

THE METHODOLOGY VALUE FOR LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE CONCEPTS

Trif Andreea^{1*}

^{1*}University of Craiova

* Correspondence author. E-mail: andreeatrif@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the challenges of transferring substance and meaning into the conceptualization of form in landscape architecture. Positioned at the intersection of art and utility, architecture in all its forms ultimately concerns people and their quality of life. Consequently, teaching students project techniques becomes a way of guiding them to understand space and to assign meaning to new uses. How could we transfer value and eliminate kitsch? Which are the main instruments to eliminate the dull and ugly? This article presents the main approaches employed in teaching landscape architecture students at the University of Craiova, aiming to help them achieve a solid understanding of the discipline's mission.

INTRODUCTION

Architecture is not merely the act of simply constructing buildings; it is a cultural and intellectual process that transforms abstract ideas into tangible spaces. At the core of this process lie two fundamental pillars: concept and composition. The concept defines the guiding vision — the narrative, intention, and meaning that shape a project — while composition provides the spatial and formal framework through which this vision becomes material reality. Together, they form the foundation for creating environments that are both functional and emotionally resonant.

In the contemporary architectural context, where technological efficiency and rapid production often dominate, the role of concept and composition becomes even more critical. A well-formulated concept ensures that projects respond to social, cultural, and environmental contexts, while a coherent composition guarantees spatial harmony, hierarchy, and legibility. For students and practitioners alike, understanding the interplay between these two dimensions is essential for developing a design methodology capable of generating spaces that enhance quality of life and foster meaningful human experience.

This paper investigates the pedagogical and practical significance of concept and composition in architectural design, examining their impact on creativity, critical thinking, and professional practice. By analysing teaching approaches, the study highlights the necessity of integrating these principles into both academic curricula and professional workflows. The article represents the result of studying different techniques and strategies in teaching about the act of creation in architecture, based on personal professional experience.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Architecture has a very specific challenge – it sells art, but as a promise, not as an object. Therefore, a professional must transmit sufficient trustworthy information that an investor decides to follow before the act of creation becomes matter. An architect sells ideas with the promise that the project will not only satisfy the buyer but also all its future users. Therefore, the mission is challenging, and the solidity comes from the authenticity and added value. If one decides to imitate, use simple and previsible elements and obtains uncontrolled results, the experience will be dull and ugly.

As professionals, we know that the trust of clients is built in years and that each project incorporates risks and low points. Another specific and challenging point is that each project represents the result of a collaboration between the client, the designer, the authorities, the constructor and the communication is the key to all these layers of complexity. Therefore, in the pedagogical methodology we aimed to explain and guide students towards these realities.

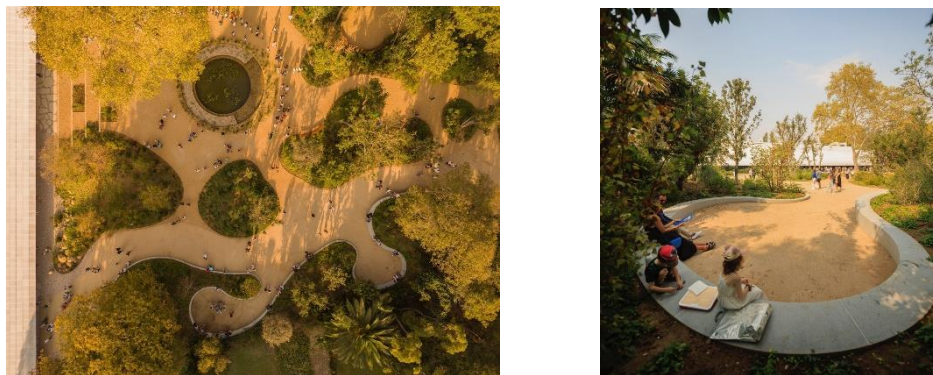


Figure 1. 2025 Landscape And Architecture Jury Award
Gulbenkian Foundation Garden Extension by VDLA and Kengo Kuma (source: landezine.com)

The methodology for teaching landscape design is based on combining the theoretical structures of architectural composition with the active studio exercise. The goal is not merely to obtain functional responses to requirements — rather, the purpose is to cultivate critical thinking capable of producing meaning, thereby giving space identity and cultural value (Moraitis, 2024). In a world where quick commercial solutions and superficial imagery dominate aesthetics, the methodology deliberately includes the cultivation of aesthetic discernment: recognizing kitsch not merely as “bad taste,” but as an “aesthetic lie” (Eco, 1989), a comfortable refuge from the responsibility of creation.

In the Landscape Project Design course within the Faculty of Horticulture in Craiova, the educational process is structured around four key notions: fundamental elements, users, composition, and scale. These are considered methodological anchors guiding the design process. The study begins with the analysis of elements — point, line, and surface — which form the visual alphabet of landscape design. The point, as a visual mark or nucleus, creates centers of interest; the line, as a vector of orientation, defines directions and boundaries; while the surface, shaped visually and tactilely, influences spatial perception and use (Lee, 2021). Practical

exercises enable students to manipulate these elements to generate hierarchy, direction, and emotion — the foundations of authentic composition.

A future landscape architect must first understand the value of graphic gestures in relation to the underlying idea and its associated responsibility. Every line becomes a plane separator; every surface eventually becomes material. The way these are transformed represents the core mission of the future designer. The “ground line” is the first essential concept. It matters whether the intervention surface is flat or not, whether there are multiple sightlines, and where the access and crossing points are located. Understanding these notions presupposes the shaping of conceptual premises.

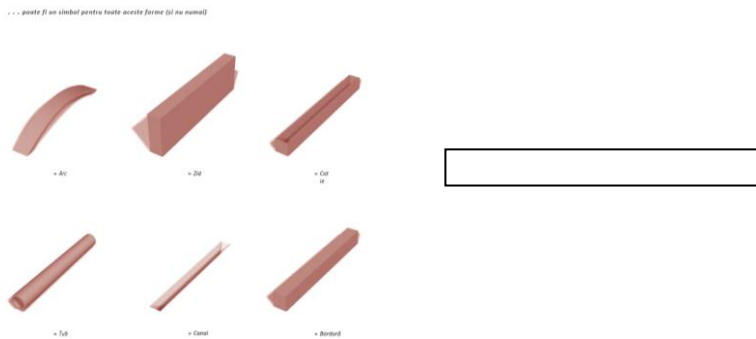


Figure 2. From 3D complexity to 2D representation (source: Hans Loidl and Stefan Bernard, *Opening spaces*)

On this foundation, composition is introduced: the creative and harmonious arrangement of elements through established techniques — balance, juxtaposition, centrality, rhythm, repetition, and so forth. Rhythm brings dynamism, repetition confers unity, and balance may be classical or asymmetrical, depending on the expressive intent. Proportions, reflected in the rule of thirds, define focal points and visual harmony. At this stage, the avoidance of kitsch becomes an essential criterion: students are discouraged from using decorative clutter without logic, from selecting visually impressive elements lacking functional grounding, and from uncritically adopting inappropriate models. The emphasis is placed on simplicity, material honesty, and conceptual coherence — the difference between a poetic intervention and a superficial or purely spectacular one.

Subsequently, the methodology incorporates the human dimension of design, focusing on the user. Landscape is understood as the infrastructure of relationships — with the human at the centre. Methods of empathic urbanism and participatory design include on-site observation, interviews, and scenario analysis, ensuring that projects respond not only aesthetically but also socially — addressing issues of accessibility, multisensory comfort, safety, and authenticity (Sandman, 2018). Here, kitsch is not only visual but also social — “Instagrammable” spaces that lack real function may seem attractive but are ultimately rejected by the community.

The final dimension is scale — the perception of proportions and dimensions in relation to the human body and urban context. Through exercises that trace spaces of varying widths, scale models, and digital simulations, students understand how

scale influences behaviour and spatial comprehension (Hillier & Hanson, 1984). Here too, kitsch is critically examined: disproportionate scale, gratuitous ornamentation, and unjustified use of precious materials are counterbalanced by requirements of aesthetic adequacy, cultivating a sense of measure and respect for context.

The entire methodological path follows a carefully structured progression: from abstract elements to conscious composition, through the integration of the user and the testing of scale. In this way, students acquire not only technical skills but also critical and cultural sensitivity, enabling them to move beyond simple problem-solving toward the creation of authentic, meaningful spaces that resist kitsch.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The application of the proposed methodology led to the shaping of a pedagogical pathway structured in several distinct stages, through which the four fundamental notions — elements, composition, user, and scale — were transformed from theoretical concepts into operational tools.

The first outcome was the site study, a stage that involved a careful reading of the physical and social context. Students were trained to map topography, vegetation, existing circulation, microclimate, and visual relationships, as well as to document the layers of memory embedded in the place, its cultural identity, and potential conflicts of use. This stage provided the analytical foundation for all subsequent decisions, confirming the importance of a systemic and interdisciplinary approach to the site (Moraitis, 2024). The difficulty consisted in obtaining information. For example, the utilities traces were established only on in-situ observation. Yet, in practice, it would be easier to obtain such information.

Next, the methodology generated the establishment of connections and connectivity, through which students-built networks of spatial relationships: main circulation axes, meeting nodes, secondary routes, and visual relationships that give coherence to the whole. Through graphic exercises and models, they explored the principles of permeability and accessibility, encouraging a design mindset oriented toward spatial continuity and experiential sequences (Hillier & Hanson, 1984; Colorado Master Gardener). In this stage the empathic exercises proved to be the most effective. The students were invited to assume a role – blind, child, old, motor disability – and try to experience the space through the lens. This proved to be a very efficient mode.

An essential stage was the analysis of the site's urban image, especially its edges, intersections, and landmarks. Drawing inspiration from Kevin Lynch's theory of the city image (1960), students identified the recognizable elements that structure the collective perception of space: built frontages, visible corners, orientation points, and key perspectives. This approach gave the projects urban anchorage and relevance to the collective memory of the place. The results were less satisfactory as these concepts are very abstract and are linked to personal cultural experiences.

Another key result was the definition of functions, in which the spatial composition was directly linked to the needs of the previously identified users. Areas for sitting, play, transit, and events were configured to create a sequence of spaces with varying degrees of intimacy and activity. This phase put into practice the principles of empathic urbanism, ensuring that the space responds not only to individual needs but also to those of the community (Sandman, 2018)

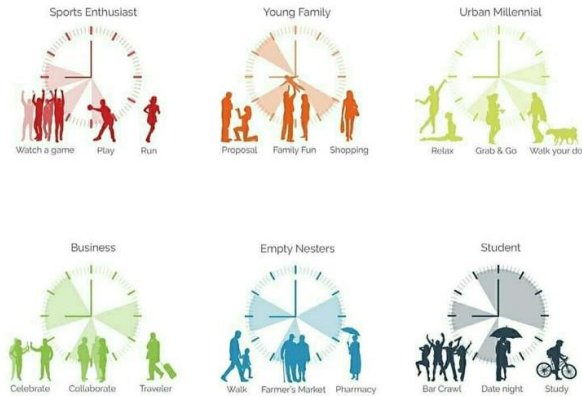


Figure 3. User, uses and design considerations (source: urbanismlite.com)

In the final stage, the methodology led to clarifying the meaning and expression of space. Aspects such as materiality, texture, colour palette, and the “vibration” of the ensemble — in terms of the perceived atmosphere and the way space invites use and evokes emotion — were explored. This stage also involved an in-depth discussion of criteria for avoiding kitsch: the selection of authentic materials, the controlled use of ornament, and the maintenance of a clear compositional logic (Eco, 1989; Dorfles, 1969).

As a result, the projects went beyond merely solving functional requirements and instead conveyed a narrative, a mood, and a recognizable identity, demonstrating that the meaning of space is inseparable from its visual and tactile expression.

Overall, the methodology produced a progressive learning process: from analysis to composition, from function to expression. The results show that students succeeded in going beyond the formal level of the exercise, achieving a holistic understanding of space and the ability to create interventions that are sensitive, coherent, and culturally responsible.

CONCLUSIONS

Assuming the pedagogical role requires the deliberate selection and shaping of a coherent methodology capable of generating both understanding and ownership of the design process. The objective is to structure information into progressive layers that are easy to assimilate, so that their traversal results in knowledge acquisition and leads to well-founded solutions. The method proves to be valuable not only for clarifying meaning but also for preventing excess and superficiality. Beauty is not pursued as a decorative goal in itself, but emerges as the natural outcome of a well-reasoned and responsible process. It is not “beautiful” merely because it is colorful, shiny, or ornate, but because it is useful, comfortable, and beneficial. The lasting value of a project is achieved through the successive and reflective application of the method, rather than through isolated gestures devoid of meaning.

The difficulties were related to the level of abstraction of the concepts. The real challenge was designing the right experiences and assignments to help students fully grasp the principles. Another issue with the methodology is that it requires continuous attendance. It is very difficult to assess whether the methodology truly

creates value if students are not consistent – for instance, if they miss classes or copy others' work.

Overall, the methodology yields good results, especially because the theory and exercises are strongly connected, and students have the opportunity to reinforce the concepts in the following years of study.

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