

# The end of drawing: narrative visualization and community-based collaboration

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**ABSTRACT:** That conventional design practice cannot substantively address many aspects of spatial production is beyond the concern of many architects and landscape architects, who would argue that the limits of their practice do not extend beyond the formal boundaries of buildings and grounds. It is at least arguable that growing anxiety about these limits led to the emergence of landscape urbanism, some practitioners of which employ a diverse array of graphic techniques not in the service of design, but instead to identify, analyze and describe problems and phenomena related to but beyond the self-imposed limits of building and ground.

Landscape urbanism's open-ended objectives expand the field of potential research subjects and the potential for community-based engagement. At least initially, many communities may require the skills, if not the standard products, of an architect -- skill sets learned during a design education -- one set rooted in graphic description and analysis (documentation), the other, in the graphic description of synthesized interrelationships (design). Two landscape urbanists using contrasting techniques, Fernando Romero (geographer) and Jane Wolff (storyteller), provide a useful reference point.

An open focus on the use of graphic skills is of benefit when working with aboriginal communities on British Columbia's coast. In that context, selecting which skills to use and how is dependent on issues that emerge from inside a collaboration rather than superimposed from outside, resulting in education, history, and legal evidence projects that are largely dependent on visual communication. These apparently simple acts of drawing have helped build trust between an academic and aboriginal community, and led to the development of other collaborative projects across environmental and social science disciplines. A wide-angle, open focus design practice of drawing research might be appealing to those unconvinced that building and ground are the practical limits of our disciplines.

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## **INTRODUCTION: REEXAMINING THE LIMITS OF PRACTICE**

Among the lessons learned during an architect's education is the simple fact that architects do not build; they draw. Exceptions of great merit exist, but these only prove the rule. Architects draw. In design school, they learn how and what to draw. The education of most architects includes not only the technical aspects of construction and code but also basic theory and history of architecture. What a thoughtful architecture student finds in theory and history is that contemporary ideas have precursors, and can be connected directly to broad social and moral concerns present at a given historical moment. Typically, architects address these concerns through the act of making drawings of things, usually buildings, but also cities and regions. As the scale of subject increases, the drawings made by architects begin to resemble maps, a durable and persistent form of documentation and representation.

Among philosopher Karl Popper's (1986) most important ideas is that things inhabit one of three worlds: the physical world, the world of thought and ideas, and the physical results of thoughts and ideas. Architects and landscape architects certainly contribute to the second category of things, so why is it that many would argue that the limits of their practice do not extend beyond the formal boundaries of buildings and grounds? It is at least arguable that this self-imposed limit to these two practices led to the emergence of landscape urbanism, which distinguishes itself from other design practices in its comfort employing a diverse array of graphic techniques in an oblique, deferred service to design. With its wide-angle lens in hand, landscape urbanism identifies, analyzes and describes problems and phenomena related to but beyond the self-imposed limits of building and ground. As such, landscape urbanism points toward an alternative form of practice, the products of which remain an open-ended question contingent on interaction, collaboration, and process.

## 1. FACTS AND STORIES

### 1.1. Drawing and spatial practice

To the Dutch of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, maps and paintings were both science *and* art. “[C]hallenging texts as a central way of understanding the world,” Alpers (1983) describes a Dutch culture in which mapmakers and painters employed figuration and narrative.

Cartographers and art historians have been in essential agreement in maintaining boundaries between maps and art, or between knowledge and decoration. They are boundaries that would have puzzled the Dutch. For at a time when maps were considered to be a kind of picture and when pictures challenged texts as a central way of understanding the world, the distinction was not firm. What should be of interest to students of maps and of pictures is not where the line was drawn between them, but precisely the nature of their overlap, the basis of their resemblance. (Alpers 1983: 126)

Through maps and paintings, the Dutch told stories. Something similar is now occurring in some corners of landscape urbanism, where the reductive qualities of representation in architectural and landscape architecture are being augmented by other graphic conventions capable of describing the entanglements, contingent relationships, and temporal change associated with contested space. These situations are in essence stories that can be told in the form of drawings, narrative drawings are part of “a social practice, not just a form of representation.” (Miller, et al: 596)

### 1.2. Mapping contested space

Two contrasting examples illustrate this trend in landscape urbanism. The focus of both is on a highly contentious landscape. Both explore temporal processes and change as both historical fact and present day risk. One describes facts as data while the other frames facts as stories, but both explain a variety of physical, social, environmental, and economic issues. Both extrapolate scenarios that do not predict the future but instead intensify the facts that they have described.

Fernando Romero’s *Hyper-Border* (2008) is an exhaustively researched work on the U.S./Mexico border. Romero begins by placing the border in the context of global cross border dynamics including trade, migration and conflict. With the clinical precision and distance of an autopsy, using the graphic conventions of a geographer, Romero then describes the historical evolution and present day conditions, reactions to, and interdependencies of the “hyperborder” region.

After laying this groundwork, Romero produces thirty-eight scenarios that project into the near future a diverse array of possible and plausible events, from pirated Canadian drinking water intended for Juarez, to new U.S. guest worker program policies and bullet trains linking British Columbia to Mexico. The wealth of

data and speculation produced in this work yields a compelling argument about the growing importance of this complex and tragic space, and is a usefully uncertain refraction of the space he has studied.

Jane Wolff’s *The Delta Primer* (2003) is an equally exhaustive taxonomy of the California Delta region located between Sacramento and San Francisco. Wolff’s book is organized as a deck of playing cards with “wilderness,” “garden,” “machine” and “toy” substituted as the suits. In her work, Wolff employs the conventions of Age of Discovery cartography, narrative painting and embroidered samplers (Bass and Wolff 1998).

In contrast to Romero’s clinical style (associated with Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau on the cover notes), Wolff’s folksy and artisanal hand-drawn graphic style seems to be a strategy for framing complex issues using media and conventions familiar to popular audience. Like Romero, Wolff does not end with a design coda. Wolff avoids the trap of false distinction between knowledge and art, or the impulse to offer art in the form of projection. Wolff’s drawings remain within the comfortable skin of describing problems, confident that solutions to them is a separate, equally important, sort of effort, but an effort beyond the scope of her particular interest and objective.

If Romero’s work tends to dissect his subject, Wolff’s reassembles hers by giving it hierarchy and theme. The border is a complex and large space, while the Delta region’s complexity is masked by its schematic agricultural landscape. In any case, despite their starkly different graphic and organization approaches, Romero and Wolff’s work shares a desire to explore issues beyond the scope of most design practice. Romero’s use of the scenario as a narrative device is complemented by Wolff’s use of a thematic structure to tell her stories. In Romero’s case, scenarios are described through words, while facts are told through charts and other diagrammatic forms. In Wolff’s example, stories are told through drawings annotated with text, shifting the emphasis to graphic narrative forms (Tufte 1997).

While the contrasting style of these two projects is evident, both produce a tension between between documentation and projection. Easterling (2003) exposes this tension in her essay *Error*, where she identifies in some who practice landscape urbanism the tendency to conflate *data* with *form*. It is important to emphasize that Easterling’s criticism is not meant to force us to make a Manichean choice between form and fact. Instead, her argument is much like Alpers’ observation on Dutch puzzlement.

## 2. NATIVE SPACE IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

### 2.1. Historical context

Romero’s and Wolff’s work are but two examples of the emergence in recent years of a great variety of participatory forms of spatial practice (Miessen 2008). “Stories,” as Michel de Certeau remarked,

traverse and organize places; they select and

link them together; they make sentences and itineraries out of them. They are spatial trajectories.

For the aboriginal people of coastal British Columbia, this narrative is one that was profoundly altered in the early 19<sup>th</sup> by British colonial occupation. To the great credit of Canadian civil society, this narrative remains open, and subject to ongoing processes of negotiation, compromise, and exchange. These processes, implicating economic, spatial, and historical issues, are precisely the sorts that drawing can engage.

Since the 1870's anthropologists and ethnographers (who often doubled as artifact collectors for museums around the world) have been studying the aboriginal people of coastal British Columbia (Boas 1897, 1925 and 1934; McIlwraith 1948). This has produced weariness in subsequent generations, who have become inured to the results of countless "studies" while they experience firsthand the effects of poverty and the inequalities of assimilation. Experience tells them to resist social scientists and academic figures that wish to conduct new and potentially useful collaborative research.

## 2.2. Drawing as an objective of research: Bella Coola

Research that results in drawings provides an alternative to this experience research fatigue, and has utility in contexts that affect the community/subject with immediacy and meaning. Graphic techniques in the work of Romero and Wolff are applicable in the context of collaboration with aboriginal communities in British Columbia.

These communities are financially limited, and producing drawings has played a key role in building trust between academic and aboriginal communities, opening the door to collaborations between social and environmental scientists and aboriginal communities. This essay will however limit its focus to a making the case for research methods that use drawing as the primary mode of describing and projecting the results of careful observation. The drawing techniques employed include the graphic translation of anecdote, an analysis of historic images, paintings, and surveyors' documents with educational and legal content, and research and development of culturally specific housing types.

The first interaction between drawing and an aboriginal community occurred in Bella Coola, British Columbia, with an elder and historian of the Nuxalk Nation. Figure 1 describes a practice common in the experience of suburban gardeners in many parts of the Vancouver metropolitan area, which developed on the traditional territories of several First Nations, who of course had been there for a very long time before the colonial era. The drawing (Bass 2005) illustrates how artifacts unearthed during everyday gardening are relocated to the gardener's fireplace mantel, and not repatriated or transmitted to government archaeologists. No family wants their backyard turned into an archaeological site. The drawing, an example of a graphic translation of anecdotal information, was shown to the Nuxalk

historian, who immediately understood its significance. He then asked for assistance in resolving a dispute over his nation's reserve boundary, which, he believed, was moved to the disadvantage of his people.

## 2.3. Open-ended collaborative projects

The historian's request resulted in two separate actions. The first was to take place in the Provincial archives and land title office, where survey records, sketch maps, and other documents were examined for any evidence of a shift over time in the reserve boundary. The second act was a collaboration between the historian and a group of architecture graduate students, who produced a series of narrative drawings on the Bella Coola River and its estuary (Fig. 1). The drawings were organized in book form, copies of which were presented to many people in Bella Coola (Bass 2006).

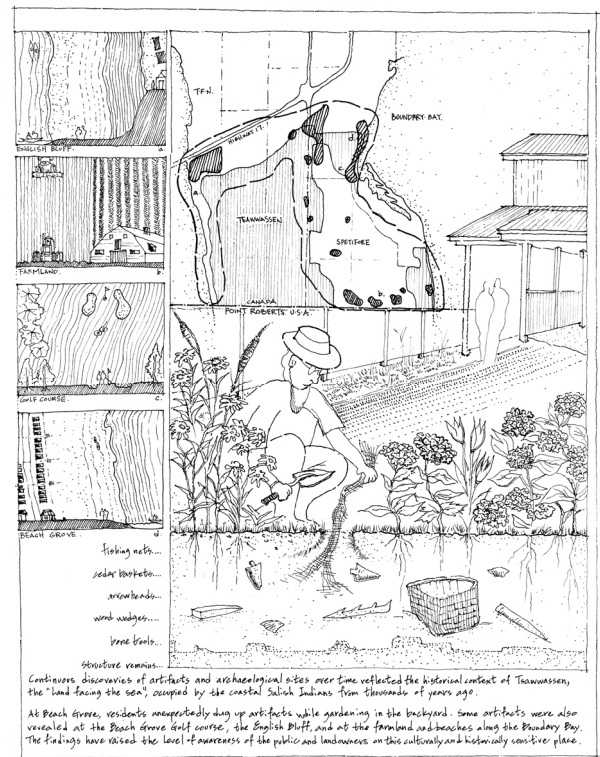


Figure 1: The Gardener's Dilemma. Drawing by Jing Xu. (Bass 2006)

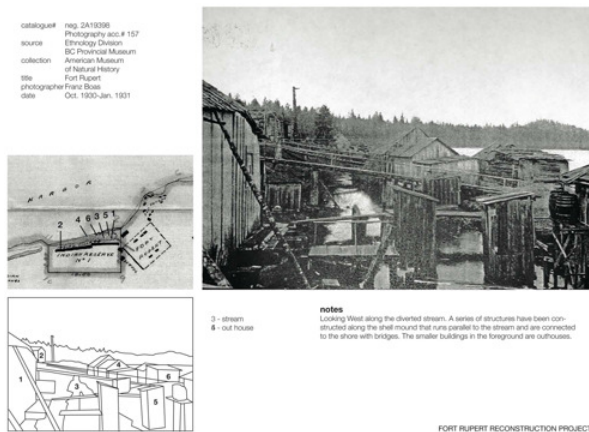
While the results of the archival research were inconclusive, the two projects that resulted from the drawing of the gardener established the beginning of what has evolved into a robust collaboration by the Nuxalk with social and environmental scientists colleagues in a Community-University Research Alliance (CURA) funded project. Collaboration with the Nuxalk has also now extended to more typically architectural forms of activity. A culturally and environmentally specific house type is now being developed (Maclean 2008), and government agencies have expressed interest in supporting the project.

### 2.4. “Reconstructing” Fort Rupert

The Nuxalk historian’s interest in boundaries and space was a preview of a much more extensive research project that was done in collaboration with the Fort Rupert Kwakiutl Band of Fort Rupert, British Columbia. This project began after the Band’s economic development office attended a presentation describing narrative drawing to a local town council. He asked for assistance in developing a “vision” for the reconstruction of a Hudson’s Bay Company fort (the fort gave the Band its name) adjacent to the Band’s reserve. The economic development office, an outsider who had begun to develop a reputation for negotiating contentious large scale, resource extraction projects within the Band’s traditional territory, envisioned the fort project as a tourist attraction, an income and job creator. But it was obvious that the great majority of the native community he worked for did not share his vision. However, a project that studied the fort’s history and relationship to the native culture within which it was established – that project was of great interest to all.

### 2.5. Building a knowledge foundation

Upon signing a memorandum of understanding, access to the Band’s collection of photographs, interview transcripts, archaeological findings, and other resources provided immediate and useful information. The fort, built in 1849, brought many visitors to this part of the Pacific Coast, and those visitors began to establish a photographic record that begins in 1866. The great numbers of images made of Fort Rupert allowed the careful viewer to note the changes to the physical settlement, and to record these changes in drawn form. This process began by producing a series of plates outlining facts associated with an image, including date and photographer, position of camera, and notable built features visible in the image (Fig. 2).



**Figure 2:** Example of photograph analysis plate. Plate by John Bass and James Eidse. (Bass 2007)

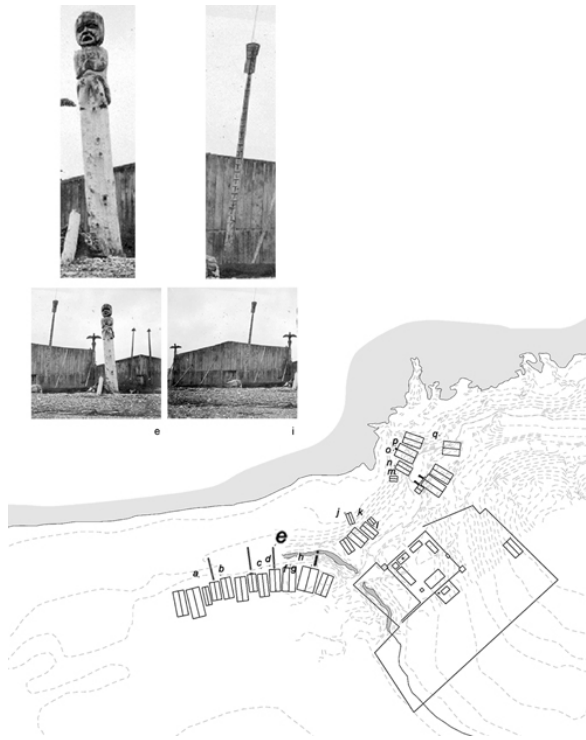
This analysis of the 19th and early 20th century photographs led to a series of site plan drawings (Fig. 3). This time-based set of drawings, seen at right, shows how the fort gradually lost its defensive boundaries and the gradual assimilation by the native



**Figure 3:** Fort Rupert, British Columbia. (top to bottom, 1850, 1870, 1900) Drawings by John Bass, Heather Maxwell, and Jing Xu. (Bass 2007)

village of its space. The phased site plans also provided a base to map the symbolic dimensions of the native village and its various carved poles (Fig. 4). These drawings, along with a series of narrative drawings and an accompanying essay, were organized

in book form and presented to the Band (Bass 2007). The Band is currently working with representatives of the Provincial education ministry, seeking to publish the work and have it integrated into secondary education programs in the region.



**Figure 4:** Pole location diagram. Drawing by Jing Xu. (Bass 2007)

### 2.6. Drawing and analysis as a legal tool

The analysis of the photographs and their translation into quite conventional site plan drawings benefited from the skills of close observation and documentation that are at important parts of an architect's education. While the work previously described was original in that it produced new knowledge, it was of a straightforward, not to say cursory, character. It has however led to other, potentially more provocative projects, one in particular that can be described here.

Among the earliest photographs of Fort Rupert was a three-image panorama taken c. 1866 (Fig. 5 and 6). The year 1866 was pivotal in Fort Rupert's history, and the photograph, which on first glance appears to be a document of an early colonial landscape with many interesting features, is in fact a tableau.

In the central middle ground, dressed in a hoop skirt, stands a woman. Her arrival at the gates of the fort is being witnessed by a dozen or more natives, who sit on the wharf above her, watched over by two guards within the fort's walls. Her presence in this highly posed photograph is an indication of a negotiation over territory between colonial and aboriginal cultures, a claim that requires a certain amount of elaboration.

The image was taken eight months after the British navy asserted its control over the Fort Rupert Kwakiutl



**Figure 5:** Panorama, Hudson Bay Co's Fort & Store House at Fort Rupert, V.I., c. 1866, Frederick Dally, photographer. (Courtesy, Toronto Public Library)



**Figure 6:** Detail of above, showing the arrival of a woman dressed in a hoop skirt, natives and guards.

by destroying much of their village. Indeed, the panorama indicates that the village was still being reconstructed or that parts had been abandoned. An 1863 survey of Fort Rupert suggest that the Hudson's Bay Company, agents of the British colonial government, was attempting a complicated three-way real estate deal with Roman Catholic missionaries and a family group within the Fort Rupert Kwakiutl Band.

This negotiation was being conducted by the HBC and the colonial government despite the fact that it is quite clear in the historical record that there were native settlements on the land proposed for the real estate. This fact should have made this land unavailable for conversion to private property by settlers, missionaries, or anyone.

Figure 7 represents the fundamental spatial order of the Canadian west during the middle part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It inverts the representational strategy implemented by colonial and later, provincial agents, in which "the maps of the Indian Reserve Commissioners who laid them out, reserves were displayed rather like insects on pins, exhibits mounted on blank sheets." (Harris 2002: 271)

These are some of the historical events and artifacts of an ongoing project involving drawing, photographic and cartographic correlation and interpretation, and archival research. This project is an inquiry into the spatial organization of Fort Rupert's colonial and native space during the period from 1857 to 1866, the time when the initial conversions of land into property occurred in Kwakwaka'wakw traditional territory. Once completed, this work will be transferred to the Band in book form,



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