A word…

Material

BY TIM WATERMAN HONORARY EDITOR

Material refers either to that stuff from which things may be made or to information or ideas that serve as the basis for creation. Matter is the mother (*mater*) of all things; that which shapes, holds and occupies space. Design for the environment requires a profound engagement with the material of life, of Mother Earth, and it straddles the material realms of both stuff and ideas.

We talk a great deal about representation in design and it has a particular meaning. To represent is to stand in for, and in order to work with the dynamic 'matter' of sites within the confines of the studio, we must use words, images and models. Some designers have it easy. Industrial designers, for example, can evaluate what is needed from a product and how it will be used, and may then build full-scale prototypes. Building architects rarely have the luxury of representing at full scale, which explains the popularity of small buildings as competition projects. Landscape architects? Well, we almost never have the luxury of testing with prototypes, so we must be proficient in using materials and our imaginations to stand in for the physical world.

'Material reasoning' is the term I have often heard applied to the process of thinking through the use of media – to use the whole mind's body rather than just the mind's eye in recalling the richest possible multisensual image of the site. Material reasoning takes place deep in the design process, when we are getting to grips with the site and its limits and possibilities, and with its physicality.

When we push clay with our thumbs, it is easier to feel the qualities of the soil on the site. A gritty stick of charcoal speaks of wood and fire, but also of soil, or maybe smog. This is design thinking, not making a sales pitch or wowing a client, which is more presentation than representation. This is testing scenarios and site programmes to ascertain whether a design will work before it is built.

One of the greatest tragedies for landscape architectural practice and education over the past couple of decades was the love affair with digital drawing and modelling, which favoured digital work to the exclusion of all other modes. This saw hundreds of drawing boards pitched into skips and studio space drastically reduced. Fees have come not to include the provision of adequate studio space; design has become a cubicle farm profession like any other.

Recently, there has been a reawakening of interest in more traditional representation. This is partially because of the need for material reasoning, but also because of sheer boredom with conventional computer graphics among both designers and clients. Firms have found it increasingly difficult to stand out in a market where everyone's work looks the same: slick, but soulless. So here's to the new generation of versatile designers who will bring landscape architecture out of the overstuffed ennui of a monomaniacally digital past and into a re-engagement with real matter. We're coming home to Mother. ●

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