

Usus in Praesens — Drawing as a Meditation Practice for Being Present through Architecture

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Rationale

At a time of fast living, compulsive consumerism, media escapism, cultural superficiality, empty technological progress, and so on, sketching architecture provides us with an opportunity to slow down, return, focus, and appreciate our world, our lives. Quite simply: in order to draw a place well, we must truly experience it. We have to stop, stay, and fully and openly engage it as it is. In other words, we must establish a relationship that is direct, intimate, and voluntarily innocent. This means nothing less than to be present. For drawing never happens in the future or the past. Any moving away from the here and now results in a noticeable depreciation of the work.

*Sketching is thus fundamentally a practice of being present: **Usus in Praesens**.*¹ It teaches us to mindfully dwell in the perfection of the moment. A moment that is not just objective but also irremediably subjective. And, when done wholeheartedly, such practice offers us the potential of profound, sublime, and transcendental insights. *Sketching is an act of meditation indeed!*

Engaging **Usus in Praesens** by sketching architecture is particularly powerful because unlike other sketching subjects, buildings and places are the very setting and atmosphere within which our lives unfold. By rendering them 'visible', we intuit the fundamental nature of being-in-the world. The more we do it, the more we awake to the mystery of "what-is" as a gift (a present!) of grace, beauty, and love.

Guidelines²

I apply two simple rules when I go to sketch architecture. First, I carry no camera with me. Unlike photography or video, drawing demands our time, commitment, and risk-taking: we have to lend effort to a task that may end up in (apparent) failure. Yet, the very sitting to draw is already a victory against the forces anesthetizing us from our own existence. Second, I draw only once and in ink. This forces me to be totally present and let go of any idea or goal of perfection. Accepting the nature of how things come out despite my best efforts or expectations is a great practice for surrendering to the moment.

I have drawn over 500 sketches since 1994, mostly during journeys away from the city I lived at the time. The vast majority of these drawings occurred during trips abroad. These 500+ times that I sat to draw have deepened my understanding of and ability to practice *Usus in Praesens*. I would like to share with those interested, a set of 10 steps that include procedural, attitudinal, and other advice. I have learned that following them enormously facilitates *Usus in Praesens* (primary goal) and good sketching (secondary goal). They help to establish the right state of mind, heart and body to be present. I have been testing and improving these guidelines since Spring 2003 (9 years!) while teaching a class addressing this very topic.

¹ '**Usus in Praesens**' means in Latin "practice in/of presence"

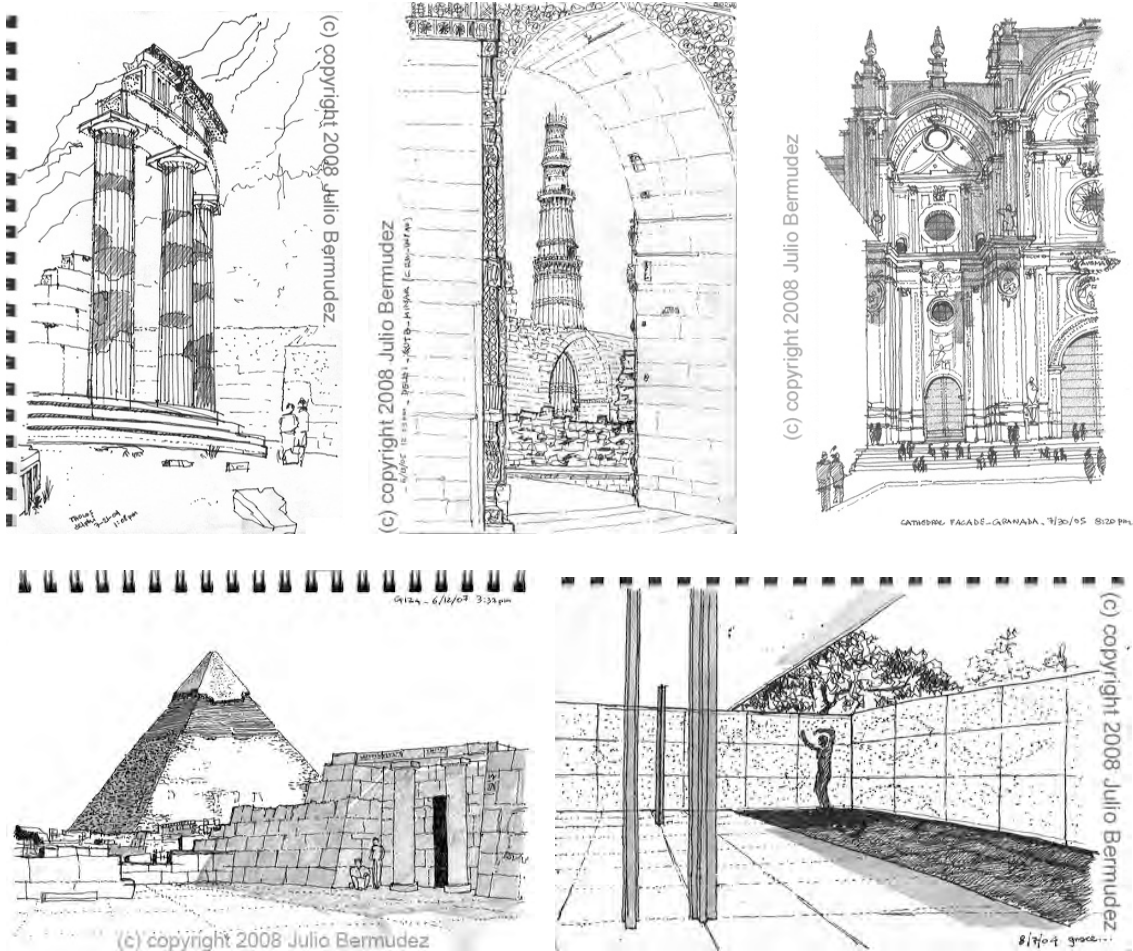
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- STEP 1:** Assume that you will waste precious hours of your life in this effort. In other words, drop all expectations of getting anything out of it. At the same time, since you have accepted this loss, don't get upset about it or intend to change or improve anything that has not been given or asked from you. If you get bored, anxious, angry or begin thinking about anything, stop and just return to your initial resolution: you'll just do this because you promised it and/or it is required from you, period. Surrender yourself to this process.
- STEP 2:** Don't previsit the place or building that you will sketch. Next time you go, you draw it. Select a special time of the day for the visit. I suggest you go at dawn or dusk when light conditions and changes are most dramatic. However, if you feel your building would be best experienced at another time, please do it at that moment. Of course, if you are in journey, you may have to adapt. However, if you can, plan :
- to arrive to your site with time (no rushing).
 - to stay 30 minutes after you have finished your drawing
 - to spend a total of 2 hours at your site
- STEP 3:** If you can, go alone without anything on you except comfortable clothing, supporting goods (e.g., water), and sketching materials. Don't go hungry, don't go thirsty but don't go after dinner either. Dress up warm (or cool, depending on the weather). You will do anything except experiencing the place with your full body, mind, and heart. You will remain alone through the whole 2 hours. If you are with a group of people or just another person, make a point to tell them that you'll be taking time off from socializing. Avoid talking to anybody. Remain silent. *Never, absolutely never hurry.* Take your time. Remember your promise. There is nothing more important to do right now. Just this!
- STEP 4:** Use whatever mean of transportation to get to the vicinity of your place. However, make sure you are on your feet at least 100 yards away from your place (depending on the scale of the place, it maybe more). Once there, stop and become as conscious of yourself walking towards the building as possible. Slow down your pace to about 1/3 your normal speed. As you slowly walk, begin to open up to the experience surrounding you. Notice your body, your breathing, your sensations. Notice the sky, the vegetation, the sounds of cars or people, the wind, the temperature, the aromas, your weight shifting from one leg to the other leg, how things move in your vision. Try to remain highly attentive of what is happening. If thoughts, memories, or worries come to your mind, don't engage them. Instead, just return to your awareness of slow walking and experiencing
- STEP 5:** Proceed to walk around the spaces comprising your building/site (inside and outside) at the same slow motion pace. Reduce your speed even more if you find anything that capture your attention, calls your senses, moves your feelings, excites you in any way. Stop if necessary and take in as much as you can. As you continue your journey, do what is both necessary and natural (trust your body). Feel the freedom of being consciously present. If for some reason you have a very powerful reaction right away while visiting a particular area, just stay there (and move to #6)
- STEP 6:** After half hour or so of free exploration, go to the area, place or spot that attracted you the most. This attraction should be visceral, intuitive, natural, spontaneous, and **NOT** intellectual. Then, find a location that is inviting, and offers you the best experiential opportunities as well as a place to sit comfortably. May be it's on the floor. Don't have preferences, just do what comes instinctively. Be aware that you will be sitting there for quite some time.
- STEP 7:** So sit down. Take a few breaths, move your back, neck, legs, arms and hands until you find a peaceful corporal sensation. As you do this, remind yourself that you are right here at this particular (unique) moment in time. Close your eyes and count following each breath exhalation until 10. Then, slowly, open your eyes. Try to relax while remaining highly alert. Be open to all the sensations and emotions that come your way. Again, if ideas, memories, thoughts, judgments, analysis, or worries come to your mind and distract you, don't get upset about it. Otherwise you will remove yourself from the experience. Instead, keep going back to your experience. And keep doing this no matter how many times things inside or outside your head get you away from the experience.

STEP 8: So, *just sit there, alone, still, relaxed, and in total silence*. For the next 30, 60, 90 or 120 minutes (it's up to you), put your concentration in drawing. Don't lose your attention. Observe deeply and make your marking. These sketches are an experiential record aimed at capturing the essence of your architectural experience. They are not analytical, abstract, or anything. They should stand for that place as felt and seen by you. Spend **at least 30 minutes** per sketch (and *I mean* 30 minutes minimum). As before, don't rush through this experience... take your time. There is nothing more important to do than being here now!

STEP 9: Once the time is up, stand up and do a slow 10 minute walk around the same area where you were sitting. Walk even slower than before, at about 10-20% your normal speed. Remain alert, silent, open, relaxed.

STEP 10: After finishing your slow walking, close your eyes again and take a few last breaths. Then leave the place at your leisure. Remain silent at least for the next 10 minutes. Don't listen to the radio or engage in conversation during this time.



For more examples of the result of this practice, please see the following websites:

<http://faculty.arch.utah.edu/usus/>
http://faculty.cua.edu/bermudez/papers/2a_2009.pdf