



DRAWING THE LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT

Chip Sullivan reflects on his path to teaching and why he believes drawing is still a valuable tool for landscape architects today.

By Daniel Jost, Associate ASLA

IF BEING A LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT didn't give Chip Sullivan a chance to draw, to touch pen to paper, he probably would have chosen a different career. Sullivan has taught the introductory drawing course for landscape architecture students at the University of California, Berkeley (UC Berkeley) since 1988. His book *Drawing the Landscape* is a required text in universities throughout the country, and his comics are often published in this magazine.

"Drawing really permeates my life," says Sullivan. And it's a part of his life he enjoys sharing with others.

A self-portrait by Chip Sullivan, top, shows him in his studio, drawing up his latest comic. As a boy, Sullivan was fond of the renderings in his model railroad magazines and the painted background of his grandfather's train set. These scenes have inspired Sullivan's own artwork, right and opposite.





He recently sat down with *Landscape Architecture* to reflect on his career—the childhood experiences that fed his enthusiasm for drawing, how he went from being a professional to an academic, and some of the teaching methods he’s picked up in his years as a professor.

But one particular topic seemed to hang over our conversation: the value of hand drawing for landscape architects today. Sullivan’s students are entering a profession that’s barely recognizable from the one

their professor entered 30 years ago. With the variety of technologies now available to landscape architects, hand drawing may seem a little quaint. But Sullivan insists drawing still has a place as a method for studying and designing landscapes.

A Chip off the Old Block

Sullivan’s love for drawing began at a very young age. “My mother remembers the minute she gave me a crayon, I started drawing,” he says. But he wasn’t a prodigy.

In pre-K, Sullivan would always use black crayons and color outside the lines. His teachers actually worried that something was wrong with him.

Yet his family always encouraged him to draw and complimented his work. As he got older, he’d often sketch the steel mills that towered over his neighborhood in Weirton, West Virginia. When he’d show these drawings to his Uncle Len, his uncle’s face would light up. “That’s a great steel mill!” he’d say. “It’s like a diagram!”

CHIP SULLIVAN





I'm going to take this down to the mill and have them build one from this."

Sullivan's family challenged him, too. His father was a fairly good artist in his own right and had planned to go to college to become a graphic designer before World War II broke out. "He used to brag about how he could draw all the Sunday comics by the fifth grade," Sullivan remembers. Young Chip set the same goal and spent hours trying to draw the comics so that he could prove himself to his old man.

When Sullivan was not drawing comics, he was playing with trains, a hobby he shared with his father and grandfather and

has never given up. He'd draw new layouts for his train set and imagine driving the train through the landscape. While many train enthusiasts enjoy modeling, Sullivan remembers being more excited by the renderings in the model railroad magazines and the painted background of his grandfather's train set. "There was something about the landscape that was cartoony and not quite right that I found charming," he says.

He was similarly impressed with animated cartoons by Max Fleisher—creator of Popeye and Betty Boop—and the monster T-shirts of Ed "Big Daddy" Roth. In high school, rather than working on homework

during study hall, he would make drawings for the other kids, often inspired by these artists. Soon this was more than just a hobby. He ordered one of Roth's catalogs and began making shirts for his friends with magic markers. People were actually paying Sullivan to draw, and it gave him a sort of high.

He decided to make a career of drawing. At the University of Florida in the 1970s, Sullivan originally studied graphic design but began studying landscape architecture after learning that the field combined art and ecology. It was around the first Earth Day, and the importance of environmentally sensitive design was just starting to break into the public consciousness. At the university, Sullivan felt as if he were in heaven. "Painters,

graphic designers, and fine artists were all in the same building at that time," says Sullivan. "You could wander from classroom to classroom. That synergistic environment was great."

There, Sullivan learned the value of drawing existing landscapes to understand them. "I never saw the world until I started drawing the landscape," he says.

Drawing on the Job

During grad school, Sullivan worked for a planning firm and did renderings for various firms. But once he graduated, he found it difficult to get a job. It was during the oil embargo, and the country was in a recession. Instead of lounging around his parents' house, he decided to explore the southwestern United States. He spent three months camping out in the desert and studying the ruins of the Anasazi civilization. He sketched the cliff dwellings at Pueblo Bonito, marveling at the way their design responded to the sun.

When he returned from his trip, the economy had improved, and he found a job with Sasaki Associates. He worked for the firm for almost 10 years, but he never grew tired of drawing or saw it as a chore. On the con-

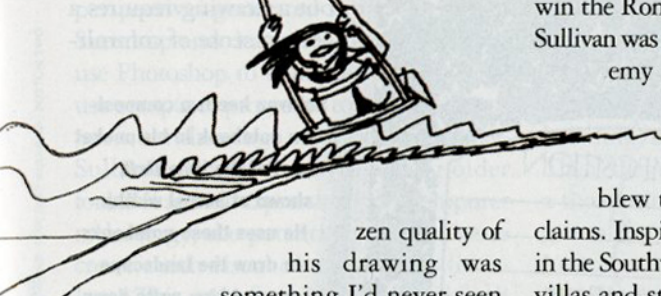


Sullivan painted this Italian landscape, top, using watercolors. He integrates his drawings into the syllabi for his classes, his letterhead, and his gift tags, above, giving them a personal touch.

trary, when he got home from work, he would labor on his own personal art.

It was at Sasaki that he met his artistic mentor, landscape architect and artist Frank James. Watching James draw a girl swinging on a swing was an inspiration to Sullivan. "The spontaneity, the

A quick sketch, right, taken from one of Sullivan's sketchbooks, shows how he records the landscape when he travels. While working at Sasaki Associates, Sullivan was inspired by this simple drawing of a girl on a swing, left, by his coworker Frank James.



zen quality of his drawing was something I'd never seen before," Sullivan remembers. "It was like watching an angel fly." Sullivan convinced James to give him a drawing lesson and James invited Sullivan over for cocktails. This led to a close friendship. "We'd stay up long nights, talking about drawing," says Sullivan.

Sullivan learned a very important lesson from his conversations with James: that with practice anyone can learn to draw. "[James] couldn't draw as well as everyone else, so he forced himself to learn," he recalls. "That shows you why I believe everybody can learn to draw. It may take a little time, but it can happen."

Sullivan actually taught himself to paint with watercolors while he was working for Sasaki. Some of his colleagues had come to him, asking him to teach them to use watercolors; however, he had very little experience with watercolors himself. "Maybe they

thought, 'this guy wears a beret, he can obviously watercolor,'" remarks Sullivan. But instead of telling them they should talk to somebody else, he found a book on the subject, taught himself, then set up some painting sessions for his coworkers. He organized trips to scenic areas where they'd paint together on weekends.

During the mid-1980s, to further develop his own art, Sullivan took a few months off from Sasaki to study at the Art Students League in New York City. "Architects were showing their drawings at galleries in New York City, and I thought landscape architects should be, too," he remembers. Eventually he was able to get some of his drawings exhibited, and the portfolio of work he developed during this time also helped him win the Rome Prize. From 1984 to 1985, Sullivan was a fellow at the American Academy in Rome. Once again, he was surrounded by creative professionals from many different fields. "It just

blew the lid off my brain!" he exclaims. Inspired by his earlier explorations in the Southwest, Sullivan sketched Italian villas and studied how their designs responded to the local climate. These sketches became the basis for a book, *Garden and Climate*, published in 2002.

Academia Calls

Winning the Rome Prize also opened another door for Sullivan. Peter Walker, FASLA, was on the selection committee that awarded the prize. Walker was impressed with Sullivan's work and asked him if he'd be interested in working at his



firm or teaching with him as a visiting professor at Harvard. Honored, Sullivan accepted the offer to teach.

"I had never considered teaching, so I went at it totally cold," he says. "But this experience of teaching with Peter, under the master, was just great... it inspired me to [become a professor]." After his experience as a visiting professor, he applied for an open position on the landscape architecture faculty at UC Berkeley. Sullivan never expected to get the job, but he did, and he's been teaching ever since. Over the years he has taught a variety of different classes and studios, including a studio focused on climate design principles and a class called the alchemy of creativity where he looks at machines that altered the way people looked at the world. His involvement in the introductory drawing studio has remained a constant throughout his tenure.

When he first began teaching the drawing studio, there were fewer than 20 students, but now he often has more than 80. He co-teaches the class with artist Joe Slusky. Each class begins with a lecture. "I keep making my lectures shorter and shorter," Sullivan says, "more direct and straightforward."

The class is split into five sections, each with its own teaching assistant, and Sullivan moves between the groups giving demonstrations and critiques. He'll look at each student's drawings individually, drawing over their work on trace paper if necessary. Sullivan believes much of what he teaches is pretty standard—gesture, contour, tone, and visualization—but unlike some drawing "masters," he

A Lesson from Chip's Playbook

"The big thing I took away from my undergrad and graduate experience was the excitement of inspiration," says Sullivan. To teach his students to look for inspiration in unusual places, he begins his upper level studio with a unique lesson. He has his students walk across sheets of newspaper with charcoal dust on their shoes and then create a landscape plan from the shoe prints. "This shows them where design can come from. The whole idea is to activate the imagination by showing that something so totally foreign can be a starting point for design," he says. "I get the most beautiful, unusual gardens you'll ever see in your life."

SHARED WISDOM

does not encourage his students to learn a specific method of drawing. "We're trying to promote everybody having their own personal drawing style," he says. "I see [my job] as simply giving people confidence in what they can do."

To help students loosen up, he begins the first day of class with a drawing session in the faculty glade, an area with ancient oak trees. Each of the students is told to draw three trees with a pen or pencil. After they've completed that assignment, Sullivan has the students draw the same trees using a stick dipped in ink. According to Sullivan, the lesson is inspired by Van Gogh, who often drew with sticks. When they are done, he has them place their drawings side by side. "I ask them which drawings are more beautiful, and inevitably, it's the ones they did with the stick," Sullivan says. "They're not being as precious. The blunt implement frees them up and allows them to be more gestural."

Hand Drawing vs. the Computer

Sullivan believes that sort of quick, gestural sketch still has a great deal of value within the profession, particularly

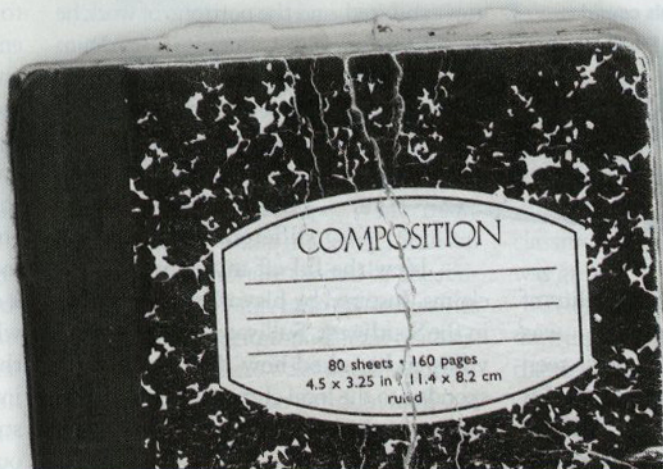
during the design process. "That lightning-fast connection, to be able to express your subconscious, it's brilliant!" he says. "You've probably had a really great idea one moment and you can't write it down," but with a quick gestural sketch, you can preserve that idea. There's an immediacy to drawing that is not matched by CAD, which is a precision-oriented tool.

There may also be a greater potential for individuality in creating renderings by hand. Sullivan encourages his students to reuse sketches they've done from nature in their renderings, since they tend to be more expressive than a tree they copy from a drawing book or a symbol from a computer program.

Like James Richards, ASLA, who wrote "Travel as Creative Fuel" in the

October 2008 issue of *Landscape Architecture*, Sullivan believes that sketching the landscape is a good way to understand it. "Look at the Renaissance. They had no textbooks," he observes. "They went to churches and drew. By sketching, you're creating your own textbook of ideas that can be used throughout your career. I carry [pocket-sized] sketchbooks with me constantly. I draw my environment and things that will later inspire a piece of artwork or landscape architecture. Even the comics I do start as little bits and pieces in a smaller drawing. I'm building a repository of visual knowledge." While some people may prefer photography, Sullivan notes that unlike photography, drawing requires you to think about space and

understand it. With digital cameras it's easy to quickly take a lot of pictures, but a drawing requires a certain sense of commit-

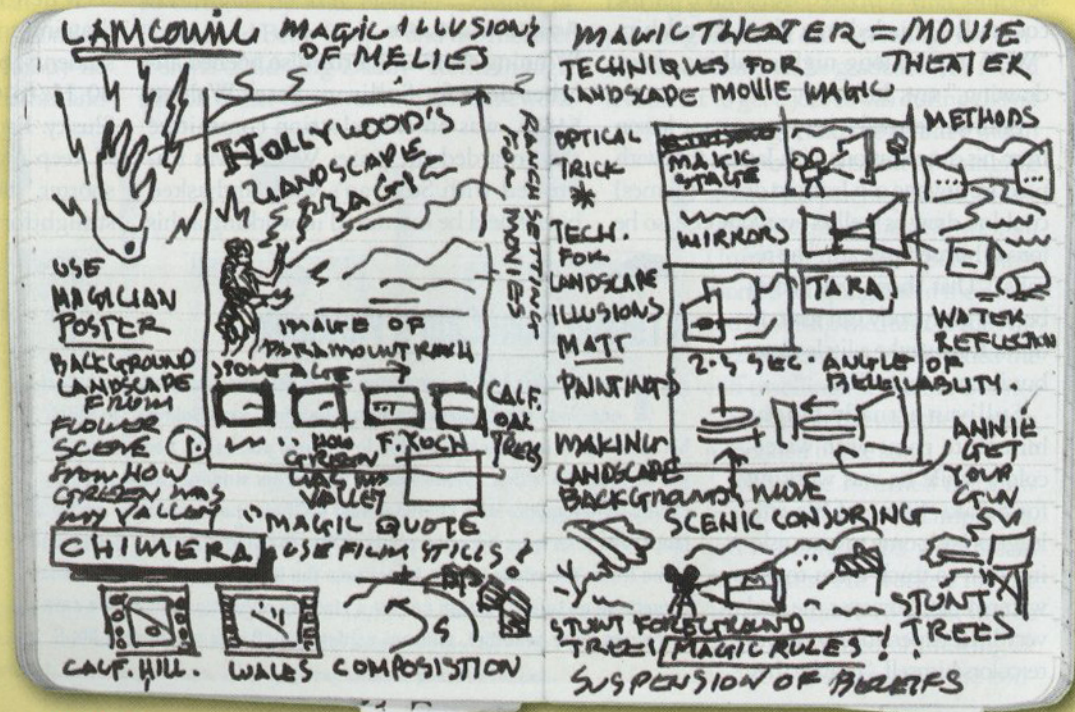


Sullivan keeps a composition notebook in his pocket most of the time (left, shown at actual width). He uses these notebooks to draw the landscape around him, write down his dreams, and plan out his larger works, below.

CHIP SULLIVAN

How Chip Draws

Most of Sullivan's designs and artwork start as thumbnail sketches in a 4.5-inch by 3.25-inch lined composition notebook. He usually uses a fountain pen to make these drawings. He tries not to worry about making mistakes. "If I make a mistake, I'll try to work that into where I'm going with the drawing," he says. "Sometimes I think I'm making a mistake as I'm drawing, but then when I look back at the drawing later, I can't even tell where I made it." For his comics, he often uses this notebook to lay out storyboards. ➔



ment, and for that commitment, your mind is more likely to create a memory. This memory can be accessed either consciously or subconsciously when you're trying to design some other place.

But Sullivan is not a Luddite. He acknowledges the advantages of drafting production drawings in CAD. He wouldn't encourage his students to create hand-drafted working drawings. In fact he promotes "hybridizing" drawing with modern technologies during the design process to create unique layouts and renderings. Students can take little pencil sketches and enlarge them. They can take perspectives generated in programs like Sketchup and draw over them. They can use Photoshop to manipulate them, then use computer programs to color them, or print out drawings on watercolor paper. Sullivan thinks that by merging older forms of artistic expression with computer technology, the potential people have to create a rich visual environment is limitless. "This way of working back and forth has incredible potential," he says.

Sullivan has also embraced computer an-



Sullivan (in the beret) sketches at a café in North Beach with some of his students from the University of California, Berkeley.

imation as a way of encouraging students to understand what it feels like to move through space. For one assignment, "I have my students create the design with storyboarding, not in plan or section," he says. Then "they take these storyboards and create a three-minute animated film [using programs like PowerPoint, Flash, or iMovie]. You can actually make a pretty vibrant film like that."

Asked what sorts of computer technology he would like to see developed and

made available to landscape architects in the future, Sullivan suggests a program that would make it easier to animate between storyboards. He also jokes that it would be interesting to have a machine that would hook up to your brain and print out your dreams.

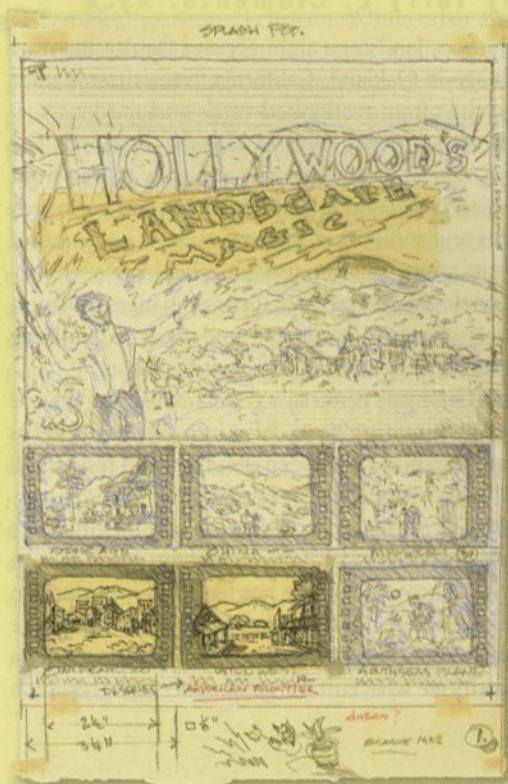
Sullivan hasn't found tablet technology that appealing, at least the ones he's tried so far. "I know some people are committed to the tablets, but I

like the feel of an ink pen on a piece of paper. With a fountain pen, you can feel it flex. You can feel it scratch against the paper." Touching a plastic stylus to a plastic surface just isn't the same.

But he does have some suggestions for whoever is designing the next technology. "What I think would be very cool is some type of magic decoder pen," says Sullivan. "You would draw on paper, but it would send that electronic impulse to your computer and record and store the information. It's kind of a combination of both worlds. You're actually doing a drawing but at the same time storing it electronically."

LAM

NICOLA STATHIERS, TOP; CHIP SULLIVAN, BOTTOM TWO



◀ Next he moves to a larger sheet of paper. He may photocopy the thumbnails, enlarging them so that he can trace over them using pen or pencil on tracing paper. Sullivan will often work with many different tracing paper overlays. Some people may move directly to the final drawing, but he likes to rework his drawings until he gets them just right.

➔ Finally, he will ink the final drawing. If it is work for an office, the final drawing may be done on tracing paper or mylar. If it is a piece of artwork that he plans to watercolor, he will transfer it onto Bristol board using a light table and then paint it. Sullivan says this is usually the longest part of the process.

