## Part 1

Learning a Language





This waterfront scene achieves an illusion of depth through one-point perspective and creation of a foreground, middle ground, and background. Loose line quality, color, and people in motion add life and energy to the sketch.

# The Freehand Renaissance



Figure 1.1 The author's annotated sketch highlights key planning and design attributes of an urban village.

# Panus Perma Panus

Figure 1.2 A striking on-the-spot sketch from Rome by urban sketcher and illustrator Benedetta Dossi.

Something's happening here. Concurrent with the rise of stunning digital technology and computer imagery, online groups dedicated to freehand sketching are proliferating at a startling pace.

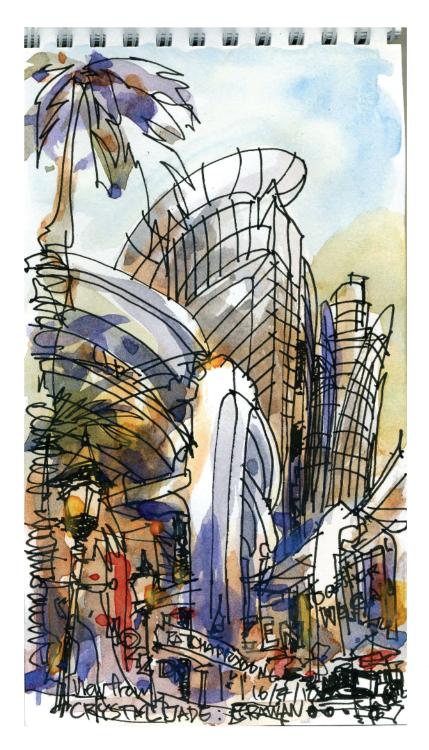


Figure 1.3
Architect and urban
sketcher Asnee Tasna's
on-the-spot sketch of
Bangkok's Ratchaprasong
junction, sketched from
the comfort of a posh
restaurant where he was
spared from the heat and
traffic.

Attendance in hand-drawing classes, declining in recent years, is surging. Creative compositions blending lively hand drawings with digital imagery crop up all around us in retail interiors, print ads, book jackets for bestsellers, and website design. On-site design charrettes requiring quick sketching of rapidly evolving ideas have become the norm in town planning practice, and the rapid freehand storyboarding techniques of filmmaking are finding their way into the creative processes of cutting-edge architects and urban designers. The 2003 MOMA exhibition "Drawing Now: Eight Propositions" argued for "the renewed importance of drawing in the discourse of recent contemporary art," marking a moment "when drawing has become a primary mode of expression for the most inventive and influential artists of the time."

We are witnessing a pendulum swing from oversaturation with digital imagery to a newfound appreciation for the immediacy and freshness of hand drawing and the emotional response it triggers.

The ubiquitous digitalization of commerce and communications has resulted in a yearning for the authentic and the handmade, as the culture seeks to reconnect to some essential aspects of human endeavor. Consequently, the world is rediscovering the magic



Figure 1.4 Stage designer and urban sketcher Paul Wang's capture of the lavish blend of classical elements with Chinese symbolism in a shophouse at Purvis Street, Singapore.



Figure 1.5 Collages of hand-drawn line, paint, and cut paper by artist John Lavin are featured as murals in Starbucks stores all over the world.

and power of the hand-drawn line, both as a uniquely human form of expression and as a catalyst for creative thinking. We are witnessing a pendulum swing from oversaturation with digital imagery to a newfound appreciation for the immediacy and freshness of hand drawing and the emotional response it triggers. The Freehand Renaissance is upon us.

Yet, at this writing, the state of drawing in design schools is ambiguous at best. I've spent a good deal of the past few years responding to invitations to speak about drawing or to teach sketching workshops at conferences and universities. Most often the audience is composed of people who, for the most part, don't draw. Others used to draw and—for a variety of reasons—don't draw anymore. And they sense something missing—they are hungry to reconnect with their creativity at a very tactile level with mind, eye, and hand.

Others are students or young professionals who, regardless of any innate talent they may have demonstrated, have been trained to believe that drawing is not only passé, but regressive—it will hold them back from the brave new world of evolving digital technologies. For them, drawing has been misrepresented and misunderstood, sadly, like the way of the Jedi in *Star Wars*: an old and useless religion; the way of the sorcerer. Like the Jedi's ancient but elegant light saber, the sketcher's tools have been cast as nostalgic and quaint—"give me a good blaster any day!"

Perhaps they have a point. Why draw? In a world of slick digital imagery, stunning animations, and virtual reality, is hand drawing still relevant? A generation of new graduates and young professionals is wading into increasingly complex projects without the drawing and sketching skills that have sustained designers for millennia; many say they see no need for them.



**Figure 1.6** The beautiful hand-drawn books of Sabrina Ward Harrison, essentially journals of free-flowing creativity, have developed a world-wide following in part because the handmade has become exotic to us.

At the same time, six-figure executives from Nike, IBM, and Microsoft are lining up to learn freehand drawing skills in seminars like Michael Gelb's "How to Think Like Leonardo da Vinci." Dan Roam's "The Back of the Napkin" has become a bestselling business book, leading the way for a surge of articles and seminars espousing the virtues of hand sketching and diagramming as potent business tools. It's the ultimate irony that as design schools drop drawing courses and offices rush to become paperless, cuttingedge company leaders are learning to draw by hand in order to become more creative, whole-brain thinkers.

Equally ironic is that as more tech-savvy graduates enter the marketplace and better digital visualization tools become available, my work as a consulting designer—diagramming and sketching on the "front end" of complex projects—is flourishing. I'm hand drawing more now than ever in my 30-plus—year career. I'm convinced that this demand isn't because my ideas are a lot better or more creative than those of my clients or collaborators, but because the ability to capture those ideas by hand, very quickly, is increasingly rare. And with the loss of these skills, our design firm clients tell us, a measure of spontaneity and creative freshness may have suffered in the process.

Accordingly, clients are not calling us for illustration—the tech-savvy grads and professional illustrators handle that very well, thank you—they're requesting visual thinking and rapid freehand sketching skills to help jumpstart a flow of ideas early in the creative process. In the past few years, I'm increasingly asked to fill a role that's more common in the film industry than in landscape architecture firms—that of the "concept designer," whose evocative sketches and storyboards initially flesh out the film director's vision.

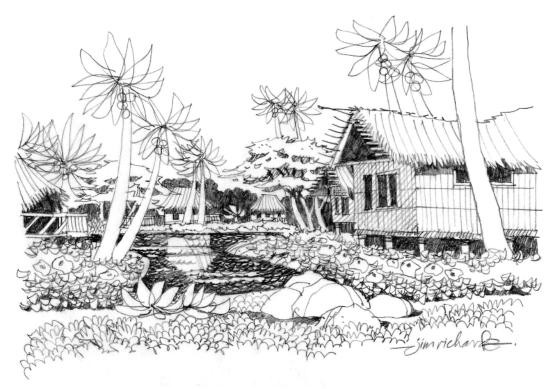


Figure 1.7 The author's concept sketch exploring ideas for the character of an island resort for The SWA Group.



**Figure 1.8** This small, quick concept sketch explores infill development character and becomes the basis for a watercolor rendering. Drawn with Pilot Fineliner, Pentel Sign Pen, and colored pencils, 4 in.  $\times$  10 in.

### Influences

In all fairness, I did not embrace drawing to take advantage of an expanding market niche. My own journey mirrors the pendulum swing we see emerging in the broader culture. I came of age in a golden age of drawing. Much of my childhood and adolescent view of the world—for better or worse—was shaped by *Mad Magazine*. The amazing illustrated movie and television satires drawn by Mort Drucker left me awestruck and were a source of endless fun and inspiration. I was similarly drawn to Ronald Searle's cartoons and the fantastic cityscape drawings of his *Paris Sketchbook*. Prowling libraries and bookstores, I discovered the magical drawings and global reach of Paul Hogarth, who called himself an "artist-reporter," and later the stunning, on-the-spot freehand reportage and impressions of Mark McMahon. Finally, in design school, I saw how the exuberant drawing styles of these heroes and my love of design and cities came together in the work of British architect Gordon Cullen, author of the seminal urban design tome *Townscape*.

Inspired by these talents and by the prospect of changing the world with ideas and a pencil, I developed a niche in preparing long-range vision plans in which drawing was a critical component and highly valued. After a murky period in the 1990s where, with the advent of computer drafting, I wondered if there would be a future for these skills, I now find I'm scrambling every day to keep up with the demand for hand-sketched ideas, impressions, and visions from clients, readers, and the exponentially growing online sketching community.

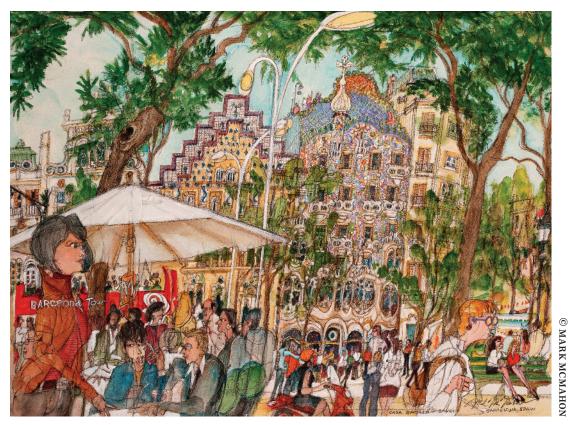
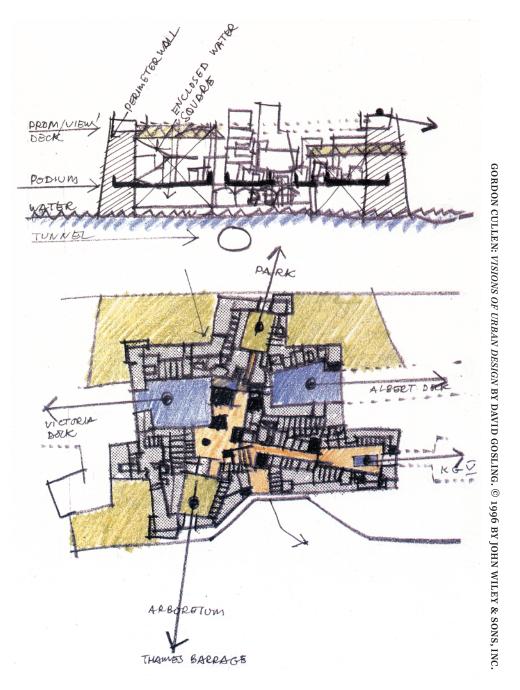


Figure 1.9 The art of Mark McMahon has chronicled decades of impressions of place and culture around the globe.



Figure 1.10 Mark McMahon's on-the-spot impression of a Chicago pub.

What has changed is the quickened pace at which design projects move and, by extension, the nature of the techniques and drawings required. Shorter timeframes and tighter budgets call for faster working methods. The need for speed has quickly outpaced traditional "graphics" and rendering techniques, and points to the need for a less rigid and more accessible sketching style. In essence, the changing nature of projects, project work flow, and digital rendering are pushing freehand design drawing into a new phase of evolution.



**Figure 1.11** The rapidly sketched urban design studies of Gordon Cullen have the fresh look of a creative mind at work.

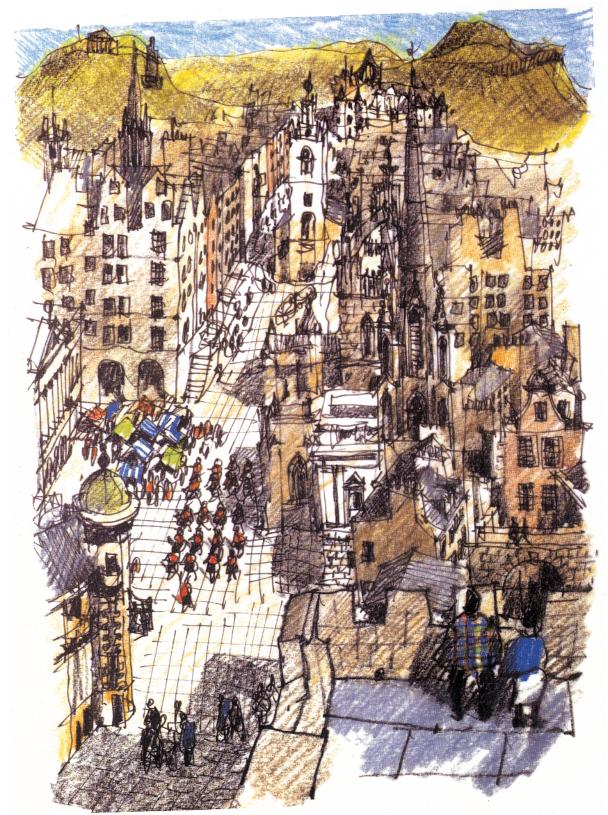


Figure 1.12 A loose, freehand aerial sketch of his design proposal for Edinburgh old town by Gordon Cullen.

### Art and Technology

We've seen this push and pull between technology and the more traditional arts before. Consider that photography didn't eliminate painting. It freed painting from its more traditional role of realistic depiction and allowed it to evolve into a more creative medium, used to convey ideas that couldn't be better expressed any other way. Indeed, the rise of Impressionist painting paralleled the development of photography as an art form, with masters of both media pushing each other to new creative frontiers.



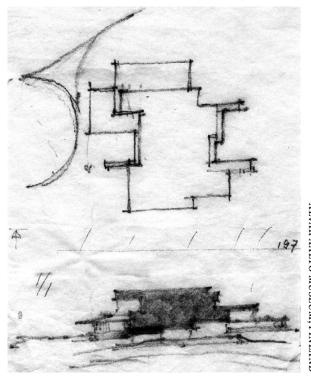
Figure 1.13 The advent of photography in the late 19th century didn't eliminate painting...



Figure 1.14 ...it freed painting to evolve into a more creative medium.

# Digital illustration programs don't replace the need for drawing. They free drawing to be a more creative medium.

Likewise, digital drafting and illustration programs don't replace the need for drawing. They free drawing from cumbersome mechanical processes and laborious illustrative techniques and allow drawing to do what it does best: to be an immediate and direct connection between the mind's eye of the designer and his audience, while capturing the exuberance of this exciting part of the creative process. At best, this exuberance is contagious, drawing collaborators and clients into the exploration of still more ideas. As concepts evolve, freehand and digital studies can inform and enrich each other, maximizing the designer's creative reach.



**Figure 1.15** This concept drawing by Alvar Aalto captures the creative energy of his search for form.

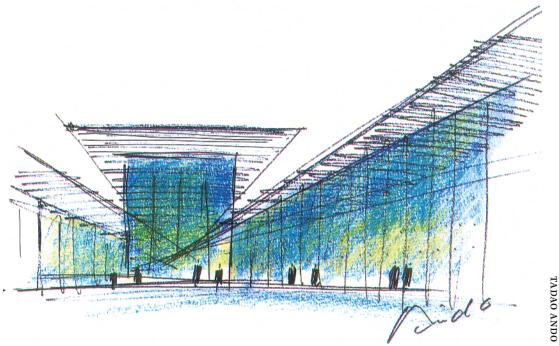
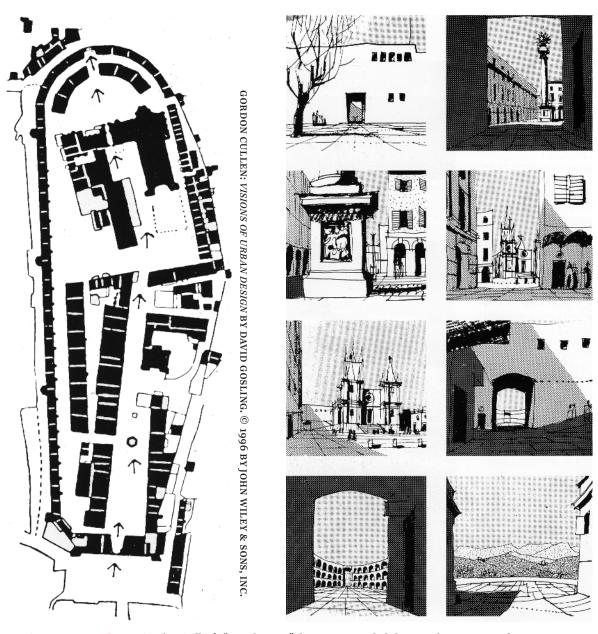


Figure 1.16 Tadao Ando's concept sketch for Fort Worth's Museum of Modern Art poetically expresses his ideas for shaping space and creating epic scale.

The Freehand Renaissance

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Embracing both spontaneous freehand sketching and the best, most appropriate computer applications and using both to their unique strengths makes both ways of working better. The field of filmmaking provides a particularly instructive example. Decades later we still marvel at Cullen's revolutionary "serial vision" drawings, documenting the experience of townscape as a series of unfolding sequential views. Similarly, the creative demands of film animation had Walt Disney creating sets of sequential freehand sketches in the form of storyboards decades earlier. And while the technology of animation has grown exponentially more complex, the hand-drawn storyboard is still the engine of creativity in film studios.



Figures 1.17 and 1.18 Gordon Cullen's "serial vision" drawings revealed the visual experience of a city as a series of sequential views.

At a remarkable conference called "Drawing/Thinking" hosted by UC Berkeley, an Academy Award-winning production designer for Pixar Animation Studios, Harley Jessup, expounded at length on the critical role that hand drawing plays in their creative process. "Story is king," said Jessup. "Until the story is right, Pixar will not allow a film to proceed into production.... The act of drawing continues to be the standard medium for communicating visual ideas at Pixar, and although the thousands of drawings we create may never appear directly on the screen, they remain the foundation of every feature film we create. The computer is a miraculous tool but a great story is, in fact, the heart of a Pixar film, and to tell that story we always begin with a drawing" (March 4, 2006).



Figure 1.19 A concept sketch for the Pixar film "Monster's Inc." by Harley Jessup.

Film storyboard artists and concept designers translate visual thought from mind to paper as fast as handwriting, creating believable worlds in a few strokes. Some of these same small, black and white sketches are hastily posted as storyboards to illustrate story ideas and generate feedback; some are scanned and digitally painted to produce stunning color renderings, further describing mood and character. For *Monsters, Inc.*, Jessup's team produced over 43,000 hand-drawn sketches to conceive the story, flesh it out, and serve as a clear blueprint for the long process of computer animation.

What does this mean? It means that in animated film—one of the most creative and technologically sophisticated of mediums—the balance between concept-level hand sketching and computer technology, using each for their unique strengths, is what makes the magic. But extensive hand drawing is largely limited to the very early stages of the creative process, where speed sketching techniques allow rapid visualization and a greater volume of ideas. Both quick freehand sketching and state-of-the-art computer magic are fundamental to the success of the project. Each way of thinking and working is used to best advantage at that point in the process where they contribute the most.

And here's a wake-up call: Jessup shared that the hand-sketch artists on his team familiarize themselves with appropriate digital technologies, and that the computer animators practice drawing from life so that each has an appreciation for the other's creative process and challenges. But he speculated that the next wave of creative thinkers will find it necessary to be fluent across the entire range of creative exploration and image making, from quick, expressive hand sketching to state-of-the-art computer imaging. The implications for education and training of the next generation of designers are profound.

### Reintegrating Work and Play

Envisioning the best computer animators in the world sketching in the street or zoo or cafe, of course, underscores the value of location sketching to designers. Rapid, spontaneous design sketching requires confidence, some learned technique, and muscle memory that allows an easy rapport between mind, hand, and pen. I've found that a routine of urban sketching is seminal in developing these skills, and in growing a capacity for creative thinking. It trains the eye in critical observation. Over time it builds a mental image bank, revealing recurring patterns and timeless insights into the subtleties that contribute to sense of place. We remember places more clearly and feel connected more deeply. A richer life emerges from this more intimate relationship with the things around us and with our own abilities. And, in less time than you might imagine, you become good. Very good.



Figure 1.20 Drawn on-the-spot in Lisbon with scores of fellow urban sketchers during the 32nd Worldwide Sketchcrawl.

For the designer—for any creative thinker envisioning possibilities—the deep seeing and understanding developed through urban sketching becomes a springboard from *what is* to *what can be*. The rapid sketching skills practiced and sharpened in the field develop confidence in our own abilities to strike out into the imagination. Drawing becomes an exploratory process of discovery, in which visual ideas in the mind are immediately given shape, examined, reworked, and refined, becoming a catalyst for more ideas. When married with the magic of digital technologies, the creative possibilities are limitless.

The deep seeing and understanding developed through urban sketching becomes a springboard from what is to what can be.

It's clear that digital technology as a design tool, in all its forms, has spurred productivity and created avenues for creative exploration we couldn't have dreamed of a generation ago. And yet, as with each new wave of technology throughout history, we are witness that rapid advances can come with unintended consequences. The limitations of current computer applications are most apparent in the earliest stages of idea generation, where programs can force the designer into too fine a level of detail too quickly. In many instances, answers are produced before the questions are even understood, and more knowledge and detail are implied than are really known. On a more human level, I frequently encounter designers for whom the intense focus on technology has sapped much of the sense of joy and creative play that drew them into a creative field in the first place.

I gave a short sketching workshop for landscape architects in New Orleans recently. It concluded with a hands-on exercise in which each of the participants followed a step-by-step demonstration to produce a nifty handmade sketch of an urban scene. Afterwards, one of the attendees, a seasoned designer, approached me and said, "Thank you—I get so bogged down and bleary eyed staring into a screen day after day that I'd forgotten that what we do is supposed to be fun." This is a sentiment I hear frequently, but rarely from those who have integrated playing with pencils, pens, and crayons into their workflow.

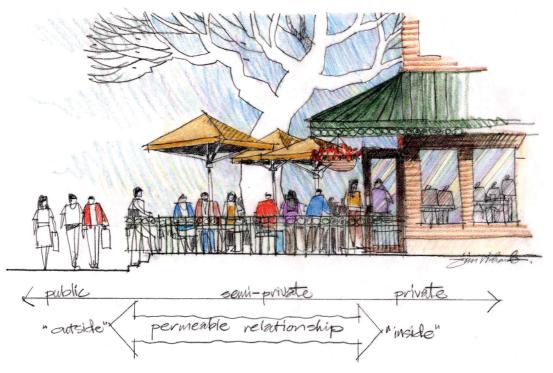


Figure 1.21 A sketch diagram illustrating the importance of permeability between inside/private and outside/public domains.

The joys and rewards of creating work products by hand are described eloquently by renowned designer John Foster in his book, *Dirty Fingernails*:

Even new designers—those who were educated to design on the computer only—are discovering that handmade design, like street art, is more profound and personally satisfying to produce than computer-generated art. The closer relationship of designer to work fosters better, more individual results. This approach yields work that hits the viewer faster and deeper—work that connects. The work is far from style over substance; the designer's fingerprints are more evident.

We need to change how we think about drawing, moving beyond outdated notions of "hand graphics" and "rendering" to encourage a less rigid and more accessible style of freehand sketching that supports and energizes our best digital technologies.

What I've learned is that it's not only okay, but important for creative professionals to adopt attitudes and working methods that integrate work and play within an ethic of discipline and professionalism. To accomplish that, our discussion needs to go beyond offering clever drawing tips and techniques. We need to change how we think about drawing, moving beyond outdated notions of "hand graphics" and "rendering" to encourage a less rigid and more accessible style of freehand sketching that supports, complements, and energizes our best digital technologies. It is time to reclaim drawing for its irreplaceable value as a uniquely human expression of visual ideas, as an intuitive tool for creative exploration and design, and as a remarkable doorway to self-discovery.

Grab a pencil. Let's get started.

# **Drawing and Discovery**

Michael Vergason, FASLA, FAAR, founded Michael Vergason Landscape Architects, Ltd. in 1987. During his career he has demonstrated great skill, passion, and sensitivity as a designer, collaborator, and practitioner. Michael's work shows a particular



Figure 1.22 Michael Vergason, FASLA

sensitivity to site and context, careful consideration of history, and a distinctly contemporary vision. He stresses the importance of a collaborative design process with architects and clients, resulting in seamless compositions without distinction between design disciplines. He maintains a small firm in order to retain personal involvement in projects, ensuring each project is designed and executed with care and skill. His sketch work is an essential component of his design process, defining and enlivening the MVLA studio.

"I learned to draw through travel and observation. Now drawing is an integral part of practice and design for me. In travels, I draw to understand the things I see better. In practice, I draw to see the things I imagine better. Some writers say they don't know what they think until they write it. I typically don't know what I think until I draw it.

"Drawing is also a privilege. That thought was brought into acute focus for me recently by Bernie Cywinski of Bohlin, Cywinski, Jackson who, two days before he died, said 'I will miss drawing; I will really miss drawing.' I reflect on Bernie's words often now. When work and deadlines become burdensome and I think I might like to be doing something else, I remember what a great privilege and pleasure it is to draw.

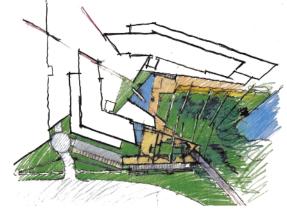


Figure 1.23 Gannett USA Today headquarters plan sketch, 1998. China marker on trace, 24 in. × 36 in.

# with Michael Vergason

"While most of my drawing is studio based these days, I have included travel sketches and sketches from practice drawn from a series of spiral- bound journals that cover the duration of my career."

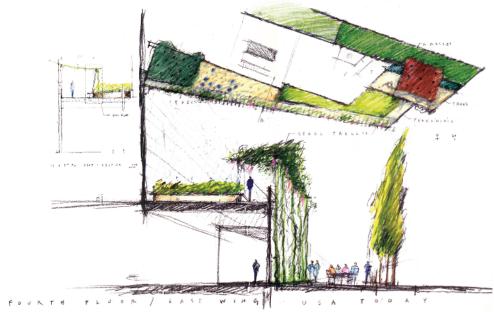


Figure 1.24 Gannett USA Today headquarters plan/ sectional perspective sketch, 1998. Prismacolor on trace, 24 in. × 36 in.

ROOF TERRACE PLAN AND SECTION

Climbers on steel trellises create vertical gardens which extend above the next level, reaching in towards the structure to create a new canopy at the terraced edge.



Figure 1.25 Southwest Waterfront Pier sketch perspective, 2012. Prismacolor on trace. 11 in. × 17 in. Drawn over Rhino Model.



Figure 1.26 Campus Green Study, 2008. Pen and ink in journal, 9 in.  $\times$  12 in., double-fold. Drawn in the Emergency Room at 12:30 a.m.

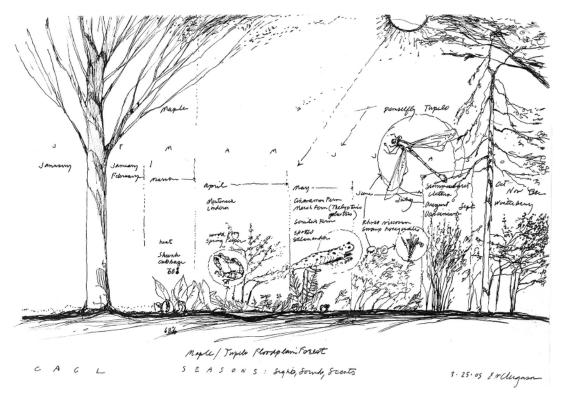


Figure 1.27 CALC Season Study, 2005. Pen and ink in journal. 9 in. × 12 in.

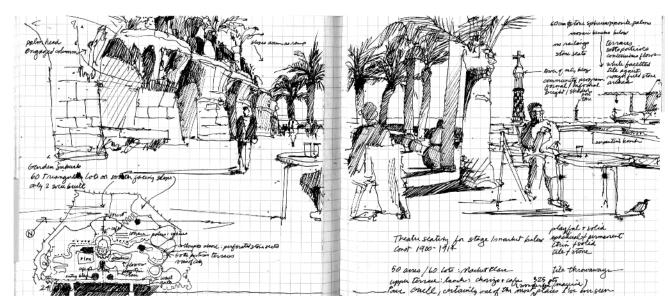
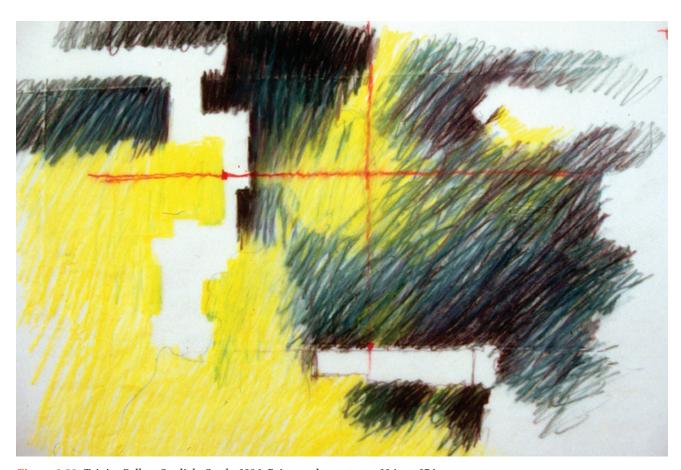


Figure 1.28 Parc Guell, Barcelona, 1990. Pen and ink in journal, 8 in.  $\times$  8 in., double-page spread.



 $\textbf{\textit{Figure 1.29}} \ \ \textit{Trinity College Sunlight Study, 1996. Prismacolor on trace, 11 in.} \times 17 \textit{in.}$