

Serendipity

Or... The faculty of making happy and accidental discoveries... through sketching

Kaizer Rangwala

Senior Planner, Department of Metropolitan Development,
Neighbourhood and Development Services Division, USA.

Sketches are momentary thoughts, quick explorations, and immediate imagery. And because sketches can be done quickly, they express a freshness rarely seen in any other form of artwork. They display a combination of elements that otherwise would be difficult to realize in a regular drawing.

Details in a sketch are generally avoided by concentrating chiefly on the essential characteristic of the whole design. These sketches often represent the salient features of a project that a designer strives for. At this level, the whole is always more important than the detailing of the parts. They are rough strokes standing for ideas, the details of which will be worked out later.

What is the importance of sketching? What are the reasons for sketching? Sketching is about versatility, and trial and error; it is about serendipitous discoveries that surprise, absorb, energize, and please us. We sketch to record what we see, to develop drawing skills, and improve hand-eye coordination, or to develop ideas that may lead us on to further work. Sketchings as a means of recording individual experiences and observations is common to all. However, different people use sketching as a means to achieve different ends. For individuals working on a one-time only project, primarily for personal satisfaction—this could be a painting or a sculpture, an item of jewellery or ceramic ware, sketches are used as personal reference, whe-

ther recording an initial inspiration or the development of an idea. For those working in a collaborative setting, such as in theatre-set and costume design, the sketch is the means of communication to other members of the design and production team. Therefore, it must be more accessible and discernible.

Architects use these brief sketches to spark their imagination, search for new ideas, communicate or persuade a client, work out a detail, record existing work or engage in critique. Major architects like Le Corbusier, Eric Mendelsohn, and Louis Kahn have sketched extensively throughout their lifetime.

Le Corbusier, like many other artists of his time, travelled extensively, which he called the 'Voyage to the Orient.' He travelled with his sketch book, and a pocket-sized writing pad, jotting down anecdotes and visual impressions, a practice he continued wherever he travelled. These sketchbooks became a medium of expression, a source-book of ideas for his buildings, polemics, and paintings. 'When one travels and works with visual things—architecture, painting or sculpture—one uses one's eyes and *draws*, so as to fix deep down, in one's experience, what is seen... all this means first to look, and then to observe and finally perhaps to discover... and it is then that inspiration may come', notes Corbusier. The importance of seeing, what others indifferently stand and look at, was discussed in the first three chapters

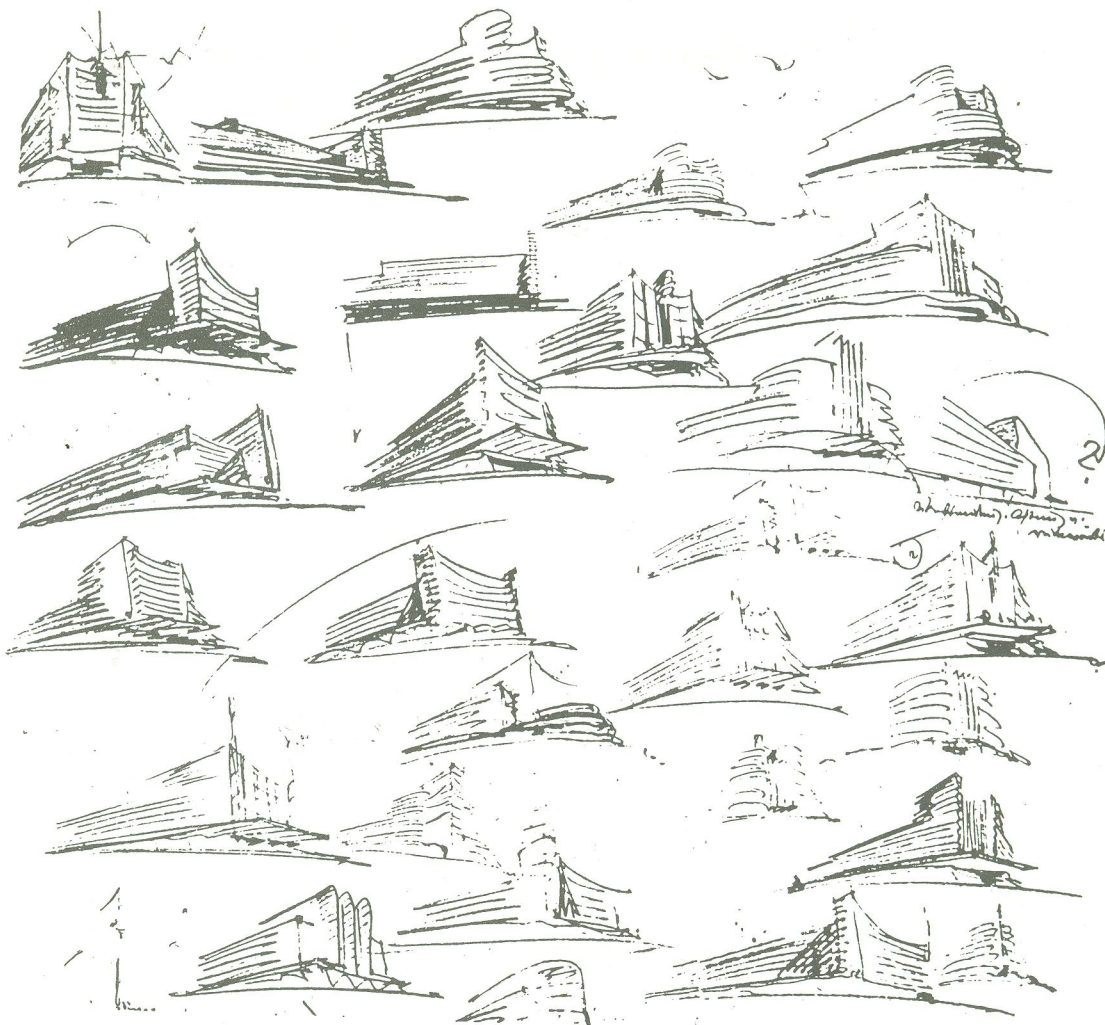
titled 'Eyes Which Do Not See,' in his book 'Towards a New Architecture.'

The history of architecture is rich with examples of architects, whose sketches, more than their executed buildings, have influenced the course of architecture. Like the photographer, who sees a breathtaking image but has no desire to actually snap the picture, just content to have experienced the image, these architects experience the joy through their bold and colourful sketches, without seeing it ever built.

Eric Mendelsohn's expressionistic, and individualistic sketches, more so than his executed works, stand as testament to his versatility. Mendelsohn sketched to the accompaniment of music. He often sketched during concerts and certain elements of the music's structure or moods are evident in his sketches.

Many people find that they do a lot of creative work while listening to music. Music puts them in a slightly altered consciousness, losing track of time, they experience a pleasurable freedom from anxiety.

In many of Mendelsohn's sketches, the scale is often vague. He did not use the traditional indicators like trees or figures in his sketches. His sleek and futuristic buildings are often drawn without any context, probably, because if you begin examining its relationship to the objects around it, you may never begin. In writing, this phenomenon is called free-write or zero-draft. Do not edit, just write and empty your brains out



Eric Mendelsohn; Metalworker's union building, study sheet.

on the page. Include everything. Otherwise you will never know what you might have had, or how and where it might fit.

Many architects working under an impulse of inspiration, will fill up a whole sheet with variants of ideas. Each progressive sketch will explore a new idea not by reworking, but by exploring implications latent in the initial sketches, yet not expressed completely in the old one.

Louis Kahn's ability to sketch was an invaluable result of the training he received during his study years at the University of Pennsylvania. *Esquisse*, a quick sketch, was integral to the Beaux-Arts training.

Typically, the student was given a written programme, without any comment from the instructor. The student would study the programme, and in a few hours would come up with a quick sketch that would show the scheme (*parti*). The details of the sketch would be worked out later. However, the final drawings could not violate the essence of the initial *esquisse*. Hence, in the drawings, the initial creative moment of the young architect was kept intact.

The Beaux-Arts experience, of developing an *esquisse* without sacrificing the basic concept, was considered to imitate real life limitations. The first impulse sketch is the last

time the architect will be free from the constraints of time, budget, and programme, the peculiarity of the site and clients found in actual practice. The goal of this training was to have the students analyse and evaluate different aspects of a programme in order to be able to select the most effective solutions.

When sketching, Kahn scorned the cast iron-styles of architectural representation. He stressed on expressing the individual feeling of design, the lyrical rhythm, instead of the rigorous principles of architectural perspective. "There is no value in trying to imitate... photographs will serve you best, if that is your aim..."

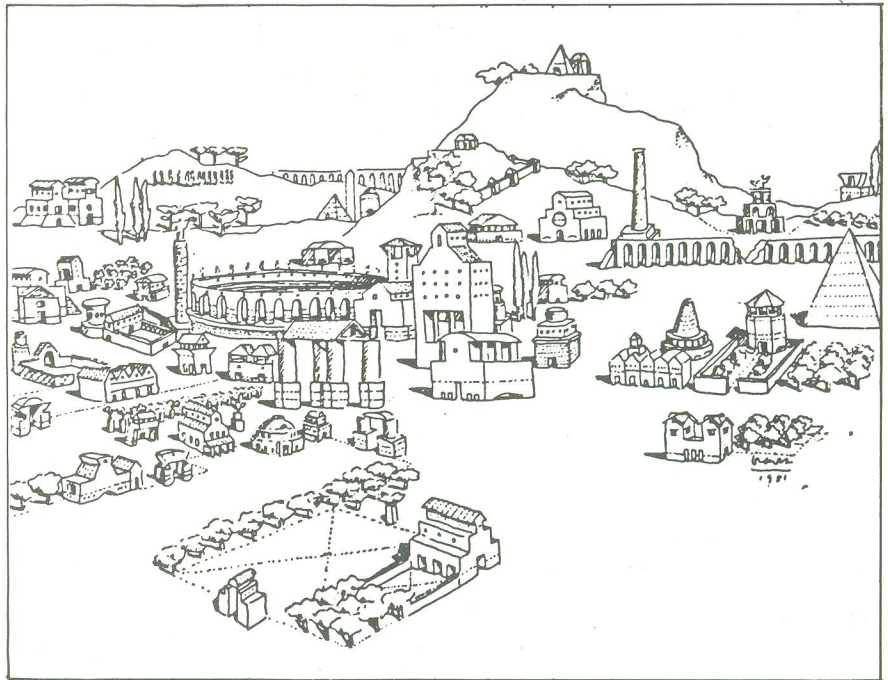
our intention is to create- to improvise," noted Kahn.

Louis Kahn had two extended study-travel experiences: the Mediterranean and during his residency at the Academy in Rome. Kahn was convinced that he could not invent except through history, which for him was made up of forms he had seen and sketched. He reinterpreted the forms in his own head. His buildings were solid masses assembled of weighty materials with beautiful joints; thereby, breaking away from the hold of International Style on modern architecture, and opening the way for the revival of vernacular and classical architecture. Aldo Rossi, a Postmodernist architect noted, "I do not invent; I remember."

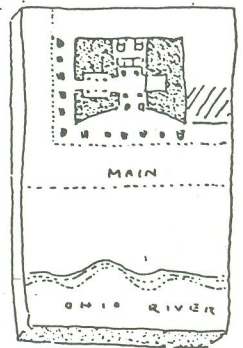
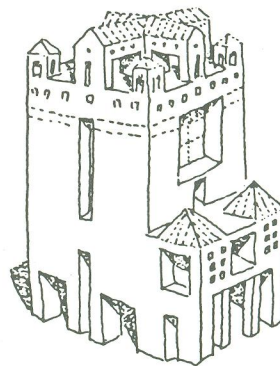
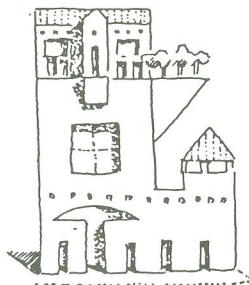
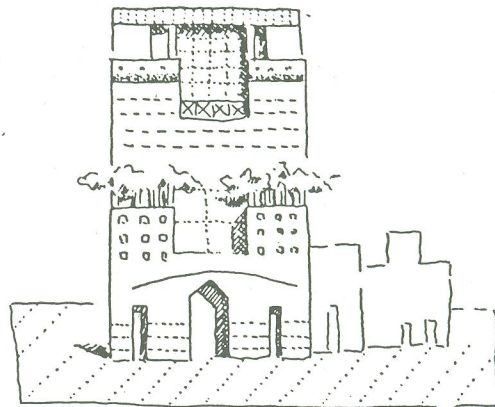
Vincent Scully, a noted historian describes sketching as a process by which the most successful of architects have derived forms. Memory is shaped by sketching. Sketches that revive images from the past, have shaped the forms of architects such as Robert Venturi, and Michael Graves.

Students of architecture are encouraged to travel, to see the world, and to sketch the setting that moves them, so that their sensitivity to space, light, form, and texture is heightened and a storehouse of inspiration is established. Tadao Ando, a trained boxer, did not receive any formal architectural training. Instead, he trained himself by travelling and sketching sites of architectural importance throughout Europe and America.

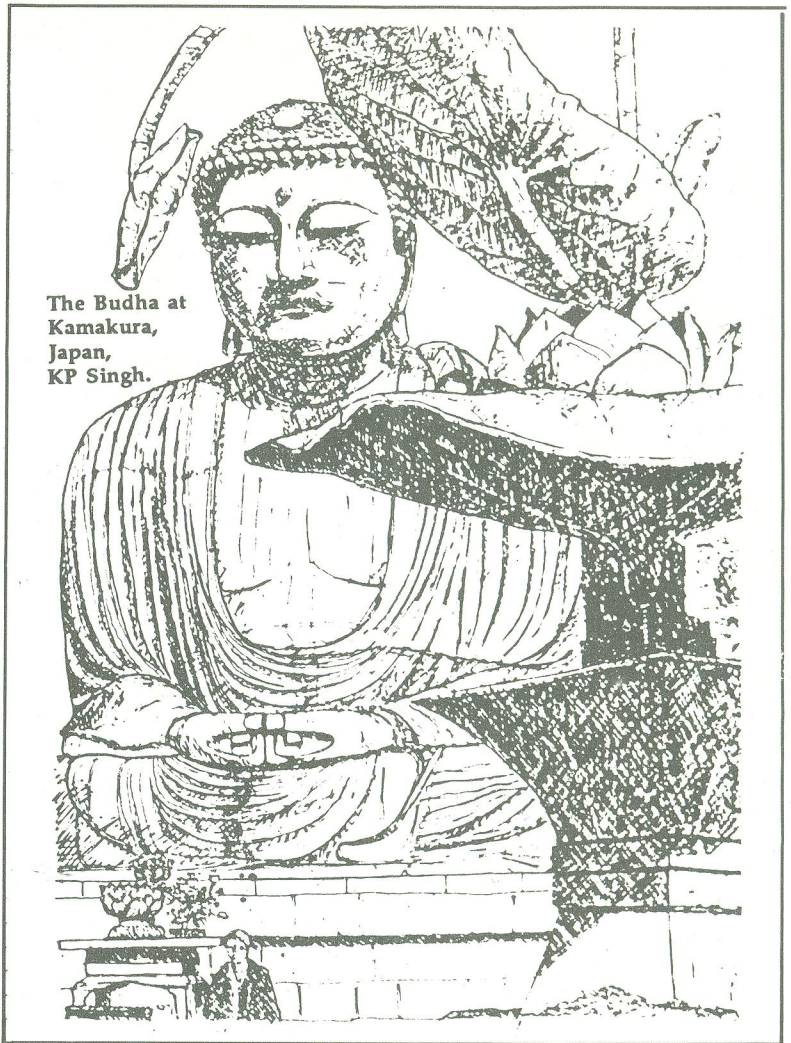
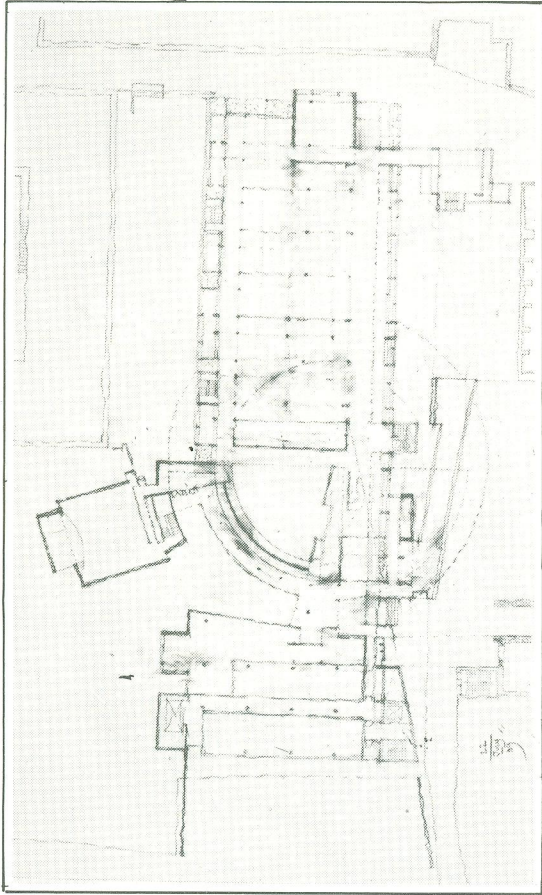
Architects are well known for carrying their sketchbooks with them to record fleeting ideas or impressions; comparable to writers who jot down notes on characters and scenes encountered over the years, who later re-emerge in their novels. Sketching helps build a reservoir of images. Learning the value of symbolism used in different cultures, social settings, and studying successful design solutions for their reference value, is an invaluable exercise. Sketching is perhaps the best way of



Sketches by Michael Graves; Architect, Princeton, New Jersey.



Museum of Contemporary Art Barcelona, Richard Meier.



The Budha at Kamakura, Japan, KP Singh.

increasing awareness and concentration. It strengthens the repertoire of ideas necessary to draw upon, in the creative design process. Sketching also improves one's sense of scale, proportion, and composition.

When presented with an architectural design challenge, one either looks to the past for design cues, searching how others responded to similar challenges, or be inspired to a solution by the memory of other designs, sketched in the past. Architects often sketch images that they are familiar with, then combine, alter, transform, or deform them—either to create a new image, or to better understand those that they are drawing. Generally, this is done repeatedly. As the lesser ideas sink to the bottom, fresh ideas clamour to the top.

The strength of sketching, as a

working method, is its openness, and the incompleteness. Architects like Frank Gehry carry the idea of an unfinished sketch into their final design. "I am interested in the work not appearing finished... I prefer the sketch quality, the tentativeness, the messiness, if you will... the appearance of 'in progress', rather than the presumption of total resolution and finality," notes Gehry.

The use of computers in the design field is widely accepted. The computer is faster, more accurate and probably more efficient. The computer as a sketching tool, has been developed. However, the machine, the hardware, and the programmers are barriers in the creative process, when compared to sketching on paper. The difference between sketching on computer and on paper is the direct involvement. While the comp-

uter can effectively process information and is intellectual and inductive in its analysis, the intuitive and emotional response, that is a source for insights and inspirations, is missing. The main reasons to encourage the unconscious stream of flow between the sense: the mind, the hand, and the eye, are to 'catch, keep, and create' impressions and conceptions directly in time and on the spot.

Reading and interpreting sketches makes us aware of what we have chosen to emphasize, the *parti*: the features, the space, and the light. A sketch, in visual terms, is a mirror of the individual's pleasures and preferences, of the ways in which that person responds both to new experiences and familiar patterns. Learning to read and develop one's own sketch is an important aspect of learning to design. □