Site Visits in the Digital Era...Are They a Necessity?

A close personal connection between the designer and the land has always been fostered in Landscape Architecture. Etymologically, the Old German landschaft refers to "[a] setting comprising dwelling, pastures, meadows and fields" (1). Walking the lay of the land, manipulating the soil within the hand, appreciating discernable breezes and inhaling the various aromas drifting along. These tangible site characteristics have been a cornerstone to the foundation of information gathering techniques utilized in our design processes. The forebears of the profession would not have thought it possible to discern the meaning of a site without first having walked and experienced it physically. Today, the ASLA website identifies a site visit as part of the design process, but other websites indicate that new technology is making it possible for landscape architects to complete their work on line, to do remote design, and never physically visit the site (2) (3). Historically the reliance on non-tangible site visit generated data can be seen at the beginning of the twentieth century. The introduction of the "overlay process" methodology for site inventory and analysis occurs in 1912 with Warren Manning's work for Billerica, MA (4). This process was brought to the forefront again with Ian McHarg's work in the late 1960's. Technology today affords students a host of on line opportunities to see and experience a site without physical engagement. Landscape visualization through Goggle Earth, Goggle maps street views, and GIS provide reliable data communicating many of the site attributes. Is the importance of physical site visits diminishing as part of the natural evolution of the design process in a digital era? A pilot study was undertaken after a summer design studio to explore the extent to which students relied on a physical visit to the site or on-line information about the site to influence their design process. Students completed a survey at the end of the studio. Initial findings indicate students relied on data retrieved from on-line sources twice as much as the data collected during the site visit during their design process. The results imply the significance of site visits to be diminishing in importance as other reliable resources become available. Although further study on this topic is required to posit the findings and provide relevance to the pedagogy of the design process, this paper will speculate on the effect of new technologies for off-site visualization tools in conventional design operations like site visits.

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