

Draw Story

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'Talk Story' is a Pidgin term used in Hawaii to define chit-chat and informal conversation. From gossip to small talk, to community meetings, to academic lectures, both formal and informal events reference this term to specify friendly dialogue, discussion and debate. Talking story can be a mundane, critical, or playful way to approach something serious. Draw Story is a design framework that intends to translate this concept into architectural inquiry through image-making. This procedural rule-set can be described as a game of forensics. A player is provided with a series of shifting lenses through which they investigate the subject. As evidence is revealed and multiple paths are explored, new narratives are uncovered, culminating in endings that are unforeseen and at times wondrous.

INTRODUCTION

Architectural images are used to develop ideas, convey information, and provoke the imagination, both in ordinary and fantastical realms. Drawings, photographs, film, models and other representational media tend to be intimately related to the subjects they are portraying, frequently becoming the topic of discourse themselves.

What makes an image a mere representation? When does an architectural artifact become the creative work itself?

As students experience the design process in the foundation of their architectural education, the notions of drawing their designs and designing drawings are often juxtaposed and sometimes conflicting.

Why do architects draw? When do architectural drawings become statements or propositions? How can the creation of images provoke the imagination or stimulate architectural discourse? How can we teach design through drawing?

This paper presents Draw Story as a framework attempting to create "Discursive Images"¹ through three different realms: Domestic Territories, an introspective study of the spaces we inhabit daily; Iconic Constructs, a diagnostic investigation focused on renown buildings that characterize Honolulu today; and The City and the Beach, a projective exercise that imagines parallel dimensions of urban environments that exist between the natural and the man-made.

The framework is presented through the work of students that investigate and illustrate various scales and levels of human-spatial interaction; depict everyday life in the context of built environments, and test the boundaries of drawings from object to subject.

PRECEDENTS

How do we remember the places we have lived in? What do we consider significant about a particular room? What can we learn from the objects that occupy our spaces? What is the importance of where and how we dwell?

A series of short exercises explored these questions through drawing. These assignments were conducted as part of the graduate studio Re-thinking Metropolis -House- at the Illinois Institute of Technology's College of Architecture during the Spring semesters of 2014, 2015 and 2016.

Memory

The first prompt tasked the students with drawing their childhood home in thirty minutes on the first day of the studio. The drawings were created with no previous warning and resulted in an honest depiction, mostly drawn in plan view, of room layouts and objects inhabiting the home. Even though the house from memory was mainly drawn from the inside out, it was interesting to see other aspects that are represented in these drawings such as facade materials, atmosphere, time of day, and pathways entering or exiting the home. Even though these memory drawings depicted architectural elements, they also gave a glimpse into culture, traditions, and elements that make each place unique.

Inventory

Immediately following this assignment, a second set of drawings were created within the same week. Students were tasked with both a drawing that would show a collection of objects in their homes and an analytical drawing displaying behaviors within the space. Even though images were based on observations, they began to delve into information that is usually hidden, such as personal relationships, economic status or daily routines.

Forecast

Following weeks of research, and focused on dwelling as a broader term, students were then charged with drawing



Figure 1: Memory, Inventory and Forecast drawings (from left). Credits: Sepideh Asadi, Antonia Ramos, Eleni Aroni. Re-Thinking Metropolis House Studio, IIT CoA, Spring 2014

beyond “what they remembered or could literally see” and were asked to predict the unknown. How do we forecast domestic life in the next 10, 20 or 50 years? What critical issues will arise? How should we envision the future of dwelling in the city?

Images began to abstract concepts beyond the typical architectural conventions, exposing overlapping worlds at different scales and extending the boundaries from previously depicted small rooms into broader sections of the city.

While introspective explorations, through the creation of images such as the memory or inventory drawings, were closely tied to existing preconceptions, personal experiences, or a particular way of understanding the world, forecast drawings allowed a certain distance from individual identities and facilitated the projection of future scenarios.

These short activities inspired further inquiry into investigating both the act of drawing and the way we understand space from the domestic to the urban.

DOMESTIC TERRITORIES

During the Fall semester of 2016, the first iteration of the Draw Story framework was launched through a graduate elective seminar at the School of Architecture at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa.

Students were asked to observe, analyze, draw and represent the spaces, objects, behaviors, and sensations they encountered in their homes through four graphic essays: Measured, Catalogued, Performed and Experienced.

These prompts were fueled by readings on domestic space, and subsequent discussions of social, tectonic, temporal and atmospheric aspects of dwelling. These four essays served as a framework to guide the students through observations

and analytical thinking, as well as foundational principles that serve as the basis for the design process

Measured

The first essay, *Measured*, referred to all that can be quantified. Dimensions, distances, relationships, and hierarchies were established. How far or how close is the home to other elements in the city, neighborhood, block, or lot? How big or how small are the rooms? How tall are the walls? How wide are the doors or windows? Upon close inspection, scrutiny and rigorous observation *Measured* drawings had the potential of exposing elements beyond those that could easily be seen and could still be measured, such as time, weight, light or sound.

These drawings, mostly surveys in nature, necessitate rigor, scrutiny and close inspection, allowing discussions about fundamental notions of space such as position, orientation, boundaries (both physical and implicit), proportion and scale.

Catalogued

Inspired by the writings of Georges Perec on *Thinking/Classifying*² the second essay, titled *Catalogued*, examined anything that could be listed and grouped into a category. Students were tasked with a detailed analysis of physical objects, building components or other elements within the boundaries of the home. *Catalogued* drawings offered descriptions of collections, groups, and subsets which often referred to the mundane, yet exposed narratives, culture, and traditions that are usually hidden from plain sight.

The process of selection, analysis, and synthesis is particularly evident through this exercise, as students find connections, contrasts, relationships, hierarchies and reasoning for including or excluding specific elements and establishing an order.

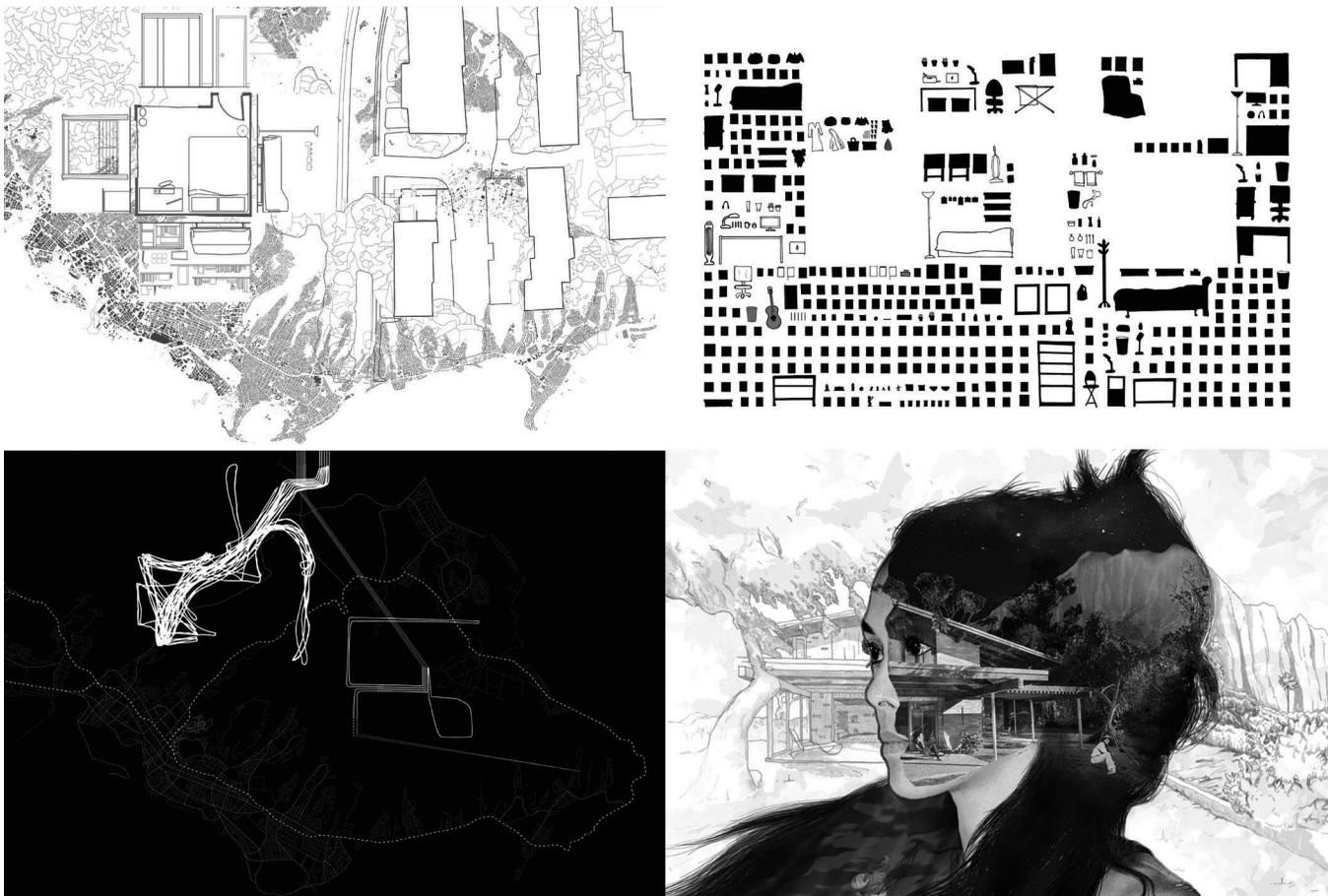


Figure 2: Measured, Catalogued, Experienced and Performed drawings (clockwise from upper left). Credits: Michelle Morimoto and Noelle Yempuku. Draw Story: Domestic Territories Seminar, UHM SoA, Fall 2016

Performed

A third prompt introduced the human figure as the primordial actor within the domestic space. How do we occupy space? How do human activities, behaviors, and sequences manifest in architectural drawings? These images explored activities and sequences that transcended the inert quality of empty architectural space, portraying behaviors, actions, movement, and operations.

Performed drawings explored notions that went beyond the typical architectural entourage and became opportunities for testing new ways of depicting behavior beyond the superimposition of two-dimensional frames.

Experienced

The last essay was left open to permit the students to describe an aspect not yet identified by the previous prompts. Experienced images were an opportunity for representing effect, sensations, or atmosphere. The resulting drawings depicted contrasts between living inside and outside, the conscious and the subconscious, the living and the dead.

The 'Measured, Catalogued, Performed, Experienced

Framework' proposed four aspects of dwelling portrayed independently in each essay: A rigorous observation of what exists, an analysis and synthesis of information, the dynamism of the human dimension and a final layer open to interpretation, where arguments, speculations, and provocations were encouraged.

Even though this framework allowed students to focus on one topic at a time, which facilitated the slow development of each image and the overall argument, the final set of four images remained disjointed.

ICONIC CONSTRUCTS

During the Fall of 2017, a revised framework was tested. The second iteration of this course extended beyond the domestic into the public realm and continued to develop the methodology that would encourage cultivating a way of observing as a means of collecting creative content; and exploring the process of drawing as both an analytical tool and a means of discovery.

A more rigorous approach divided the semester into four phases: Fundamental Understandings, a research phase,

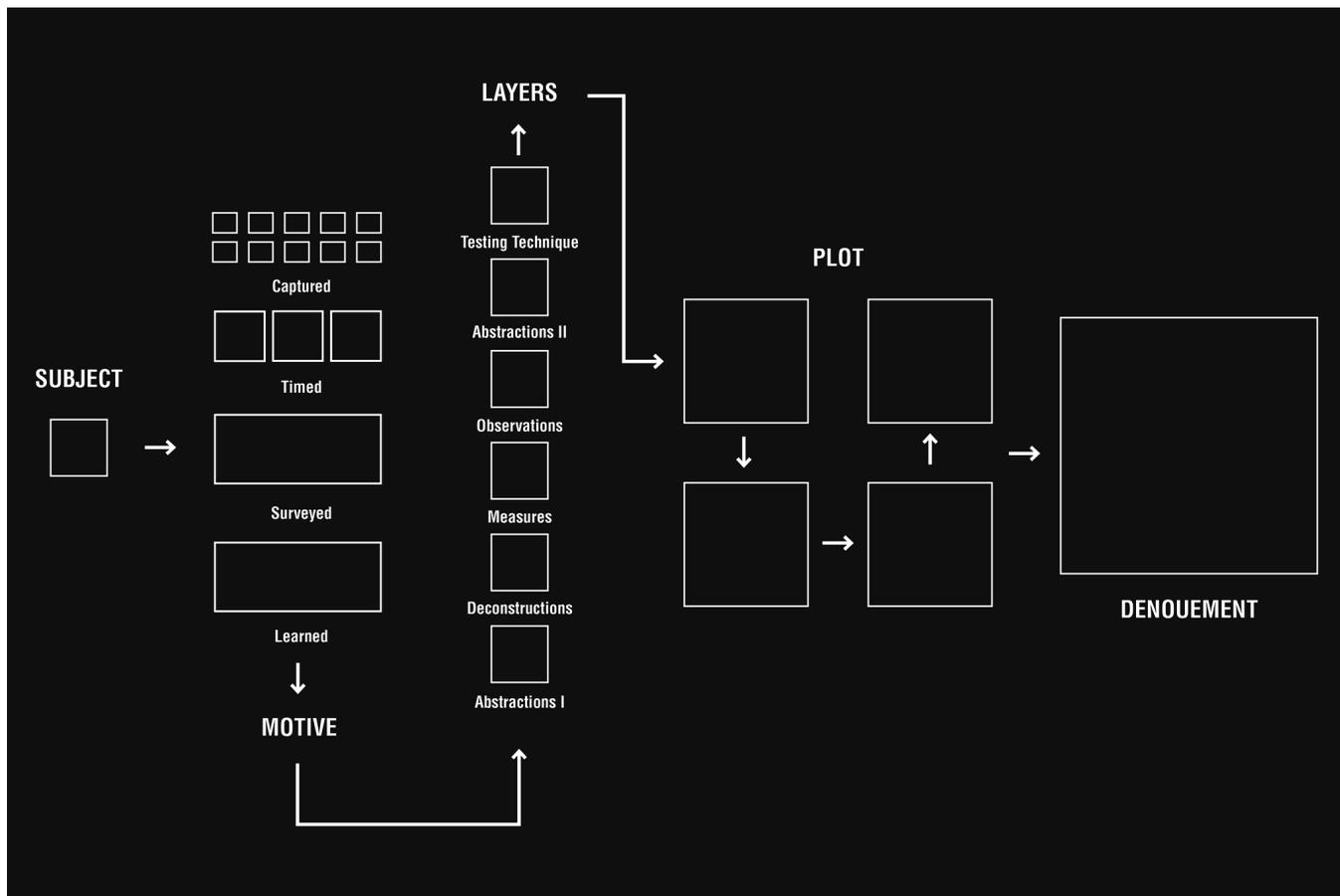


Figure 3: Draw Story Framework Diagram. Fall 2017, 2018.

Focused explorations, concentrated on analysis and synthesis, Layered Compositions, centered on exploration, and Edited Narratives, where the concept or idea was developed and executed.

This new approach converged upon process and was based on the content categories of the previous framework. Students were presented with one task: the design of a single drawing. The design process would be guided by a series of prompts that varied timing, format, and content. A single drawing was to be designed through a series of other drawing explorations that would be discussed informally through Talk Story sessions.

Fundamental Understandings

The first phase (weeks 1-4) was centered on definitions, diagnosis, establishing character and motive. A series of readings, research on the production of architectural images, mapping and diagramming songs, movies, books, or artwork were utilized to debate the definition of narrative and discuss parallels between designing and writing.

A shift from the private domestic sphere to public buildings established a set distance between the subject and the

designer. Five structures in the city of Honolulu were selected based on quality of space, use, design recognition, and public access: The Honolulu Museum of Art, founded in the 1920's and registered as a National and State Historical site; The Hawaii State Capitol, known for design elements that carry cultural symbolism; The East-West Center by I.M. Pei; and two mid-century modern buildings recognized for indoor-outdoor spacial relationships designed by renowned architect Vladimir Ossipoff.

A series of open-format short prompts followed. Students were encouraged to visit these places as many times as possible to observe, draw and make acquaintance with the architecture and its surrounding context. New variables such as authorship and the architect's design intent, as well as current use and inhabitants, played a critical role in analyzing the subject.

A photographic essay captured first impressions. The actions of zooming, focusing, cropping, presented the instinctive and curated versions of the world. Design decisions such as color, lighting, format, number, order, or the specific moments selected to be photographed began to reveal narratives and points of view, as well as urged the students to establish hierarchies and relationships.

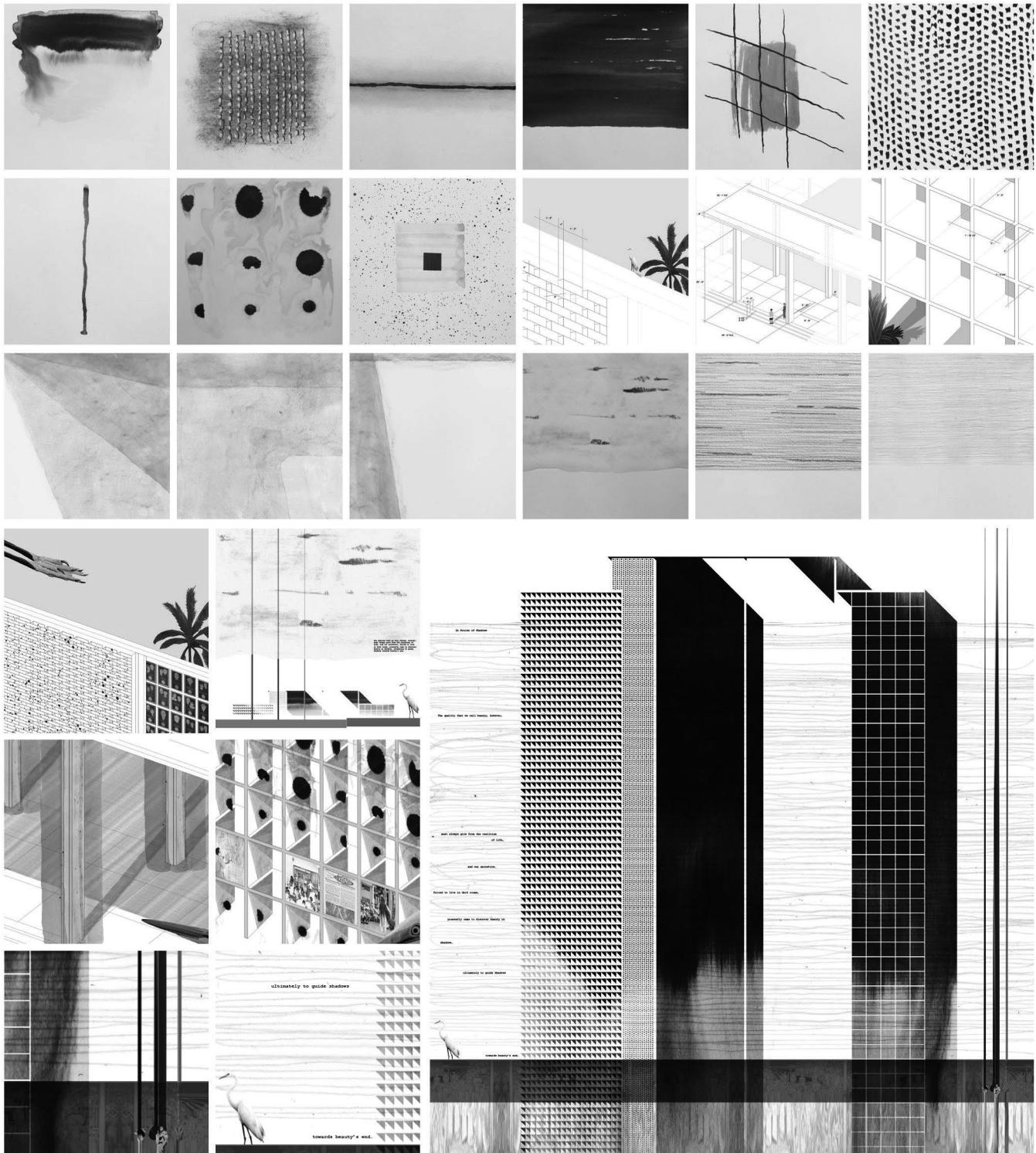


Figure 4: Final drawing set including Focused Explorations, Layered Compositions and Edited Narratives, inspired by Bachman Hall in Honolulu, designed by architect Valdimir Ossipoff. Credit: Danalli Ignacio. Draw Story: Iconic Constructs Seminar, UHM SoA, Fall 2017.

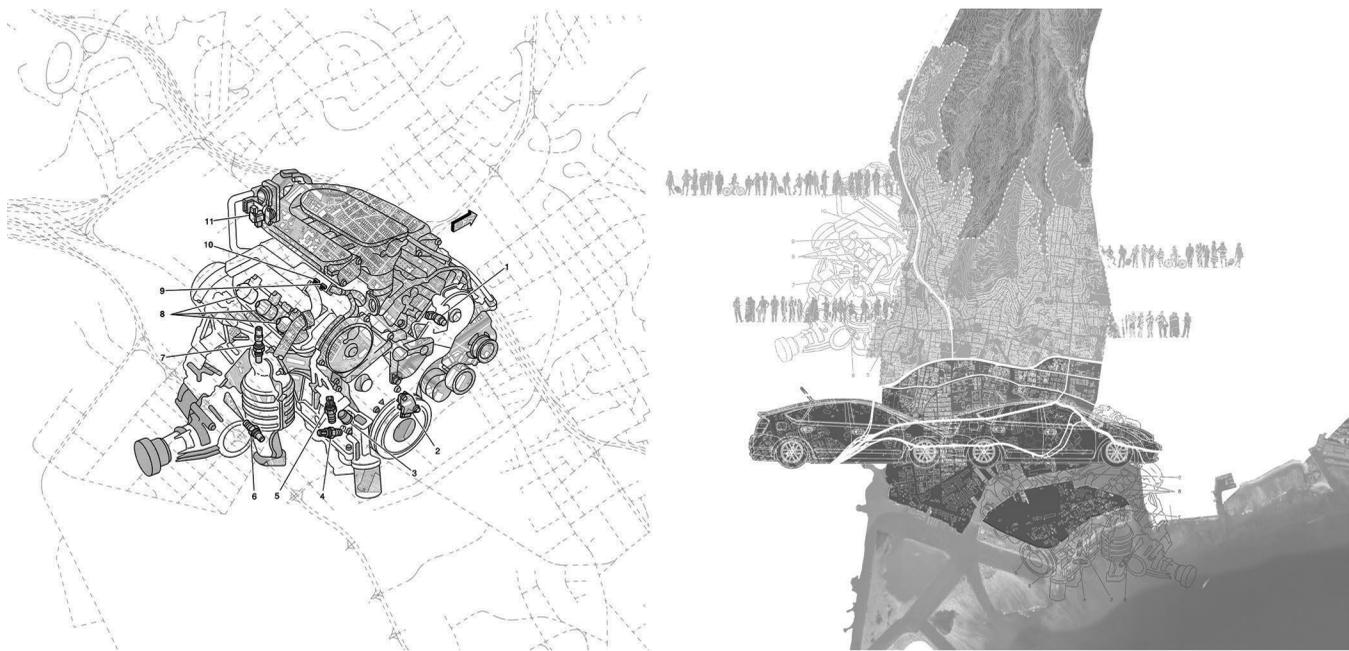


Figure 5: Focused Explorations inspired by the Kalihi-Palama Valley in Honolulu. Credit: Christopher Songvilay. Draw Story: The City and the Beach Seminar, UHM SoA, Fall 2018.

Three timed sketches tested the number of lines needed to convey an observation. Drawings within one minute translated the essence of the building, either formal or conceptual, literal or abstract. Ten-minute sketches revealed the importance of individual elements and one-hour drawings depicted details, which brought students a step further in reflecting on the specific characteristics of the space.

Students were also tasked with drawing the structures using formal architectural drafting conventions. These vector-based, survey drawings were created to scale with computer-aided software and presented two and three dimensions, establishing an infrastructural foundation, or base layer that served as a generator or precedent for future drawings.

Final images for this phase exhibited drafts of ideas and concepts, first impressions of character, and existing preconceptions in search of a motive.

Focused Explorations

The second phase (weeks 2-8) was centered on sequential but independent drawing explorations which aimed to focus on building elements, fragments, details, further defining attributes and mannerisms of the buildings. Students worked within a 10" x 10" square format, with different techniques, both hand-drawn and digitally made.

Design tasks included producing abstractions of the essence of the place, deconstructing the buildings into its basic elements, measuring components or space, drafting to scale, and establishing order.

The resulting visual collection of information was a mix of perceptions and intuitions, of on-site measurements, of techniques and methodologies, rigorous yet flexible, convergent and divergent, including both creative discoveries and failures.

Layered Compositions

A quadriptych series was proposed as the deliverable for the third phase (weeks 9-12) when students began to re-assemble and layer information. A new 20" x 20" square format was established. This sequence demanded a conceptual approach, where students tested combinations, organization and other compositional strategies such as balance, figure/ground, scale, hierarchies and the use of datums.

Drawings portrayed individual identities as well as relationships between each other, testing notions of order at multiple levels and revealing plots, and potential sequences for design narratives.

Edited Narratives

The fourth phase (weeks 13-16) presented the final denouement, which was accompanied by a finalized written description. Students were tasked with combining all previous studies into one 40" x 40" square drawing. This new format demanded a shift in logic, scale, resolution, and detail.

Edited Narratives presented the opportunity to utilize what had been learned, processed, and tested with previous investigations. These images evolved into speculations, crossing the boundaries from reality to fiction and from the figurative to the abstract.

THE CITY AND THE BEACH

The four-phase framework: Fundamental Understandings, Focused Explorations, Layered Compositions, and Edited Narratives, was further refined during the Fall of 2018. Beyond the domestic sphere, or the stories encountered through specific buildings, the third iteration of this trilogy

explored drawing opportunities offered by the broader urban realm.

Segments of the city of Honolulu were selected based on the island of Oahu's indigenous land divisions which span from the mountain to the ocean and from the city to the beach front.

Focusing on the metropolis as subject, demanded a series of adjustments within the design process. Establishing a subject of investigation encompassed defining boundaries, and narrowing down the area of study. One mile long sections were selected based on previously established borders such as political divisions and natural watersheds, or implicit edges determined by experiences, perception or daily habits.

Drawing the urban environment presented an abundance of opportunities for abstraction and incorporated broader concepts focused on historical events or critical issues within the city. Conversely, this scale presented new challenges, such as the complexity added to the process of editing and decision making by conglomerate sets of information.

CONCLUSIONS

The design of a drawing is no different from the design of an object or a space. Often, the final product carries less value than the sum of all the architectural artifacts produced along the process. These collections are of great value to students, as they begin to reveal visual or design languages that can be carried beyond the confines of a single academic course.

Furthermore, the fact that the outcome of this design framework remains unexpected until the final composition, forces students to develop a way of thinking through the exhaustion of a topic utilizing multiple iterations, and independent from previously acquired knowledge or believed experiences. In the end, something that might feel familiar has boundless potential to reveal the unexpected.

Aside from technique, tools or references, Draw Story focuses on a particular subject of investigation, which can vary widely in scale and realm of engagement. Even though the four procedural stages presented by this framework remain relevant with all variations, each subject demands a specialized approach, especially when understanding context or collecting content.

Draw Story provides a medium for expansive rule sets, evolving strategies, and multiple interpretations, a series of

'game states' for exploring architectural space, questioning its character, and ultimately redefining its identity. Draw Story is a game of -trial and error- resulting in an archive of potentials.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ENDNOTES

1. Amy Kulper, "Drawing Forth Difference," *Journal of Architectural Education* 70, no. 1 (2016). The term 'Discursive images' was defined by the design committee of the JAE featuring the inaugural call for Discursive Images in 2016. "Discursive images, a specific subset of the constructed imagery created by architects, are loaded—they are full of information, replete with spatial articulation, jam-packed with representational conceits and conventions, and overflowing with interpretive possibilities—while simultaneously concise in their delivery, refined in their graphic language, minimal in their aesthetic, and pithy in their communicative potential. Within their fulsome compositions, they retain both clues and tools for their own unpacking. They are discursive in both of its meanings, simultaneously meandering, digressive, diffuse and visually verbose, while retaining the potent capacity to stimulate discourse on, in, and surrounding the discipline of architecture."
2. Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* (London: Penguin Books, 2008), 188-205.