



**Fostering a Sense of Place
in an Increasingly Technological Classroom**
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At the University of Illinois, a recently established rite of passage for each Master of Architecture student is a one-semester, architectural theory course. A major objective of the course is to demonstrate how architectural practice – whether in the university studio or an office – is informed by a set of ideas with long and intricate histories. Upon successfully completing the course, students are able to weave together the various events, persons, movements, and concepts that have shaped the key schools of thought in architecture since the mid-nineteenth century. The goal is to show the students that their work is a product of cultural, political, economic, technical, scientific, philosophical, and historical forces (among even many other factors). We further hope to spur each student’s intellectual curiosity so that they will weigh the different schools of thought within architecture, and then judiciously and self-reflectively apply some of those ideas into their design projects. As such, the students should come to realize that their work does not reside in a vacuum. There is a broad context to what they are doing in their studios, and their work will be more meaningful if they are cognizant of that knowledge rather than remaining ignorant of it.

This paper deals with two forces that are crucial in our teaching of architectural theory – technology and a sense of place. While technology has had and continues to have a central role in the evolution of architecture, notions of place, on the other hand, have had their ebbs and flows within the field. Unfortunately, many who value a sense of place often see it at odds with today’s technological world. Such a stance views today’s cyberspace and social media culture as fostering placelessness. While such arguments offer valuable and thought-provoking insights, the reality of our profession is that today’s production of architecture is wholly beholden to the computer and the “electronic paradigm” (Nesbitt 1996, 51). To put it another way, we live in a technological world, and when pitted against each other, technology will always prevail over place. Consequently, throughout this paper, a sense of place is the prevalent theme, while the influence of technology is the subtext.

With these brief notions of place and technology in mind, the purpose of this paper is to investigate how architecture students and instructors can incorporate place-thinking into their studio presentations. I will propose criteria by which to evaluate students’ studio projects and presentations in terms of fostering a sense of place. Also, I will examine some of the techniques used by today’s architecture students in order to determine in what ways and to what extent they support notions about place. This paper, then, will attempt to bridge the gap between place-thinking and the technological production of space in the digital classroom. The end result will be what to convey – a sense of place – as opposed to the specific applications through which to do so (e.g., AutoCAD, SketchUp, or Photoshop).

Four Notions of Place

At the heart of this paper is the question: How can ideas about place inform a student’s studio presentation? To answer this question, one needs to understand various notions of place. First there is the concept of *genius loci*. Commonly translated as “spirit of place,” occasionally some also use it to refer to a “sense of place.” Originating in ancient Rome, *genius loci* refers to the notion that every place (particularly natural places, but especially wild, untrammeled, or virgin landscapes) is attended to by a resident spirit. To engage with a place – whether that meant traversing a valley or establishing a settlement there – was to engage with the spirit of that place. Such a notion of an attending spirit governed over natural locales, settlements, and even individual homes. In the case of the ancient home, a special place or shrine was preserved to venerate that home’s protecting spirit. If one was to interact with a place, whether for the first time or on a habitual basis, one was supposed to do so with reverence, lest they offend the resident spirit and risk its retribution (Norberg-Schulz 1980, 18; Malnar and Vodvarka 2004, 75).

While such a view of places may seem quaint to our contemporary minds, it should be noted that some cultures today still practice similar belief systems. Anthropological studies of such cultures not only demonstrate the idea of *genius loci* in practice today (albeit not specifically referred to as that), they have also proven useful in understanding ancient and prehistoric cultures, alerting us that such a kinship with places may be a timeless and essential human condition (Tilley 1994, 37-57). Regardless, the principal lesson concerning *genius loci* is being not just conscious of place but also being reverent to place.

Another concept that sheds light upon our understanding of place is the concept of the lived-world, a central tenet of phenomenology. The aim of those who advanced the idea of the lived-world was to return to a way of thinking away from the scientific worldview or perspective that was prevalent in Modernity and towards a renewed awareness of the world we occupy, known to us through “immediate experience” (Spiegelberg 1982, 144-146 and 747). As such, the idea of the lived-world posits the individual as the primary conduit through which we come to know the world. In the lived-world, then, the first person perspective is primary, and science is a “second-order expression” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, viii).

Next is the concept of the inhabited landscape. The inhabited landscape expresses an overarching theme in the work of Christian Norberg-Schulz, which is that architecture, when properly carried out, seeks to create an organic whole between a building and its surrounding environment or context. Norberg-Schulz called this “a complex totality of interrelated things” (Norberg-Schulz 1985, 19). In this vein, a building and its environment enliven each

other. Nature and the man-made complement one another. Each brings out the best qualities of the other (Heidegger 1971, 41-43; Nesbitt 1996, 430-432).

And finally, there is the notion of “being there.” “Being there” has wide ranging implications in phenomenology and existential philosophy, but in fields such as anthropology, archeology, architecture, and geography it has come to mean that the farther a person posits themselves from what they are studying or investigating, the less likely they are to understand it. In other words, similar to the lived-world, “being there” values an awareness of our surroundings and close proximity to anything we choose to study. As the British archeologist Christopher Tilley succinctly summarized when writing about his phenomenological methods in the field:

“It [phenomenology] involves participant observation, which means being a part of what one is attempting to describe and to understand. A phenomenologist works and studies landscapes from the ‘inside.’ This may be contrasted with mediated or abstracted ‘outside’ experiences of landscape such as those that might be gained from texts, photographs, paintings, or any computer-aided technologies, simulations, or statistical analyses. The claim is that studying landscapes through such representations can provide only a relatively superficial and abstract knowledge. There is no substitute for personal experience, for being there” (Tilley 2010, 25-26).

Thus, the notion of “being there” is as much a matter of *praxis* as it is a manner of place-valuing. Which is to say that, in regards to architecture, “being there” values both getting closer to places (i.e., engaging with or approaching places) and bringing places closer to people by designing and raising buildings.

Looking for Place in a Studio Presentation “Board”

These four notions of place provide us with new ways of looking at a design project presentation. More specifically, using these notions as guidelines we may ask, is the designer being mindful of the surrounding environment or context, and of the proposed building design as seen or experienced by the human observer? Does the design convey a sense of place or does it “stand alone,” with no regard for its surroundings? In short, is the design an object or a place? With these questions in mind, the following criteria for graphic representations correspond with our four notions of place:

1. A drawing or computer generated image should represent a real human perspective, that is, a view at eye level, and from a specific spot on the street, sidewalk, or the landscape.
2. It should also encompass the visible, recognizable, and relevant context. This includes foreground, background, and adjacent elements; recognizable built forms or details; and landscape and topographical features such as level of vegetation, grades, and slopes.
3. It should also portray human activity and use as part of the design.

These criteria serve two main purposes. First, they help professors, critics, and students to recognize a sense of place in a formal studio presentation. Second, they promote place-thinking during the design process, that is, they guide professors and their student’s to see places as an integral part of the design process leading up to a final presentation. In the first case, the criteria serve as standards in evaluating a project after the fact. In the second case, the criteria are imbued into the design process. In both cases these criteria can serve as pedagogical tools. But in order for them to be most effective, they first need to be weighed against those representational techniques used in studios. Then a sense of place can be exhibited through those representational techniques most appropriate for them.

What are those representational techniques, how may they convey or fail to convey a sense of place, and which are the most conducive to conveying a sense of place? A survey of a group of graduate-level, architectural studio presentations will provide some answers. The studio projects under consideration consist of a total of 52 final presentation boards by Master of Architecture students at the University of Illinois during the Fall 2012 Semester. As part of a quarterly student competition and exhibit, these projects were selected as among the best graduate studio projects by the design faculty across 12 graduate design studios. As someone with recent experience in a graduate architecture design studio may expect, computer modeling rendering was the most common graphical representation technique used in the student projects surveyed (approximately 21% of 486 individual images analyzed), followed by diagrams (19%) photographs (14%, including photographs taken by the students themselves and photographs from online sources), and floor plans (8%). (The remaining images (approximately 38%) consisted of the standard fare of elevations, sections, site plans, etc.)

Students’ boards suggest that the utility of computer model renderings lies in their ability to illustrate almost any aspect of a design project. In the projects under consideration, renderings were used to represent exterior and interior views, structural systems, construction phases, architectural details, exploded axonometric views, design

processes, massing, internal organizations of buildings, and even traditional orthographic projections such as building elevations, sections, and plans of various sorts (e.g., floor plans, site plans, and master plans). But what of a computer model rendering's utility in conveying a sense of place? The great variety of ways that a student can utilize a computer-generated rendering makes it just as useful in conveying a sense of place as it is to create an image not grounded in place or on an authentic human experience. Take, for example, figures 1, 2, and 3 on the following pages. They depict different aspects of a Chicago high-rise, hotel, and railway project by a group of students at the University of Illinois. Figure 1 shows us the high-rise building from the Randolph Street Bridge over the Chicago River. Easily recognizable landmarks – the Chicago River, the Chicago Sun Times Building, and both the Randolph Street and Lake Street bridges – are prominently featured. This is the view a pedestrian would see as they walked towards the building from Union Station or Willis Tower (formerly the Sears Tower). Indeed, there are even three people walking over the bridge. As such, this image is in many ways the idealization of our criteria for fostering a sense of place. The view is at eye-level and from a specific spot on the street. The visible, recognizable, and relevant context locates us in a specific place, as well as expresses the character of the built environment at the site. And the pedestrians and the single car crossing the bridge indicate human activity in the area, as well as give the view a human scale and perspective.

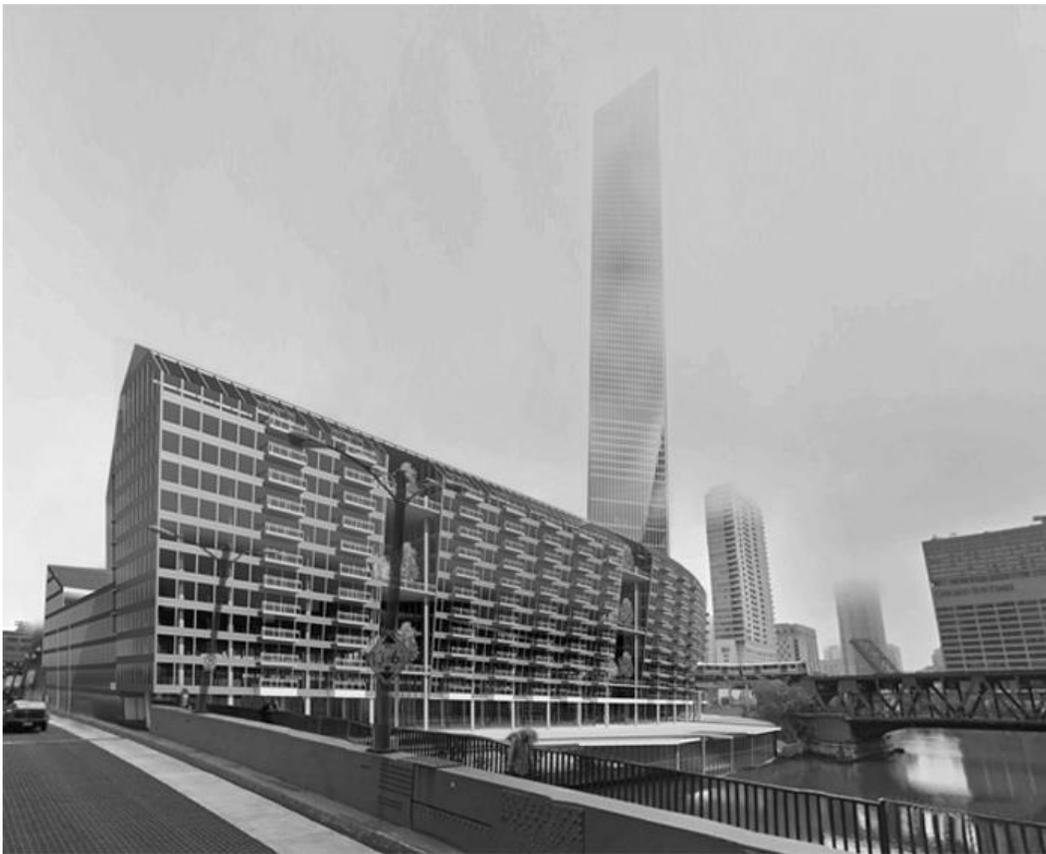


Figure 1. A Chicago high-rise, hotel, and railway facility, a graduate student project.
(Figures 1-3 courtesy of the School of Architecture, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign,
<http://www.arch.uiuc.edu/portfolio/573/index.aspx>.)

In Figure 2, a site plan view of the same project, there are still delineators of place, but we begin to get away from as full a sense of place as was possible with the first-person perspective seen in Figure 1. The surrounding buildings, the shadows cast both by them and the high-rise project, and the river still speak to context and a tangible quality evident in places, but the overhead or “bird’s-eye-view” of the site is akin to a satellite image instead of an eye-level view from the man or woman on the ground. People, but especially human presence through the first-person point of view, are central to a sense of place. They are inherent in all four of our notions of place and in our three criteria for fostering a sense of place. Hence, plan drawings such as the one in Figure 2 generally do not follow our criteria for fostering a sense of place because they deemphasize the human element.

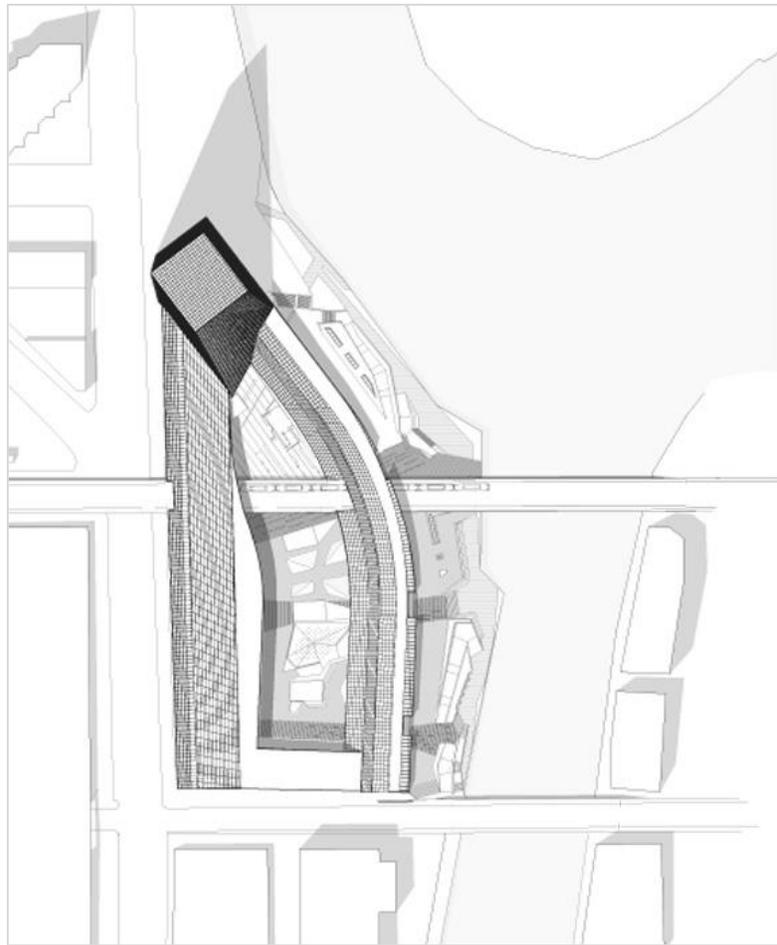


Figure 2. Site plan, a Chicago high-rise project.

Figure 3 shows a further abstraction of the same high-rise project. Again, there are elements in the image that lend themselves to portraying a place – the surrounding buildings, the river, the sky above, and the birds in flight. But in this case, the perspectival building section shown is a pure fabrication. Unlike a bird's-eye-view or an aerial perspective, this is a view that no observer would ever see at the building site – a clean, planar cut through a building. Thus, like Figure 2, the primary weakness of Figure 3 is its misrepresentation of a place. The misrepresentation is arguably a minor one – a section drawing can still show context and the surrounding environment, human activity and use, etc. Nevertheless, it is significant enough to deemphasize the human element similarly to the image in Figure 2.

Understanding how these three computer renderings either convey or do not convey a sense of place help us to understand how other graphical representation techniques likewise either portray or ignore places. The first-person perspective exemplified by the computer rendering in Figure 1 is prevalent throughout the student presentations examined, and is demonstrably one of the strongest ways to convey a sense of place. Other techniques that can foster a sense of place in similar fashion are sketching and photography. If drawn or taken on-site, both sketching and photography are natural tools for conveying a sense of place. Nevertheless, just as a student had to consciously guided their computer mouse to obtain the view in Figure 1, only if the person sketching or taking the photograph consciously incorporates an eye-level view, the context and surrounding environment, and human activity and use will such illustrations indicate a strong sense of place. On the other hand, sketches, aerial perspectives (whether drawn, computer generated, or through aerial photography), and satellite imagery from Google Earth and similar online applications are not strong indicators of place because they discount the presence of an observer on the ground. Similarly, as we saw in the case of Figure 2, all orthographic projections – such as floor plans, site plans, master plans, elevations, maps, or sketches and diagrams depicting similar perspectives – can approximate places through the inclusion of the surrounding environment or building context, topography, vegetation, and human

habitation and use, but they inevitably end up significantly misrepresenting places (i.e., as inaccurate and unrealistic) because they also dismiss the first-person perspective. And Figure 3, a perspectival section, as it does not exist in the lived-world, cannot represent a real human perspective. Other techniques similar in nature to Figure 3 are building and wall sections, exploded axonometric and cut-away views, and construction details.

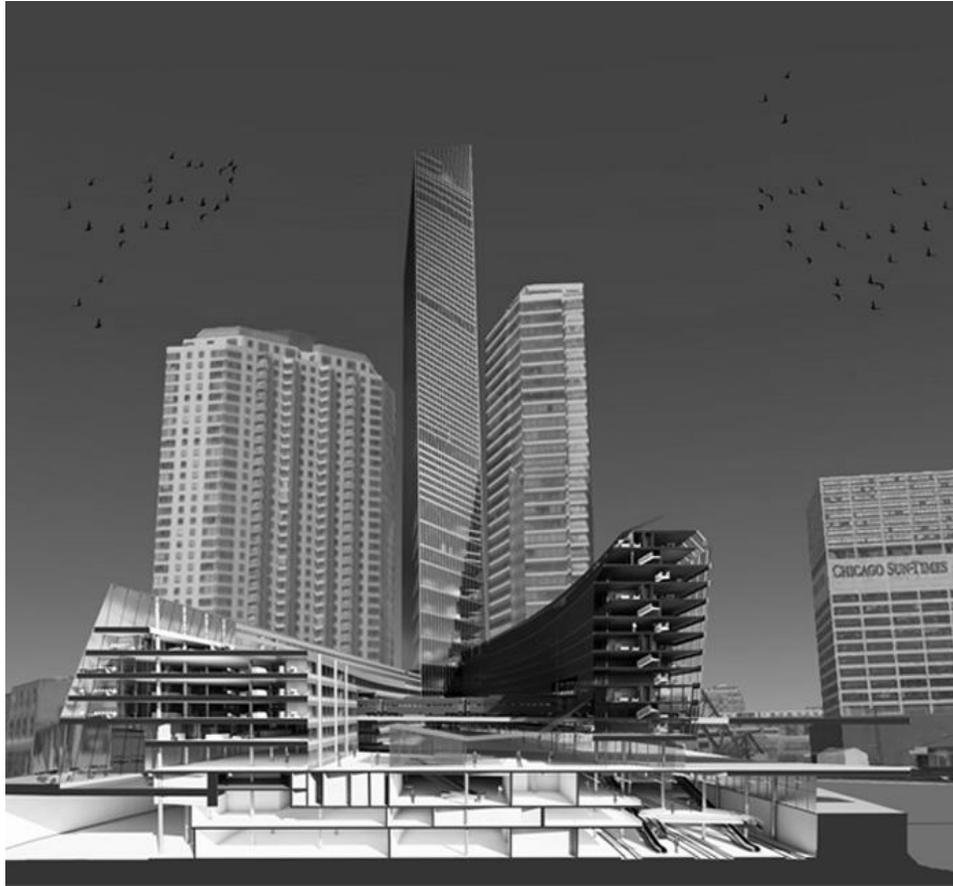


Figure 3. Building section, a Chicago high-rise project.

In the final analysis, many of the graphical representation techniques that today's students are accustomed to are able to convey a sense of place, albeit to varying degrees. Computer-generated renderings have the greatest potential to portray places, both existing and devised in the mind's eye of an architect. Other graphical techniques, when incorporated consciously and thoughtfully, also have a great potential for fostering a sense of place. Understandably, to foster a sense of place is not the sole, and even the principal, objective of most student studio presentations. And many of the illustrations on a student's final presentation board are dictated by course requirements. Nevertheless, conveying a sense of place through one's studio design project taps into a rich potential within architecture – that buildings can augment places as well as be a boon to human habitation and use. The four notions of place described in this paper and the three criteria that flow from them will help students and professors to bring out places in their studio design projects.

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