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The Importance of Drawing as a Means of Architectural Investigation

When I pass pre-arch students in Rapson Hall with their charcoal smudged hands and tired eyes, I can't help but smile. I think all of us do. We are reminded of the hard-work of this architecture initiation-ritual and simultaneously fascinated by what talent and explorations will again be uncovered by a fresh batch of undergraduate students. There is a palpable sensation of dread and panic in their motions to desperately tape up their drawings, but for the rest of us it is a gallery of spatial sensation that lends enjoyment and spectacle. For me, it also importantly represented an awakening of my visual literacy.

The idea of having visual literacy was first imparted to me by my Introduction to Architectural Drawing professor, Andrzej Piotrowski, and the idea radically changed my understanding about the importance of drawing. He was an inspiring professor who understood, and taught us to understand, the importance of seeing the world not in terms of symbols or preconceptions, but in real raw experience. As I drew spaces such as Rapson's concrete stairwell, I saw the rhythm of a suffocatingly heavy amorphous concrete form punctuated by the continuity and lightness of long lean windows. Before it had only been a stairwell - a symbol defined by its function. With watercolor too, I could appreciate the interaction and intersections of light, form, and color. Before I could identify something that was red and put down a simple primary color, but it took a heightening of my perception to see how the shadows on the lumps of snow outside were in fact indigo, or how fluorescent lights could give a downturned face a faint mixed shade of purple and green. The act of drawing or painting a space forced me to consider my spatial

understanding in a way that immediately challenged my perception. When something looked off, deep down I knew it was because I had believed an untruth about what I thought I saw. It was a learning that was self-reflexive, self-aware, and one that demanded of itself brutal self-honesty. Ultimately I believe therein lies the importance of drawing architecture and urban spaces. It is a necessary visual exercise for us to consider not just the fallibility of our perception, but the steps in-between that go into accurately recreating sensations that we intuitively feel such as the rhythm, balance, proportion, and unity of a space. Drawing is a testament to the age-old wisdom that something must be exercised with our hands and with our critical thinking to truly understand. It is about both the discovery of process and the process of discovery.