

Daniel Roehr and Stephanie Braconnier’s Multisensory Garden

Heather Braiden with Daniel Roehr

Heather Braiden is Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Environmental Design – School of Urban Planning and Landscape Architecture at the University of Montreal.
—heather.braiden@umontreal.ca

Daniel Roehr is Professor in the School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture at the University of British Columbia. He also founded and directs greenskinslab at UBC’s School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture.¹
—droehr@sala.ubc.ca

Introduction

The UBC studio organized by Daniel Roehr and Stephanie Braconnier was one of at least four that had chosen their sites and written their brief before agreeing to join the Studio Problématique experiment. After reading their course description and speaking with the pair, I understood why they had agreed to participate; they framed their studio in response to the impact on the mental health of citizens living in cities and the lack of accessibility to green spaces during the pandemic and how landscape design can foster optimism through programmed open space.

The global COVID-19 pandemic and possible future lockdowns highlight the need for urban areas worldwide to reimagine the development and availability of public space as so-to-speak “brave space”: accessible and equitable respites for urban dwellers.² There is a noticeable disparity between the mental health and well-being of people with access to private gardens and outdoor space and those who rely on access to the public realm. Under lockdowns across the world, some citizens of dense cities were limited to an hour or less of outdoor recreation per day, leading to increased anxiety, depression, and lack of connection. As restrictions have been lifted, commercialized public spaces and events can no longer function as attractors for social connection due to physical distancing requirements, and parks, gardens, and other green and blue open spaces have become the de facto civic “backyards” for friends and family to meet and socialize. This increase in the use of parks has put pressure on cities to increase the quality and quantity of urban green space. It also offers an opportunity for designers to bring more refined consideration to how these spaces can spread optimism through careful design interventions.

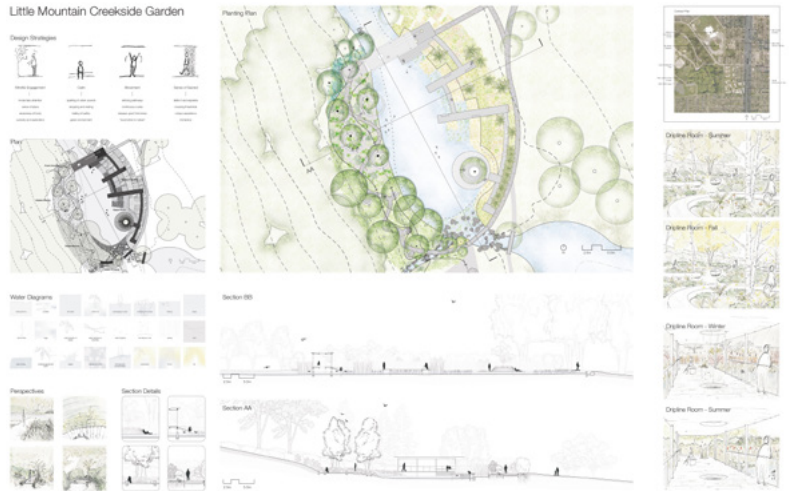
Studio Structure

The students participating in this studio were in the second term of their master’s program; it was the second of three core studios designed to prepare students for their independent study and professional practice. To gain admission, students needed to complete a landscape architecture or architecture (for the double-degree students) foundational studio. The 2022 edition was the second time Roehr and Braconnier co-taught the course, and they tell me that they modified the assignments slightly from the previous

1. The lab, established in 2007, disseminates information on urban design retrofits and new approaches that improve the ecological functions of public open spaces. See: <https://blogs.ubc.ca/greenskinslab/>.

2. John Palfrey, *Safe Spaces, Brave Spaces: Diversity and Free Expression in Education* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2018).

Figure 1. Caleb Spyksma and Ruby Barnard, *Little Mountain Creekside Garden*, LARC 502 Assignment 1, University of British Columbia, Winter 2022.



year to account for online learning in the two time zones—North America and the UK—where Stephanie resided in spring 2022. The studio's main objective was to create an optimistic atmosphere by asking the students what outdoor space programs they would design under pandemic circumstances, practicing skills to read plans, create concepts, cut sections, and design at a human scale. In addition to technical design skills, the instructors aim to foster independent and critical thinking and the development of a design concept.

The co-instructor divided the term into two key projects: the first, an analysis and design of a garden; and the second, the proposal for a medium-sized public park that was an enjoyable, accessible, and equitable respite for everyone. Working at these two scales, students found distinct but related experiences of the outdoors—gardens and urban parks—while exploring how these spaces can be designed in the future to react to new urban realities and the impacts of ill health. Additionally, the studio sought to explore ability, inclusivity, and accessibility in the public realm with the understanding that cities have historically been organized in a manner that is biased based on ethnicity, gender, or physical ability.

The teaching duo tried to experiment with an approach that established an “open-minded” space for students to present their ideas, encouraging students to adapt their vocabulary to participate in design discussions. An open-minded space means listening and learning to set boundaries, which can challenge students as well as instructors. On the one hand, students needed to understand that instructors were not available 24/7 and would listen attentively during the allocated studio times. On the other hand, instructors needed to be open to any point students made and to use constructive language with suggestions that were inappropriate for the client or the site. The boundaries provided time away from the classroom, and the open discussions gave students a voice in their design process.

However, students needed to move beyond the culture of adjectives like “nice” or “good” to enable free-flowing discussions. Roehr reflects on when he first arrived in Vancouver to teach at UBC and conversations with his mentor, professor emeritus Douglas Patterson, around the same topic. The reflections demonstrate that students’ understanding of design critique and vocabulary are longstanding teaching challenges and not just due to online learning in the COVID era.

Discussion

Roehr and Braconnier find that first-year students are often timid or insecure about sharing their ideas because they believe that they are going to be told they are “doing it all wrong,” when in fact the opposite is true: design is about decision making, and critiques are an opportunity for students to elaborate on their process and to demonstrate how their ideas work with or against course discussions or readings. A critique is a means to engage actively with a design proposal to help students become aware of diverse positions, the messiness of mixing theories, and to state their position within a broader design conversation.³ Taking the time to ensure that students understand the purpose of a critique and different ways to approach it enables students to hear what their instructors and peers have to offer throughout the design process.

Students developed skills for self and peer review throughout the studio. In part, Roehr and Braconnier used the Miroboard (and, since spring 2023, a blog) to encourage design development, keep students motivated, and allow them to learn from one another. Once a student made a post, they needed to keep the entry to document the evolution of their design process and observe where they made critical design decisions. The process is reminiscent of “the old days” when landscape architects posted tracing paper on the corkboard to the side of their drafting tables. The Miro board and blogs let students “see” the scraps of ideas that, in studio days, were tangible artifacts lying around the studio. In this way, the teaching duo enhanced digital design process conversations outside the studio’s hours and beyond the course’s timeframe to create a positive and open atmosphere to motivate these emerging professionals.

The studio engaged a third type of feedback from external reviewers. Throughout the term, the instructors invited feedback from professionals and academics from local and North America. The guest critics engaged the students in an additional layer of dialogue by providing links to professional practice and modelling types of feedback from clients. By inviting professionals into the academic setting, first-year students can hear the various skill sets needed to be a landscape architect, the range of existing projects, and they get to know local and regional offices. Students acquired a better understanding of the field, as many do not know what it entails, and could develop a positive outlook to manage their post-graduation expectations, including pragmatic topics like salary expectations and working hours. Meanwhile, local and further-afield professionals can assess the next

3. Jacky Bowring, “Teaching Design Critique,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Teaching Landscape*, ed. Karsten Jørgensen et al. (Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2019), 168–90.

Phoenix Park

Heidi Evans and Tess Adebar / LARC 502

Our garden creates a private, immersive, shady space for burn survivors and their families, and facilitates physical and emotional recovery and restoration.



Figure 2. Tess Adebar and Heidi Evans, *Phoenix Park*, LARC 502 Assignment 1, University of British Columbia, Winter 2022.

Urban Sanctuary

Livia, Cansu, Alejandro, Shruti & Sheena / LARC 502

We are creating an ecological oasis for the diverse population of Oakridge by breaking the physical boundaries of the park both horizontally and vertically while responding to the urban context such that it attracts people with nature.

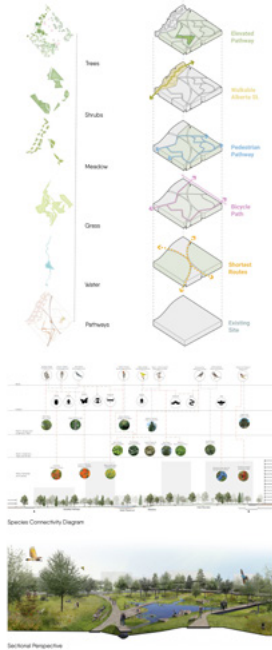


Figure 3. Cansu Undeyoglu, Livia Newman, Alejandro Loyola Urquiza, Shruti Misra, and Sheena Jain, *Urban Sanctuary*, LARC 502 Assignment 2, University of British Columbia, Winter 2022.

Figure 4. Nabil Basri, Dante Baies, Jenn Richards, and Luc Bagnères, *The ParkLab Project*, LARC 502 Assignment 2, University of British Columbia, Winter 2022.



generation of landscape architects’ knowledge and skill level before they graduate. In other words, the students’ projects and outcomes are critiqued at multiple layers, and the landscape architecture community is kept abreast of students and their design abilities.

One of the differences between the two projects is that, in the first project, students were responsible for observing, recording, and analyzing the site to develop a base plan. Students self-selected a site for the first design exercise—individually in 2021, in their countries, and in pairs in 2022, in Vancouver—a multi-sensorial garden, either public or private, that responded to a specific health limitation (physical, mental, or otherwise) and that provided healing or respite, an optimistic future urban vision for those who would not otherwise have access to such a space. Roehr has developed two methods to help students advance their site-analysis skills through sensory observation and digital recording. The hand-drawn “Cube Method” has the students move quickly through plan and section drawings to achieve an axonometric drawing that can be “animated to explain [...] complex environmental processes which have always existed in landscape architecture.”⁴ Students simultaneously learn the site and connect abiotic, biotic, and cultural elements through drawing. They are taught to design for what the garden or park space user needs, not what they want to design. “Design is making a decision and placing oneself into the space user’s shoes,” says Roehr.

Additionally, the instructors asked the students to question the privilege designers often give to sight by pushing them to detect their surroundings using all five senses. The assignments recommended the students to go outside multiple times during the different design phases and explore public spaces close to their homes when the university was closed due to pandemic restrictions. Roehr firmly believes that our bodies should be treated as the first recording device of our design process. He suggests in his second book, *Multisensory Landscape Design: A Designer’s Guide for Seeing*, “Site Immersion is the first physical engagement with a site, and this procedure should be repeated

4. Daniel Roehr, “Off Screen Studio,” January 10, 2023, <https://blogs.ubc.ca/drawingsdaniel-roehr/>; and Axo Demystified blog: <https://blogs.ubc.ca/axonometric/>.

5. Daniel Roehr, *Multisensory Landscape Design: A Designer’s Guide for Seeing* (New York: Routledge, 2022), 29.

6. Daniel Roehr and Sean Bailey, “Gardens are... Buildings: A Garden’s Role in Unprecedented Times,” trans. Feiyu Wei, *Landscape Architecture* 27, no. 9 (September 2020): 24–34, <https://doi.org/10.14085/j.fjyl.2020.09.0024.11>; Roehr, *Multisensory Landscape Design*.

multiple times throughout the entire design process.”⁵ Overall, the book offers a toolkit of multisensory “seeing” and designing for new and professional designers alike.

I found the studio’s site exploration and analysis exercises central to the course objectives: Roehr and Braconnier asked students to experience the site with all their senses (touch, taste, sound, smell, and sight), enhancing a positive bodily experience. I like this exercise because there is little room for smartphones in this exploration besides photography, video and audio recording. As a result, the students describe the feeling, through hand drawings, of a wet leaf touching their pant leg, the sound of a soggy sneaker on paving, and the smell of compost. After two years online, these students moved their bodies and re-invigorated their senses.

The connective “optimistic” element between these two exercises is the focus on using planting design as a cohesive healing force. This was reinforced by sessional instructor Karin England, who worked with the students to develop a broad planting and material matrix to initiate a multi-sensory design. The matrix, which can be applied worldwide, uses the five senses of touch, taste, sound, smell and sight as a basis for students to build up a layered design approach that considers space and access equally with physical sensations within the landscape.⁶ In this studio, students are asked to explore and research how planting design can enhance health, invite connection, and heal ecologies within private and public spaces.

Conclusion

In many studios, instructors work from a large-scale to small-scale design; however, Roehr and Braconnier “flip” the process. Partly, working up from the smaller scale of a garden is easier to grasp first and allows the instructors to evaluate existing skills learned in intro studio, which helps in providing individual feedback. In a world where AI software can produce an academic-quality paper with little means for tracing plagiarism, we must be sure students have the essential design tools before adding layers of complication. In addition to drawing, being a competent designer means listening, discussing, exploring, and critiquing, for Roehr and Braconnier.

The pandemic and other local, national, and global events have radically changed the practice of landscape architecture over the last five years. To navigate students through this period of change, instructors must unlearn skills and vocabulary used in the past to prepare students for a society facing the realities of climate change and the hard truth about colonization. Students need to be able to position themselves and have confidence in the ideas they propose while being competitive in a constructive way. We all need to find a balance between optimism and reality by knowing ourselves and our clients, and not being afraid to fail forward. ¶