



# 10 Years of Urban Sketching Imprint

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**Abstract.** Urban Sketchers movement is non-profit organization, created in 2007, with the goal of encouraging and supporting a global community of people who practice on-site drawing. Many of these sketchers are architects or architecture students who draw on the street in order to improve their representation skills and share drawing technics and supplies. This group is increasing every year, generating a general drawing spread, specific publications and workshops in all the continents. The proposed article aims to understand the reasons for this successful approach on “traditional” drawing on our digital era and how it influenced architects and architecture students to enhance their drawing skills. Is this an isolated movement, or is there a “status quo”, that is claiming drawing traditions?

**Keywords:** Drawing · Architecture · University · Urban sketchers  
Teaching · Sketchbook

## 1 Urban Sketchers

Created ten years ago, as non-profit organization, Urban Sketchers movement has been encouraging and supporting a global community of people who draw in situ.

According to Urban Sketchers website, this drawing community took off when the Spanish (Seattle-based) Gabriel Campanario created an online forum “for all sketchers out there who love to draw the cities where they live and visit, from the window of their homes, from a cafe, at a park, standing by a street corner... always on location, not from photos or memory.”

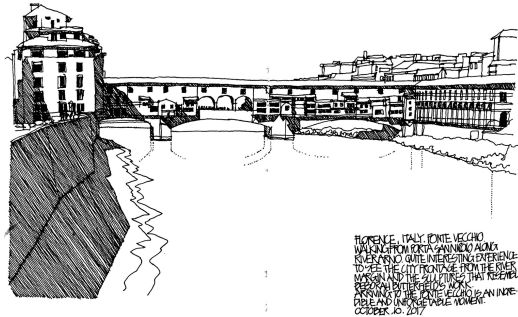
A year later, this journalist and illustrator invited other sketchers to share their drawings and storytelling in a blog: Urban Sketchers.

Only two weeks after, twenty-five sketchers from cities all over the world, like Moscow, Naples, Nueva York, Seattle, Singapore or Lisbon, just to name some, answered the first call. The French illustrator Lapin, based in Barcelona, had the honour to open the Blog.

With the motto “see the world, one drawing at a time” These blog sketches rapidly spread around the web world, pushing out people to draw in the street.

The next stage was creating locals group where people could easily meet physically and organize sketching sessions (Campanario 2017).

Since then, Urban Sketchers not only meet on the web but also organize regular local meetings. Also, once a year, an international symposium is held, in random cities around the world. The last Symposium, celebrating the 10th year of this organization was celebrated in Chicago and got together more than six hundred sketchers. The group has been increasing every year, creating a general drawing spread and specific publications and workshops in all the continents. Figures 1, 2, 3, and 4 feature drawings done in Buenos Aires, Valencia, Florence and Naples, recorded by sketchers from Argentina, U.S.A, Spain and Portugal.



**Fig. 1.** Fountain-pen drawing by Carlos Almeida. Architect and urban sketcher based in San Francisco, California. Florence 2017



**Fig. 2.** Fountain pen and watercolour drawing by Sandra Massazza. Architect and urban sketcher based in Entre Ríos, Argentina. Buenos Aires 2017

As a non-profit organization, Urban Sketchers has created teaching and learning opportunities for thousands of sketchers who attended workshops and symposiums around the globe. These sketchers can be divided into two big groups, students that are learning sketching skills and professionals (active or retired) that want to improve and practice drawing.



**Fig. 3.** Pen drawing by Hugo Barros Costa. Naples 2017



**Fig. 4.** Pen drawing by Salvador Gilibert Sanz. Valencia 2017

## 2 Teaching

The reasons for this successful approach on “traditional” drawing, on our digital era, are hard to comprehend. I feel it has been being an influence to architects and architecture students, enhancing their drawing skills. “Architectural drawing is the fundamental language of the architect, and it is used to understand himself in the most personal moments of architectural creation, but also to be understood by others, at the moment of communication and architectural construction” (Boudon 1984).

As a University teacher, I noticed how students followed Urban Sketchers community and got motivated by it. In contradiction, I also sense how hard is getting our students to sketch regularly, although they are forced to attend the courses, as the result of Bologna Process agreements.

At the same time, Urban Sketchers meetings can get together hundreds of people that spend a considerable amount of money and time to learn and share sketching experiences.

Is the (fundamental) analytic and abstraction base we ask our students negative to their motivation? Do they want to freely develop his drawings? Maybe we should foment other complementary ways of teaching drawing like some ETSAM experiences? “The purpose of our research is to encourage creativity through intuitive learning as opposed to the concept and the analysis” (Trachana 2016).

Nevertheless, Urban sketchers also have a set of rules, a “Manifesto”.

Urban sketchers should “draw on location, indoors or out, capturing what they see from direct observation”. These drawings should also, according to this manifesto, be a “record of time and place” and “truthful to the scenes urban sketchers witness” Urban sketchers (2007).

In short, this eight rules manifesto, focus on location drawing (using any kind of material) and sharing the result online, afterwards.

Possibly, online communication is a highly efficient way to reach our students. Social media and Internet are undoubtedly contributing for Urban sketching global spreading.

One of the authors of this article has been trying to use Internet and social media to direct or indirectly transmit information to his students, with good results.

He has also already written about this subject: “Given the continuous difficulties of communication with the students (concerning the basic concepts of the above mentioned subject), another—and equally important—goal of the blog “a fresh drawing everyday” was the attempt to create a communication channel teacher/student, as a strategy teaching. That is, since the traditional ways of communication were not working, we thought that the web could be a better way to approach to students (Barros et al. 2016).

As graphic expression teachers, we all agree drawing tools need time to be learned, Internet can be a complement and extension of our courses.

The natural evolution of web 2.0, populated by prosumers (persons who consumes and produces media, e.g. blogs), has generated a new economic, social and cultural scene. In this context, the formation and continuous evolution of a specific blogosphere (hyperlinked blog community) from students of the graphic subjects in the Architecture Schools is a fact. Their potential, yet to be developed, is extraordinary as a vehicle for dissemination, as a working tool and as a meeting place for graphical references. (Marquina 2016)

However, Urban Sketchers triumph cannot be only based on Internet features.

When we asked several urban sketchers about their motivation, they mentioned us their intention on returning to regularly sketch, after having abandoned drawing practice for a long time. This recalls me quote from Álvaro Siza: “every kid likes to grab a pencil and draw. Everybody does beautiful things when is three, four or five years. The majority of them loses that spontaneity, I think it always happens. Nevertheless, some are able to gain a second chance.”

Urban Sketching offers this “second chance” for many people, even to architecture students that find complementary motivation to sketch, after their first year courses and finishing their mandatory subjects.

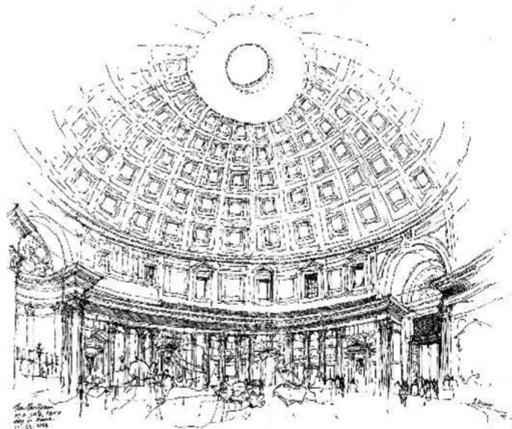
Besides, the magic word—Travel—is frequently linked with Urban Sketchers group. Usually, they mostly draw when travelling and a considerable part of them travel to sketch.

Travelling has been distinguished, by far, among the fundamental education means for architects. There is no better way of studying architecture subject than visiting the big past achievements, with the goal of knowing and analysing them. Then comes the second part, maybe even more relevant; it is never enough to stress the following corollary: the best way to study them it is, and it has always been, sketching them. (Otxotorena 2016)

The authors of this article have been trying to foment this travel/sketch connection on the first course “architectonic forms analyses” subject. Students are asked to have a daily sketchbook. In addition, every year, we travel for a weekend with to goal of visiting a building we will analyse later during an entire semester. On the last trip, we were able to get more than one hundred students to sketch together in a Toledo square. The successful announcement recalled the “sketch crawl”, meetings organized regularly by the Urban Sketchers. As a way of motivation, some teachers sketched with the students: it works better when they have direct references from his instructors.

Many of urban sketchers instructors are like “stars”, lecturing, and organizing workshops around the world; furthermore, they publish sketching and technics books that are broadly translated.

The emeritus professor and urban sketcher Francis D. K. Ching is one of these “stars”, besides of being a reference in architecture schools around the world, particularly in Spain (Fig. 5).



**Fig. 5.** Fountain pen and watercolour drawing by Francis D. K.Ching. Architect, professor and urban sketcher based in Seattle, U.S.A. Rome 2013

When asked about Urban Sketchers movement at his interview on *Revista EGA*, the professor answered: “tendencies and processes in design thinking occur in cycles. Now that digital technologies and photography have matured and become more readily accessible, I believe the pendulum is swinging back toward seeing the value of hand

drawing, especially of “drawing on location,” which is the focus of the Urban Sketchers group. The movement is growing and attracting interest because of the unique eye-mind-hand connection that analog drawing enables between viewer and the environment. Drawing on location is at once contemplative, immersive, and authentic (Barros and Hidalgo 2015).

We do agree with professor Ching: hand drawing is in a positive cycle and we, as teachers, should make the most of them, sketching not only inside our classrooms walls but also stepping out on the street. Then, share the result along our students as well with other students around the globe. In such a way, we maybe should be able to also “see the world, one drawing at a time” as Urban Sketchers do.

Drawing outdoors, alone or with a group, using different sketching tools, (digital or traditional), fomenting the use of sketchbooks and sharing the results, tools and technics on meetings or the web, can be a way of keeping drawing alive, inside and outside school and drawing courses (Fig. 6).



**Fig. 6.** Ballpoint pen and watercolour drawing by Paulo Mendes. Artist and urban sketcher based in Oporto, Portugal. Oporto 2017



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