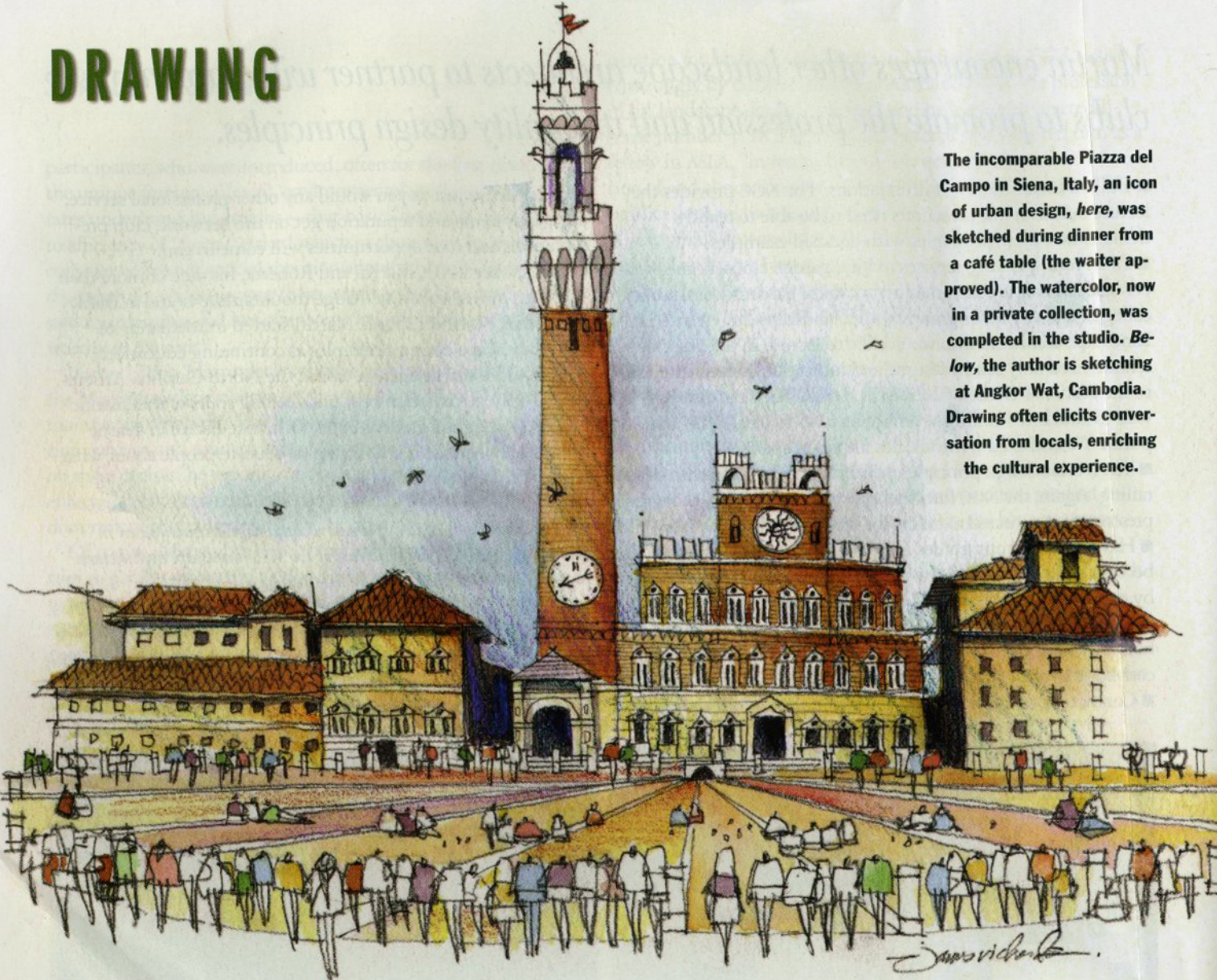


# DRAWING

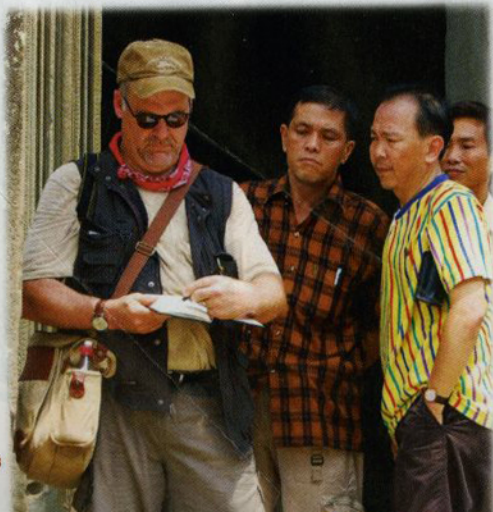


The incomparable Piazza del Campo in Siena, Italy, an icon of urban design, *here*, was sketched during dinner from a café table (the waiter approved). The watercolor, now in a private collection, was completed in the studio. *Below*, the author is sketching at Angkor Wat, Cambodia. Drawing often elicits conversation from locals, enriching the cultural experience.

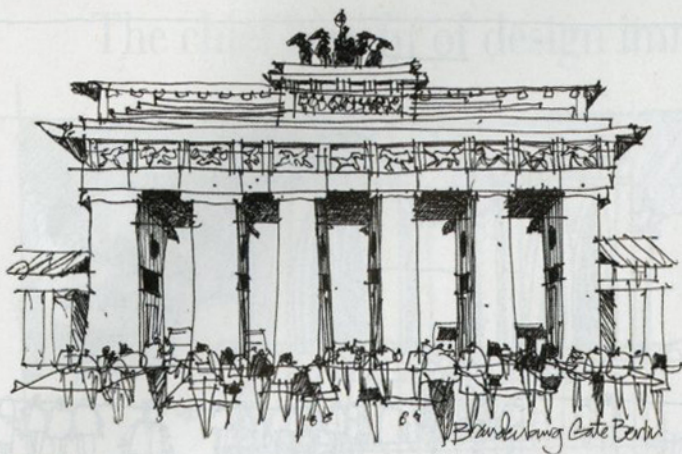
## TRAVEL AS CREATIVE FUEL

The lessons of great places are best learned through “design immersion.” **Text and Drawings by James Richards, ASLA**

**Y**OU'RE A YOUNG DESIGNER. You want to become good—very good—at what you do. Or perhaps you're a seasoned professional, hoping to rekindle that fire in the belly that has driven your best work. A word of advice: Travel. Frequently. Widely. I know of nothing short of cutting a deal with the devil himself that will jump-start passion and accelerate creative skills faster than packing a bag and, in Mark Twain's words, lighting out for the territory ahead.



Many academic programs offer “study abroad” programs, affording young designers the opportunity to pursue course work while immersed in a foreign culture. The traditional “study abroad” model has its undeniable benefits, and many have grown immeasurably from the cultural immersion experience. But the travel model that's been most beneficial to my work as a designer has been a different, more intense kind than typically offered by customary travel/study programs.

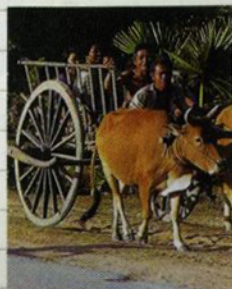


I call it “design immersion.” Its fundamental characteristic is rapid exposure to the most instructive landscapes and best creative works a region, country, or continent has to offer. These trips are characterized by an ambitious itinerary and almost-perpetual motion so that the traveler is immersed less in a particular culture than in the visual language of design, which cuts across time and cultures. It is, in my experience, the designer’s single best avenue of growth outside academic walls.

**The author sketched Berlin’s Brandenburg Gate, above, from a spot that has seen crowds gathered for historic figures from Napoleon and Hitler to Kennedy and Reagan. On recent trips his journal, below, has mixed notes, sketches, brochure photos, and found objects to capture a broad impression of a site.**

For example, a recent 21-day trip is best described by numbers: 2,500 miles, five countries, six major cities (Paris, Berlin, Prague, Salzburg, Munich, and the Creative Class hot spot of Kraków), 10 miles’ daily walking average, 40 pages of notes, numerous sketches and doodles, and 1,800 digital photos. Long days were planned to reveal the essence of place from classic city form to state-of-the-art projects; great museums and 1,000-year-old medieval cities were juxtaposed

Angkor Thom, the older area, is truly the more fascinating (though less well known) site. Though renovation of its main temple, Bayon, is ongoing, much looks untouched. It’s certainly doubtful that, as tourism pressures increase,



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with the Bauhaus school, a new water filtration system using aquatic plants, and a German automaker's stunning new shrine to its all-encompassing culture of design. The upshot? A creative well refilled with new knowledge, timeless insights, and inspirational energy to spare.

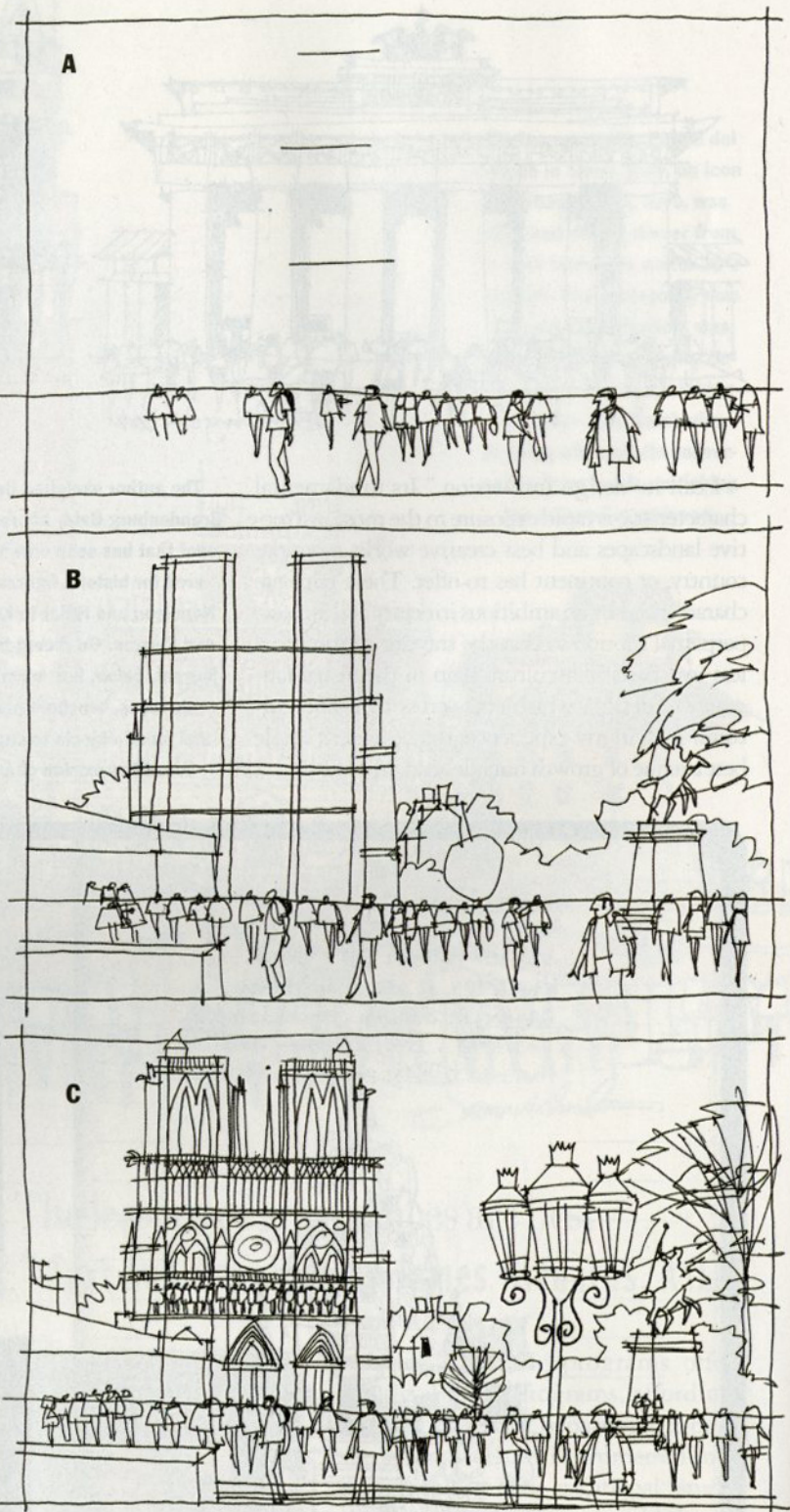
My passion for design-inspired travel (27 countries so far) and awareness of its considerable creative benefits, like those of many colleagues, were sparked by Louisiana State's rightly famous study trips, initiated by now retired Director Emeritus "Doc" Reich, FASLA, in 1941 and developed over 40 years by Professor Max Conrad, FASLA, a world traveler without peer. Through the initiative of Max and Doc and the ongoing efforts of two generations of faculty colleagues, thousands of students have been exposed to the best minds and work of the profession throughout the United States and abroad, and the "design immersion" field trip model became a cornerstone of the school's

### Stimulus-rich travel builds a rich storehouse of mental imagery that becomes the designer's inner sourcebook.

educational philosophy. Design Workshop CEO Kurt Culbertson, FASLA, an LSU alum, is one of many who credit these trips for a life-changing perspective. "Classes gave us the tools," he says, "but travel gave us the world."

The chief benefit of design immersion travel is to train the eye. Learning the principles and subtleties of design is comparable to learning a language—one becomes fluent through immersion. And rapid, continual exposure to the world's great places—their structure, streets, plazas, parks, buildings, gardens, art, and details—trains the eye in the recognition and masterful use of timeless principles of scale, proportion, and materials.

Second, a series of stimulus-rich travel itineraries over time builds a rich storehouse of mental imagery that becomes the designer's inner sourcebook. As a young, traveling LSU student visiting the Harvard Graduate School of Design in the 1970s, I heard the venerable Norman



**HOW TO CONSTRUCT AN ON-THE-SPOT SKETCH: NOTRE DAME (A)** Begin by drawing a light frame around the paper's edges to mark the boundaries of the drawing. To make sure the sketch will fit onto the page, mentally divide the subject vertically into thirds, then subdivide the drawn frame into corresponding vertical thirds with light pencil marks, thus creating guidelines for keeping the subject in proportion. Once the page is subdivided, drop in a horizon line and a few

people to animate the scene and to provide a tool for measuring elements in the drawing. (B) Start the composition with simple shapes—the rectangles, triangles, and other basic geometry that make up the overall forms of the scene. With the composition set you can relax knowing the drawing will be successful. (C) Have fun filling in details. Try to simplify complex facades or scenes to capture their "visual texture" rather than their literal details.

The chief benefit of design immersion travel is to train the eye.



**(D)** Compose darks—black and one or two middle values—to add visual structure, freshness, and life to the image. **(E)** Add color very quickly with a limited palette of colored pencils. Watercolor pencils are another traveler's favorite for portability and ease of use.

Newton observe that “planners think in words; designers visualize in images.” My own experience is that the quality of our visualization depends, in large part, on development of our own rich and diverse “mental image bank” on which the designer can draw for in-

spiration and creative direction. As we take in more landscapes, villages, towns, and projects, our minds go through a subconscious sorting process, revealing patterns that point to enduring principles of placemaking. As our mental image library grows, wide differences in time, geography, and culture evaporate, and timeless principles and ideas reassert themselves with clarity. Travel puts our own personal efforts as designers into the context of an engaging storyline bridging centuries.

**Sketching.** Travel sketching has survived centuries through technological advances for good reason; translating a view into lines, tones, and textures can convey the visual essence of a scene and your reaction to it in ways snapshots cannot. Two travelers' photos will be very similar, but their drawings capture a uniquely personal view. Deeply observing and sketching a subject sears its form, proportions, and details into the mind in a way that makes it your own. And creating a lively drawing teaches its own lessons about design fundamentals—composition, value, rhythm, repetition, focus—that sharpen our design skills back in the studio.

Sketching also facilitates cultural exchange, attracting onlookers offering critiques and more. An observer

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in Mesilla, New Mexico, turned out to be a former mayor of the town who made a copy of my streetscape sketch for framing, gave me an insider's tour of the town's hidden charms, and treated me to lunch on his lushly planted patio garden. I traded road stories with a Chinese student I discovered videotaping over my shoulder while drawing in Paris; while in the jungle of southern Thailand I was startled by a gentle but firm nudge from an enormous female elephant that had approached from behind in complete silence as I was absorbed in sketching her mate chewing cane.

Sketching on the spot is compatible with a fast-paced travel itinerary with some preparation and a goal of loosely capturing the essence of a scene or object rather than painstakingly recording details. On an extended trip, I generally have a goal of supplementing my notes and photos with one or two sketches a day. Each takes about 10 to 15 minutes to draw the overall outlines and key elements. Tones, repetitive details, and color are usually added later.

**Journaling.** While sketching captures personal visual impressions, I find daily journal writing indispensable for recording



**The masterfully restored townscape of 1,000-year-old Bautzen, Germany, above, offers lessons in dramatic landmark siting. The raised thatch hut at our elephant base camp in a southern Thailand jungle, below, was sketched as elephants roamed freely among us.**

details of soon-forgotten experiences, fleeting sensory perceptions, and creative insights. Journaling styles and formats vary widely from elaborate handmade scrap-

books to Internet blogs; my current system employs a 3-by-5-inch lined moleskin notebook that lives in my vest pocket, enabling me to note impressions as they arise throughout the day. At day's end the notes are literally torn from the book and arranged alongside the day's drawings, brochure photos, and scavenged objects—from stamps and transit tickets to matchbook covers—on the pages of a larger, leather-bound journal. The result is a permanent chronicle of words and pictures that recalls important factual information as well as more intangible impressions that can be drawn upon for inspiration months or even years later.

With the accumulation of miles and passport stamps, the sights, experiences, and lessons of the landscape and the great masters, past and present, become our own and reemerge in the quality of the spaces and elements we design in the studio. So consider that advice. Travel widely and frequently. Your creative thinking, your next project, and your evolving career will be deeply enriched, and you'll never see your world through quite the same eyes again. *LAWJ*

*James Richards, ASLA, is cofounder of Townscape Inc., an urban design consultancy based in Arlington, Texas. Part of this article was drafted on a sidewalk table at La Rotundo Café in Paris.*

### Tips for Travel Sketching On the Fly

**H**ave a small clutch of sketching materials you carry everywhere. Lately I carry a 0.5 mechanical pencil with eraser (no need for sharpening), uni-ball micro pens, a Sharpie for filling in bold darks, and about 10 colored pencils in a nifty canvas pencil wrap by Derwent.

Work small. My 5-by-7-inch sketchbook fits into a jacket pocket and thus goes everywhere. Working small forces you to simplify a scene



to its visual essentials. It also allows you to complete sketches quickly, resulting in a larger total volume of drawings.

If your tour is moving fast, use "found time" to create sketches. My own are often begun while waiting for an alfresco meal, a

bus, or friends, with details completed later.

Feel free to create mixed media sketchbook pages, using a glue stick to paste in notes, photos, stamps, or other objects to creatively flesh out the impression of a scene.

For practice and inspiration, I collect and study travel sketchbooks, illustrated journals, and "how to draw" books in styles that catch my eye at the library, bookstore, or online. Over time, this trains your eye to see life scenes as lines and tones. Try your hand at copying the drawings that speak to you. Your progress will surprise you!