

Books on Landscape: Cultural and Personal Perspectives from the Middle East

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This presentation will examine one approach to introducing personal investigation and research into a beginning design studio. I will be looking at a specific workshop from a second semester design foundations studio entitled “Books on Landscape Cultural and Personal Perspectives from the Middle East”. This workshop ran for five weeks in the School of Architecture and Design at the AUS in the United Arab Emirates. The topic of landscape was set for this project to force students to examine and question not only how they perceive and filter external information, but also how they explore internal issues relating to self and identity. This workshop was designed as a capstone project for my students Foundations year experience. I placed an equally strong emphasis on the development of their ideas through out the process and the quality of their craftsmanship in the final outcome. My students were to develop a series of images or ideas through a planned deliberate process of transformation, exploration and experimentation. They were to incorporate drawing, photography and the creation of three dimensional book forms to communicate their point of view. A high level of craft in the construction of the book forms was essential. There had to be a relationship between the overall form of the book and the content found within.

I started this workshop with a series of demonstrations on basic paper folds, bookbinding techniques and the overall construction of three basic book forms: the accordion book, the basic folio stitch and the Japanese box stitch. I brought in several well-crafted examples of each type of book as well as examples of poorly crafted book forms. These demonstrations and sample works began to foster some awareness for the craft of books and the correct way to make them. Once the students had examined and created several traditional book forms we then began to examine alternative book forms. We looked at several examples, which go beyond the traditional form of a book and help to inform the final outcomes of this project. We discussed the differences between the two approaches to bookmaking and how they vary. Do the differences only lie in form and layout? We looked at what non-traditional books can convey in terms of meaning and what the possibilities for visual communication are with these new forms. The studio work corresponds to these discussions. Throughout the course of this workshop I was interested in developing the students ability to visualize their ideas through the act of making. Once the students had begun to explore the potential of deviating from traditional book form we began to center the discussions around the content of the books.

I presented the idea that we break the term landscape down in to three areas.

First the physical - The built and/or natural environment. What surrounds you, affects you, interests you, disgusts you? How does it differ from where you came from and how is it similar? Second the cultural - The environment you grew up in, the environment you find yourself in now. What/Who is it you surround yourself with? How is it different from where you grew up? What are the similarities? And third the personal - The type of people you surround yourself with, the type of person you are, the type of person you are becoming. Your identity.

One of my primary expectations for this workshop was for my students to explore different points of view outside of the stereotypical responses to the topic of landscape. Some of the first discussions we had centered on how they could stretch the definition of landscape. How they could go beyond the traditional view of landscape as the external physical environment only and begin to also look at the term in the broader context of culture and identity. I wanted my students to become conscious of their surroundings through a steady deliberate process of observation and research. I asked them to start their research by going out and really looking at their surroundings with a critical eye. They were asked to make drawings, take notes and shoot photographs. I wanted them to record their observations in a variety of ways. We had several long discussions in the studio about what to keep in mind while starting this process of observation and investigation. These discussions continued and began to take focus as the work developed and was brought into the studio. I asked my students to specifically look for commonalities and differences in landscape while conducting their research. Some of the questions I had them ask themselves were:

What are some of the contrasts between where you came from and where you are now?

What holds someone's personal interest? What holds your personal interest?

What are the social boundaries of the landscapes you have been in and are in now?

What is your role in all of these landscapes? Is it controlled or uncontrolled?

What is your responsibility in regard to these landscapes?

How do you influence the space around you?

How does the space around you influence you?

How can you relate form and visual imagery to communicate your findings?

These are just some of the questions I posed to my students. I asked them to attempt to find the answers to these questions during the course of their research. I did not expect that they would find the answers to all the questions above. My real hope was that they would discover unforeseen topics and subjects through the process of their own investigation. I wanted them to begin to establish a working pattern or habit that required them to ask questions and look at the world outside of the studio. To take a look at issues that went beyond the formal questions often posed in the studio. I wanted them to examine ways they could relate the information they are gathering in the outside world to work being done in the studio. To find ways in which they could visually communicate their findings. To ask themselves what form or forms would be most appropriate to communicate a given idea and to discover how they might begin to organize the information they find in order to communicate to a larger audience. I wanted them to search for answers to these kinds of questions so they could begin to establish a methodology of questioning and effectively visually communicate their answers.

I would like to briefly discuss some of the book forms and images produced. The approaches taken toward this workshop and the final outcomes varied greatly. Some students chose to use very traditional interpretations of book forms while others created spring-loaded collapsible books and sets of tarot cards.

Sheikha, a local student from the UAE, began with an intensive study of geometric patterns found in the detailing of Islamic design. She came to this subject through a two fold path. First she had been studying the development of geometric patterns in her drawing class and second is the ubiquitous use of Islamic pattern found in the architecture of Sharjah and Dubai. This study of geometric pattern in her physical landscape led her to a closer study of other architectural details. She sought to explore the potential that architecture creates for unique image opportunities rather than the study of the form as a functional object. Her work took on the focus of visual identity rather than spatial awareness. During the development of her work and while having discussions with her about the progress she was making I got the sense that she was straddling two worlds. One was this search for her own identity as a young woman who has modern tastes and sensibilities. The other is a strong tie she feels to the traditional side of her life and the cultural landscape she is in. She managed to handle both with a restrained and sophisticated sense of composition mixed with a taste for local color and traditional patterns in textile design.

Some students took on a more physical approach to the landscape and looked at landmark buildings associated with the regions identity. Traditional wind tower structures and the Burj al Arab hotel played a central role in another local student's work. Bodour took the view that this progress is not possible to reverse and views the changes in a positive light. She focused on comparisons between traditional styles and modern trends in building and dress. One of the most intriguing comparisons was in Bodour's comparison of her own Ray Ban sunglasses and her grandmother's burka. Both are meant to obscure the person's identity, yet each comes with their own distinct visual identity, which each wearer takes on as a part of herself. The end result for Bodour was a series of books, which looked at huge changes in attitude and expectation between generations.

Other project outcomes ranged from comparisons between the Gulf landscape and Nebraska to false theatrical impressions of people that surround them.

I selected this workshop to discuss because I feel that it is important to ask certain questions of our selves as instructors in the Design field. Do we teach all students with a single view or do we provide many views to the single student? At different times throughout any given semester we probably do both. Ultimately, I believe it is our role as design instructors to provide students with the framework and ability to uncover many views. It is our role to pose questions to students that require them to investigate multiple viewpoints and examine topics or subjects that surround them, involve them and affect them. This workshop was designed for the freshman student. It was intended to establish an approach for researching any given topic and to raise the students' awareness about issues of identity. This same sense of awareness, curiosity and willingness to question can develop into a methodology of exploring new topics as they encounter them. The methodology a student develops now can later be adapted to other design applications.

It is my view that if one wants to become a designer and solve problems for others one must first begin to know who they are, they need to become aware of their own identity. How can an individual solve problems for others without an educated awareness of the world around them and their place in it? I believe we should be educating students to be able to problem solve through an intelligent process of social responsibility and independent thinking that allows for elements of research, personal investigation and critical thinking within the studio environment.