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Construction Documents: A Crossroads of Misunderstanding

The methodology with which landscape architects communicate their design ideas to clients has embraced new technology at every turn. Virtual tours, three dimensional vignettes, and literal graphic renderings allow clients to step into our designs, and experience the space. The opposite is true of communications to general and landscape contractors as they attempt to interpret and execute the design intent conveyed to the client. There has been little advancement in communication techniques since the days of Humphry Repton riding on horseback and throwing potato pieces to identify where trees were to be planted. Two dimensional drawings, schedules, details, and written specifications remain the primary tools utilized to transform an idea into reality. The shortcomings of this approach to clearly and fully communicate the design are seen in almost every project with the issuance of addendum and change orders. Clients incur additional costs, projects are delayed, and business relationships can become strained.

The proposed study seeks to explore the underlying factors that contribute to the reliance on current construction documents and inhibit exploration of alternative communication techniques through case studies, interviews, and surveys of landscape architects and contractors. The study will look for recurring themes and patterns of miscommunication. It will also seek to identify internal and external influences to the process from both perspectives. Possible external factors include legal, financial, and contractual concerns. Factors inherent to the process itself could include our design culture, document preparation techniques, and budget constraints. It is perceived that technology and software availability could be a shared contributing factor impacting communications. The study will go on to examine alternative forms of communication, primarily the introduction of technology new to the landscape architect/contractor relationship, and the viability of their integration into the process. This would include, but not be limited to project modeling techniques, videos, and realistic graphic renderings.

This study is significant in that it highlights and explores a possible deficiency, or at least an antiquated approach, within our procedural theory base. We have found and employed new ways to communicate our ideas to the client and the public. This has not kept pace with our next most important audience, the people who are responsible for making our ideas a reality. Clearer communication of design intent at the start of the project will elevate a project's sustainability through reduced waste of re-doing work that has already been completed.

--Associate Professor David J. Watts