

[DRAWING, SEEING AND THE SPIRIT OF PLACE: A WORKSHOP IN CONTEMPLATIVE OBSERVATION]

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Introduction

The act of drawing from direct observation is an exercise in disciplined attention. It requires active perception, decisiveness, and physical engagement, coordinating the eye, mind, and hand in a continual process of observation, evaluation, interpretation, and revision. More than a means of representation, drawing becomes a way of thinking and a disciplined practice of seeing.

To draw a building or urban place is to ask what gives it meaning, what qualities make it memorable, moving, or spiritually resonant. The process demands careful observation and thoughtful selection, requiring participants to decide not only what they see, but how that experience might best be recorded. The resulting drawings may employ familiar architectural conventions or experiment with more personal, abstract, and expressive forms of notation.

The workshop has two complementary objectives. First, it introduces and reinforces fundamental observational drawing techniques practiced by architects, urban sketchers, and plein-air artists. Second, it encourages participants to move beyond purely pictorial representation by exploring expanded drawing methods that record qualities such as spatial sequence, rhythm, proportion, light, movement, atmosphere, memory, and emotional response. These approaches invite participants to discover drawing not simply as illustration, but as a way of seeing that cultivates attention, wonder, and an encounter with the spirit of place.

The limited duration of the workshop makes the production of highly finished drawings neither possible nor the objective. Rather than striving for polished renderings, participants will focus on developing ways of seeing and recording that sharpen observation, deepen engagement with place, and generate meaningful visual discoveries that can be continued beyond the workshop itself.

At its heart, the workshop proposes drawing as a contemplative practice. Being fully present in a place, attending carefully to its light, materiality, sound, scale, texture, and atmosphere, cultivates a deeper relationship with architecture and the city. Through drawing, participants become more acutely aware of both the place itself and their experience of it. The resulting sketches become records not only of physical form and space, but also of perception, reflection, and a deeper, more personal understanding of place.

For architects and designers, this sustained practice develops visual judgment and spatial memory. Measuring with the eye, discerning proportion, and recording essential relationships build an internal reservoir of knowledge that informs future design work. More broadly, the workshop demonstrates how drawing can become a lifelong discipline of observation—one that enriches creative practice while deepening our appreciation of the built environment as a source of cultural and spiritual meaning.

The workshop will take place one hour before the AURA immersive experience. Participants taking part in the Old Montreal walking tour will need to depart the tour in time to join the workshop. The walking tour will most likely be taking place nearby, pending final planning.

The meeting place for the workshop is next to the Maisonneuve Monument, the central sculpture in the Place d'Armes directly in front of the Basilique Notre-Dame de Montréal. This setting provides an opportunity to explore a traditional, albeit challenging plein-air drawing of the urban space and frontal façade of the Basilica.

The relationship between the exterior workshop and the AURA experience inside the Basilica also provides an opportunity to consider more experimental forms of visual recording. How might these architecturally distinct but directly connected lived experiences, one in the public space of the city and the other within the interior of the Basilica, be captured in a sketchbook or journal? Participants will be encouraged to consider how familiar architectural drawing conventions might be combined with invented forms of notation to record changes in light, sound, movement, atmosphere, spatial sequence, and emotional response.

Enrollment is limited to twelve participants to allow for individual instruction, discussion, and feedback. Basic drawing materials, including paper and pencils, will be provided, although participants are welcome to bring their own sketchbooks and preferred drawing media. A limited number of portable stools will also be available.

In the event of rain, the workshop will meet under the portico of the Bank of Montreal Museum (Musée de la Banque de Montréal) facing the Place d'Armes.