

Coloring as a Means of Exploring the Existing

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Summary

Participants in this interactive drawing workshop will explore 'coloring' as a creative and meditative process that invites dialogue between existing and imagined realities. Through a series of individual and collaborative prompts that center on the interpretation of pre-existing linework, environments, poetry and personal memories, participants will draw forth new imagery that marries these multiple realms. Together, we will consider how physical and personal 'existing conditions' direct and influence the imagination of form and space; and contemplate the connection between seemingly disparate things as a portal to inspired wonder.

Topic

Unlike sketching and drawing processes that begin with a blank sheet, coloring provides an artist with pre-existing linework that directs and influences the way new imagery develops. In this respect, coloring is akin to site-sensitive design processes that observe and respond to existing conditions as fundamental aspects of placemaking. Coloring is also a meditative process that often inspires the mind to wander across time and space, wherein current observations of form are connected to previous experiences and future potentials. Additionally, because coloring does not demand the artist totally invent the scene, it is inherently rooted in dialogue—the artist is called to respond to something 'other' already on the page, and thus contemplate its role and relationship to the intended aim.

Workshop Activity

I will provide each participant with diverse drawing media and one an accordion-style coloring book printed with a variety of pre-existing lines taken from the architectural drawings of Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater and the existing environs. Each page of the book will be accompanied by a specific prompt that will invite the participant to observe the existing linework in relationship to one additional 'existing condition' of varying type, including physical observation, poetry, and prompts that engage one's memory. Each prompt will be timed, and we will proceed through the exercise collectively—at times working alone and at other times together. Once all of the prompts have been completed, we will assemble as a group to share our work and discuss our discoveries during the experience.

Scope

Coloring is rarely discussed in architectural education and often considered a simple children's activity one should eschew after 'true creativity' blossoms (1). Indeed, many artists and educators have viewed coloring books in a similar vein as paint-by-number sets that value conformity and 'staying within the lines': too didactic, constraining, and generally anathema to creative freedom. Debates within art education dating back to the 1950s have positioned this tool in opposition to 'modern, creative' curricula, reinforcing the perception that coloring hinders innovation and is even harmful to one's creative development (2). In recent years, however, coloring has enjoyed a resurgence of popularity both as a form of meditation and of social engagement. Sales of adult coloring books have soared alongside the advent of 'coloring book clubs' that celebrate the activity as a relaxation technique for people—many who do not self-identify as 'artists'—to color together (3). The beauty of many contemporary coloring books, in fact, is their ability to inspire the creation of new, original art by providing sparse, minimal linework

that does not evoke figural content, thus leaving more room for personal invention(4). Studies confirm coloring's healing effect on the frontal lobe—that part of the brain that controls problem-solving, fine motor skills and memory—inspiring hospitals and therapists to incorporate the activity into patient treatments (5).

For designers, the practice of coloring has additional benefits. Unlike the mythical 'blank sheet of white paper' that offers limitless possibility via few initial constraints, coloring provides a host of pre-existing lines. These may depict a specific scene and vantage point (figural lines) or simply meter the page with rhythm and scale (abstract lines), but in all cases the coloring page contains information that predates our desire to draw there—context that we can choose to amplify, erase or ignore as we add our own, original marks. Like lines on a map or landscape, the lines we choose to acknowledge (and those we don't) reveal our position in the world. How we see, interpret, and respond to these existing forms and patterns sheds light on how we perceive and what we value (6).

In this way, the act of coloring links closely to the design process. After all, no matter how monumental or singular one's vision, every architectural project begins within an existing context and all it implies. Just as coloring transforms a picture by giving it atmosphere, life, and a more detailed story—so too does our approach to 'site-specificity' whenever we propose something new. As an exercise, coloring can serve as a way of examining one's relationship to lines/boundaries/content and illuminate how mark-making plays a role in the transformation of meaning. It can challenge our sense of comfort with respect to abstraction, shed light on our perception of form, space and scale, and open new territories for discussing self and other.

Beyond the sheer pleasure of making marks, the practice of coloring can become much more than 'following the lines.' As we become more conscious of 'the existing' at all scales, it can become a pathway for understanding the instincts of our own creative spirit.

Outcomes of Experiment

The theme of this year's ACS Forum focuses on 'training a lens on the many practices that nourish' the overlapping spheres of architecture, culture, and spirituality. This workshop aims to contribute to the discussion by exploring one type of drawing practice that is often misrepresented in contemporary architectural education or altogether overlooked and forgotten. The meditative quality of coloring stems from its unique accessibility as a practice: artists are provided with a landscape of lines to which they can respond in any number of ways without the pressure of 'inventing' content. One can simply revel in the sensation of mark-making or, if inspired, add/revise/erase and totally transform the page. The project seeks to shed light on the many ways our interpretation of existing form is influenced by the physical and personal contexts that precede our engagement. It also aims to reintroduce participants to the joy of drawing in dialogue. It is my hope that at the conclusion of this experience, participants will feel encouraged to consider the relationship between seemingly disparate things and thus leave with a sense of connectivity and wonder.

References

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Images

All images courtesy of [Frank Lloyd Wright Kaufman House, "Fallingwater," Bear Run Pennsylvania](#). Edited and photographed by Yukio Futagawa, Text by Paul Rudolph. GA Global Architecture, Japan. 1970.

