

Learning from Art

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Abstract This article explores how a foundation level landscape design studio borrows ideas from the creative art discipline to engage students to understand the design process.

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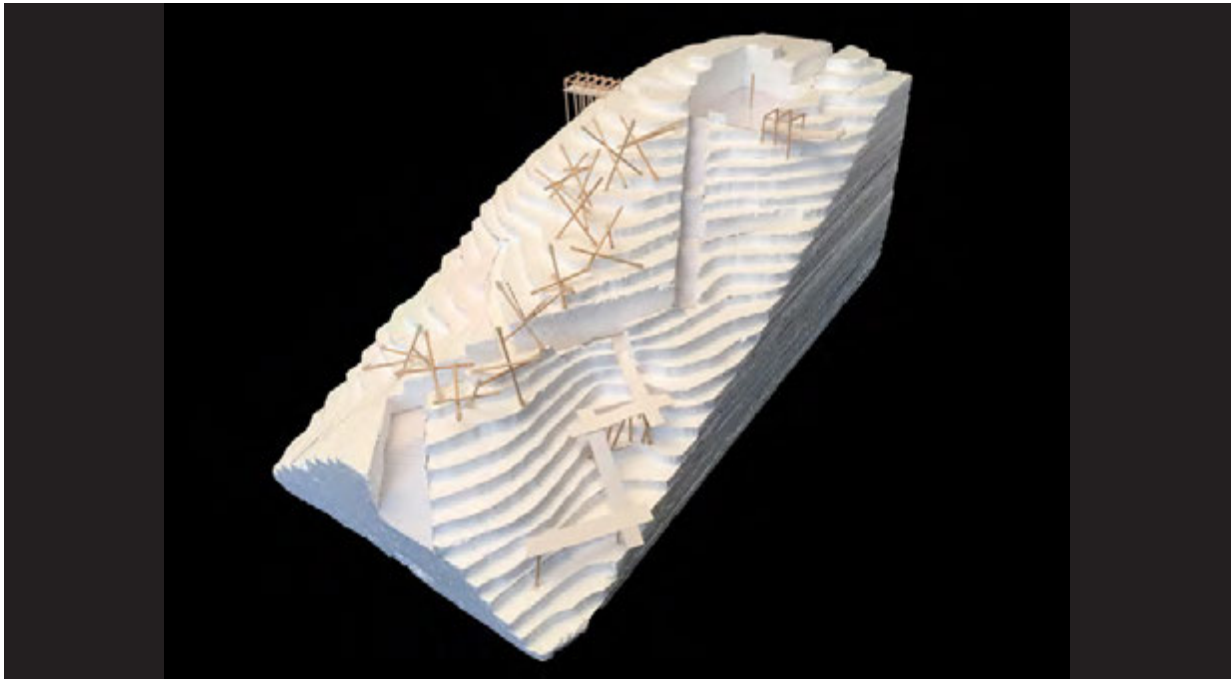


Figure 1 Final Model by Mandy Chong

Introduction

The “Introduction to Landscape Design Studio” offered at HKU Division of Landscape Architecture Bachelor of Arts in Landscape Studies Program, is the first design studio students take in their four-year landscape education.

As young designers, one of the best ways to learn is to understand the wide scope and breadth of design disciplines, before they engage specifically in landscape. Therefore, this foundation level landscape design studio starts with exercises that present them with fundamental design skills. The philosophy of the content chosen and the studio learning flow are based on the universal design approaches that apply to all design disciplines.

One pedagogical methodology implemented in this studio is the introduction of creative art as study objects, for students to ease into the understanding and appreciation of creative operation and design process.

As Professor Chip Sullivan at the University of California, Berkeley, College of Environmental Design, mentioned, “I have a lens, which always believed that landscape architecture is an art form and should be accepted as such. I teach all of my classes through an artistic lens, with each student encouraged to develop his or her own sources of intuition, inspiration, and imagination. Each project brief establishes a framework that allows exploration and pushes students to develop their individual creative process.”¹

Art as a Study Object

At the beginning of this studio, students are randomly assigned a piece of artwork selected by the instructors for their study. The artworks selected range from both Western and Asian artists as well as a significant portion of female artists. Such curatorial effort aims to not only bring in values of cultural diversity and gender equality, but it also opens up a wide range of creative styles and design subjects to be explored by students. Using art as a study object (or topic), we hope to stimulate students’ curiosity about creative work in general.



Figure 2. Abstract Drawing by Agnes To

In order to engage students to understand the three-dimensionality of space, most of the artwork selected for the study are sculptures or have a spatial attribute.

With the assigned artwork, students are first to study and research about the artist's philosophy and creative approach, the period this artwork is created, the significant characteristics of artistic work from that era, and how that influences the understanding of form and space in future generations of design professions.

The understanding of form, scale, proportion, and composition, is further explored when students engage to make measured drawings for

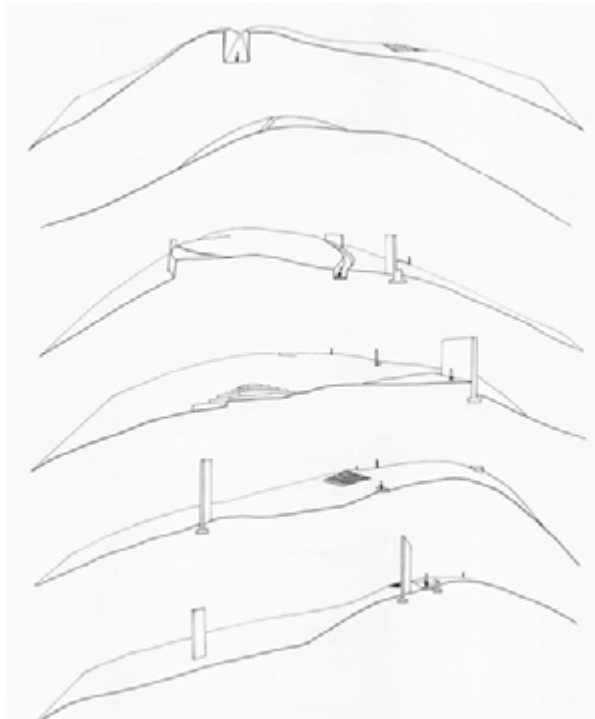


Figure 3 Sections (left)

Figure 4 Perspective Diagrams (above)

by Agnes To

the artwork. They have to composite information from different research sources, to derive plan and section/elevation drawings of the artwork in orthographic projection. All these are to be done by hand, to nurture the skills to translate real scale (of the object) and the representational scale (of the paper layout).

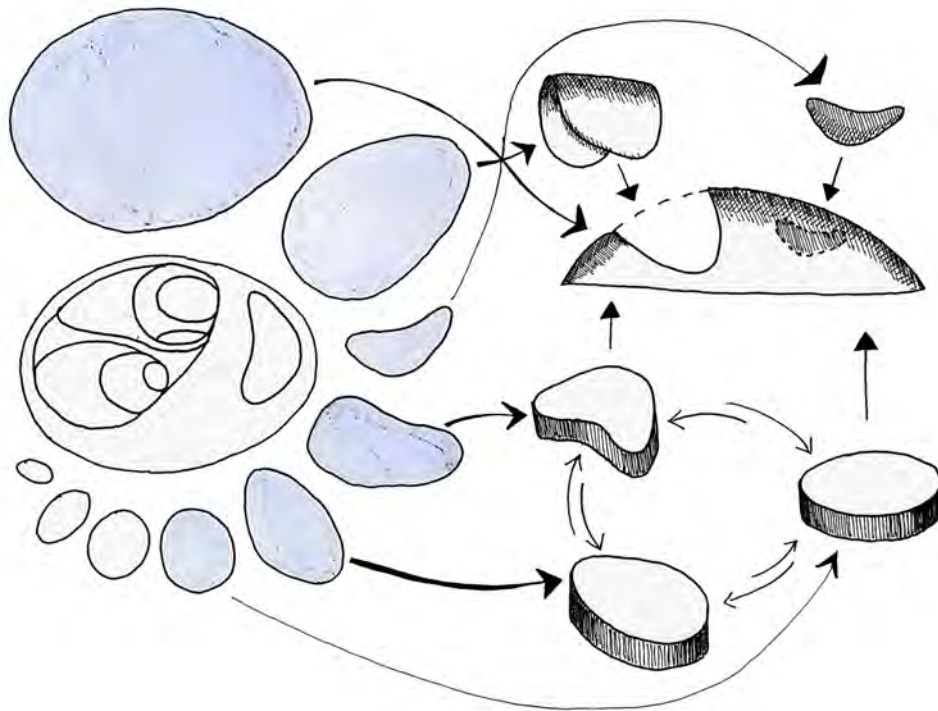


Figure 5 Concept Diagram by Joyce Fong

Conceptual Development

One main element intended to be introduced through the study of an artwork is how a creative concept is conceived. When students study the art piece, they are also to study the artist's work processes. From initial thoughts to trial-and-error experiments, through constant revisions and iterations to seek the ultimate version, there is a workflow shared among all creative professions that landscape students should learn to master.

In the next exercise, students are asked to create an abstract drawing to express the concept they

understand from the artwork, and this exercise is conducted in iterations. Students produce sketches or drafts of their ideas; then they go through studio desk crits to discuss how such concepts can be expressed; from there, they relate conceptual understanding to form and composition expressions. Methodologically, it takes students' initial research and analysis to the next level, as the abstract drawing involves the synthesis of ideas and interpretations beyond a direct representation of the artist's work.

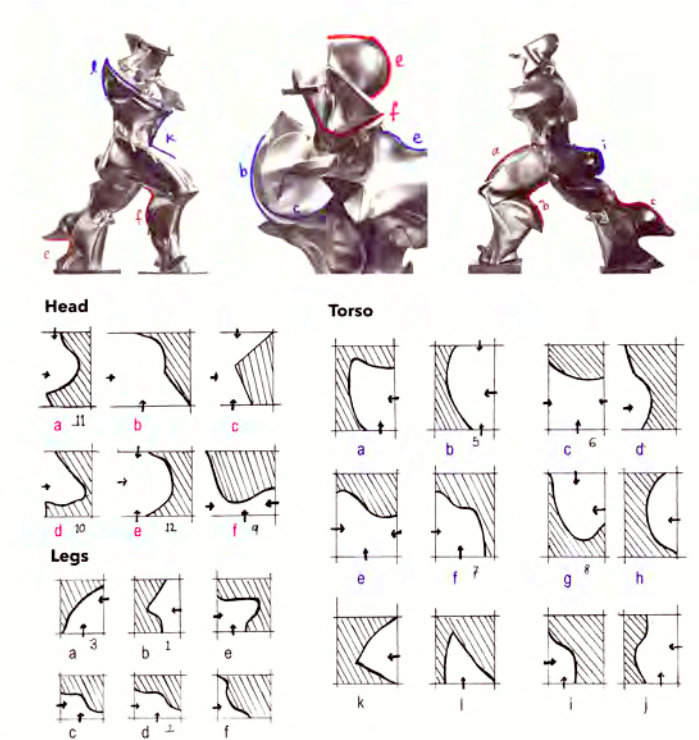


Figure 6 Study Diagram by Sabrina Young

An Open-Air Museum Design

While the abstract drawing is meant to express the students' interpretation of the artwork, it also lays a conceptual foundation for the next exercise. Students are to design an open-air museum to house the artwork they study, using the concept developed in the abstract drawing. This exercise brings the conceptual understanding of form and composition on an abstract drawing, to the actual design of space. Students' analytical and synthetic processes done before, are now translating into a three-dimensional real-

ity; the abstract concepts distilled from the artwork, to be infused back into their designs. This is a process for students to see how landscape design relates to art, yet also is different from art. The artistic forms and compositions can convey thoughts and ideas, and spatial design disciplines (like landscape architecture) take forms and compositions to transform them into space – a dimension that has bodily experience.



Figure 6 Abstract Drawing by Sabrina Young

Conclusion

Seen in the larger context of the landscape architecture education, this foundation level landscape design studio aims to introduce students to the elements and principles of design, and to get them to be acquainted with the various *modi operandi* of artistic field, as a way to mark the beginning of their design education.

There is so much that students can learn from Art, and it is hoped that the creative energy and inspirations from art, can create new qualities and interpretations to landscape architecture in the future.

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