

Insistence

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There is an inherent insistence in architectural drawings. I learned this insistence early in my training and education as an architect. I was introduced to it in my high school drafting classes and was steeped in it during my undergraduate education in the 1990s. The insistence I speak of makes a distinct statement about how the designed object is and must be. Things like thickness, material, joints, seams, connections, layers are all communicated with things like: scale, lineweight, linetype, hatching, notational clarity, projection (orthographic, parallel, or perspective). I was drawn (pun intended) to this insistence and thrived in it. That continued beyond undergrad when I was working in an office and they knew I could put clear drawings together. But there was more.

Stan Allen¹ writes about and references Nelson Goodman's² concepts of the autographic and the allographic. Goodman characterises, and Allen expands upon, the 'curious mixture' of the two that is found in architectural drawings. The autographic is that which can only be made by the author and the allographic is that which can be reproduced, like a script or musical score. Insistence is embedded in the allographic form of architectural drawing because these types of drawings become a contract. I was taught in architecture school that the allographic contained a hegemony of pragmatism. Draw what can be built; you will need to know this to get a job. Insistence seemed integral to the allographic — but could it be embedded in the autographic?

As an architecture student I was enamoured with another kind of insistence: the insistence embedded in the drawings of practices like Diller + Scofidio, Neil Denari, Enric Miralles, and Morphosis. Miralles' insistence in using no variation in lineweight creates a wonderful obfuscation of hierarchy that I could only characterise as poetic ambiguity that requires the viewer to work a bit harder to decipher. They elevated what architectural

1 Stan Allen, *Practice: Architecture Technique + Representation* (Routledge, 2009).

2 Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Hackett Publishing Company, 1976).

representation could be and yet, what they made was from the same genealogy of drawing that I had worked so hard to perfect. The insistence of these architects was for us to see the drawing as speaking in another way, and it was the viewer's task to learn how to listen to the way the drawings were speaking. The autographic creates the voice of the drawing and imbues it with authority. So much so that it is virtually impossible to recreate. This is one of the foundational concepts in Goodman's thoughts about the autographic. The allographic can be reproduced and speaks a quasi-universal language that can be duplicated and/or translated by others.

In my undergraduate and graduate education more than one of my classmates had walked away in a huff after seeing my drawings. I can only guess it was because of the drawn precision. I had an undergraduate professor dismiss a drawing I submitted for a summer research project that required drawing skills. He claimed it was a plot from a CAD drawing — Nope! I am just that precise about my drawings. When I went to the University of Virginia (UVA) for graduate school I was still working in a manner that could only be characterised as drafting. One of my UVA professors noted, 'Chris, you need to be more messy.' I started to watercolour my drawings, but that was still 'between the lines'.

Upon graduating I received the Artist in Residence Fellowship from the National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution (NMAI). I had proposed to do an architectural translation of the Oneida Creation Story (Fig. 1). The work, *Cosmological Documents* (2004), a play on Construction Documents, mixed the drafting insistence I was comfortable in, and the exploration of, 'How am I going to draw the beginning of the universe?' My sketchbook became my trusted companion; I could tell (draw) my un-comfortabilities to and ask (draw) profound queries like, 'How thick is the Sky World?' I trusted it so much I stopped erasing and simply drew over, beside, or near. To me, my sketchbook was now an integral interlocutor.

I had started the smaller sketchbook format a year earlier in Rome and started my NMAI experience right after returning from Rome a second time. The edges of Roman ruins are less insistent and require an eye-hand that doesn't follow the drafted edge. The insistence of the subject required me to draw differently and really see the imperfect edges and translate them in a new way. In many ways the precise drafted edge presents a world of unattainable perfection.

After many drawing and rendering projects, I started *Radio Free Alcatraz* in 2013 as a research endeavour to explore the complexities of colonisation on Indigenous people in the US and perhaps discover the possibilities of what could be (Fig. 2). I decided to start with the medium I knew: Mylar drafting film, graphite, dry-transfer lettering, Letratone, and Pantone film. I have a cache of all these items like a doomsday prepper might hoard food for an uncertain future.

I purloined the insistence of architectural lineweight, linetype, form, shape, and notation, and leveraged them as decolonial apparatus — there is nothing more insistent than colonisation! Colonisation erases the existence of the Native along with their lifeways and epistemologies and supplants it with those of the settler as if nothing had existed before.³ The insistence that there is only one way to read a drawing infers that all drawings speak in the same way — they don't.

The allographic language insists that only one thing can be true, like a colonial mindset. An autographic language believes multiple things can be true, like Indigenous epistemologies. As a designer, I don't need to wait to know what it is before I start drawing it (as I did during my time as a student). I can begin drawing in a proto-language and allow the design to be birthed from the graphic utterances — thus creating a new syntactic system that makes the familiar unfamiliar and decolonises the line. The drawing surface becomes the place where true/false and

3 Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang. 'Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor', *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, & Society*, 1.1 (2012), pp. 1–40.

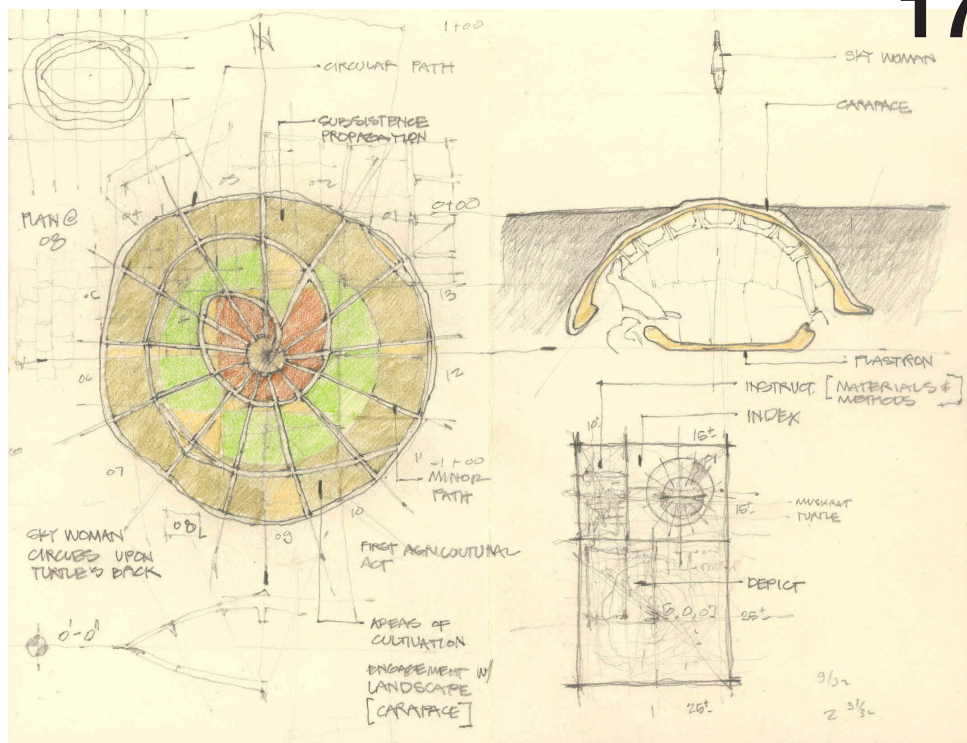


Fig. 1. Chris Cornelius, *NMAI Sketchbook*, 2003.

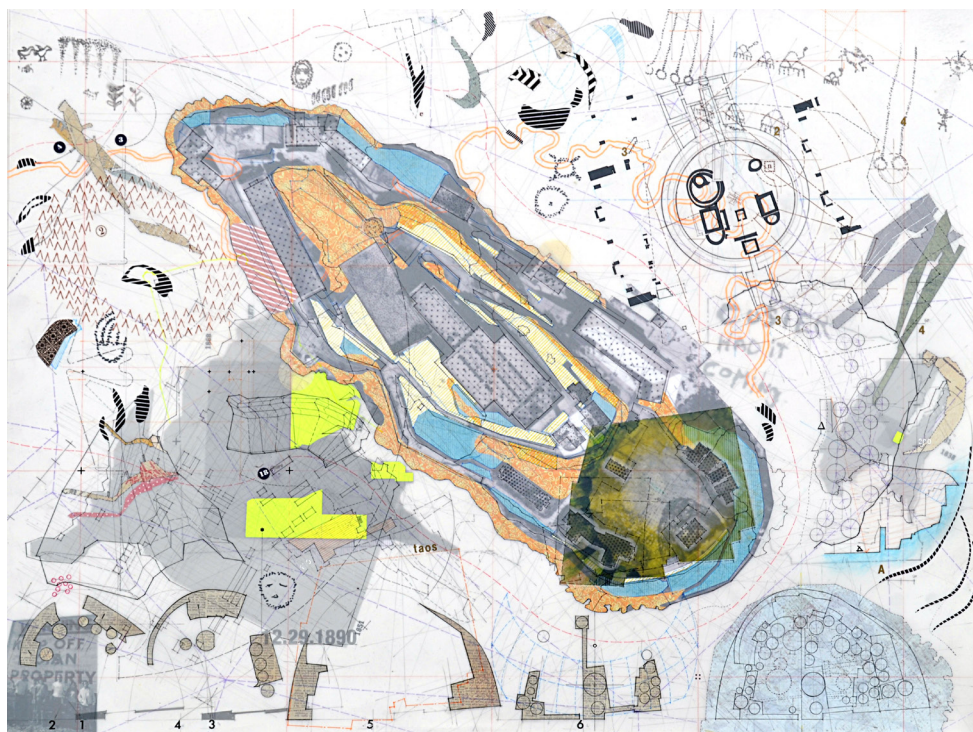


Fig. 2. Chris Cornelius, *Radio Free Alcatraz: Territories*, 2013.

fiction/non-fiction may coexist. The rejection of erasure forces the literal and figurative coexistence in the syntactic system, much like the Indigenous oral tradition where stories are not only entertaining but are also purveyors of culture, values, and epistemological systems.

The *Radio Free Alcatraz* drawings visually demonstrate how I am thinking about the ‘project’ of designing something on the site of Indigenous occupation while wrestling with the complex history of settler colonialism. Each thematic drawing posits my own thoughts of, ‘I don’t know how to deal with all of that, but let me draw the shit out of this drawing!’

I believe you can think your way into a million (design) problems, and you can draw your way out of any (design) problem. Waiting for the idea to arise before drawing will not move the work forward. You can begin drawing (anything) and ideas will come forth. Just like critiquing the apparatus of colonisation from the outside will not make it change — taking on the apparatus by dismantling and reassembling it will effect change.

The real insistence lies in trusting yourself to draw something that has never been, and you may have never known. This is something I try to impart upon my students (Fig. 3). I teach them a methodology of drawing, like *Radio Free Alcatraz*, that requires a blind trust in believing that drawing is an active partner in ideation. That process includes developing a shape language, procedural glyphs, glyphic offspring, notational riffs, and shape inhabitants. While the process, on the surface, seems procedural, it requires building the author’s (student’s) subjective facility to create autographic success. This way of drawing is not intended to follow the same choreography as drawing first and building second but allows students to trust their pre-drawing minds and to render graphic utterances visible. The syntactic system makes the designed object better because the design is informed by more than the contingencies of site, program, structure, enclosure, etc.

A group of my students at Columbia GSAPP in Spring 2024 were concerned that their drawings were not ‘architectural’ enough (Fig. 4). I understood the subtext of the concern as, ‘We are about to graduate architecture school, shouldn’t we make architectural drawings?’ I let them know that they are, and more. That was the very moment I formulated this thought about the unrelenting insistence that can be embedded in architectural drawings. The insistence was almost willing the architectural drawings into existence. The drawings they made were embedded with texture, sense, and material characteristics, and to me that was architectural. They were drawings that implied line with a carefully calibrated set of marks. They were hand-drawn axonometrics with poetic verbal thoughts. They were indexical prints of the physical model, conflating the work-subject. The exquisite drawn works of these three students were a visual translation of Indigenous culture as only they could understand as being respectfully outside.

My insistence now, as a maker and teacher of drawings, is to present both the allographic and autographic knowing that drawing is ultimately the way we see the world around us as designers. And that we need to learn how a drawing speaks to understand what it may be trying to tell us. I suggest that drawings like *Radio Free Alcatraz* have plastic truth that depends on context and may rely on the viewer’s place in life. Perhaps I inherently understand this from being Indigenous and knowing that stories may have been entertaining when I heard them as a child, but when I hear them again and again as I mature, they contain new salient lessons. I have had the pleasure of learning new things from these drawings every time I publicly talk about them. They insist I keep listening to them.

Fig. 3. Yale student Ruike Liu's mapping research of the Opaskwyak Cree Nation in Manitoba, 2021.

when grain not indigenous

Water is responsible
for most of
glacial and transportation work
chemical reactions paint
the soil. Eolids.
Wind-blown dust
solids dissolved
or suspended in
raindrops slowly

Beneath the old are soils that
developed thick red-
clayey
pedals of time, soil horizons

aeolic horizons
depends on soil age,
become as hard as
asbestos

lumpy iron-bearing
minerals produce the
color, they paint
the soil. Very young soils
are pale brown or yellowish
soils may tend to be
of brownish colors
Strong red soils are
The degree of redness

depends on
amount of
iron in soil
The degree of
oxidation
depends on
amount of
iron in soil
The degree of
oxidation

Very clayey
in a short span of time
The degree of
oxidation

Reddish brown
loam the soil - being
loam

Reddish brown
loam the soil - being
loam

Reddish brown
loam the soil - being
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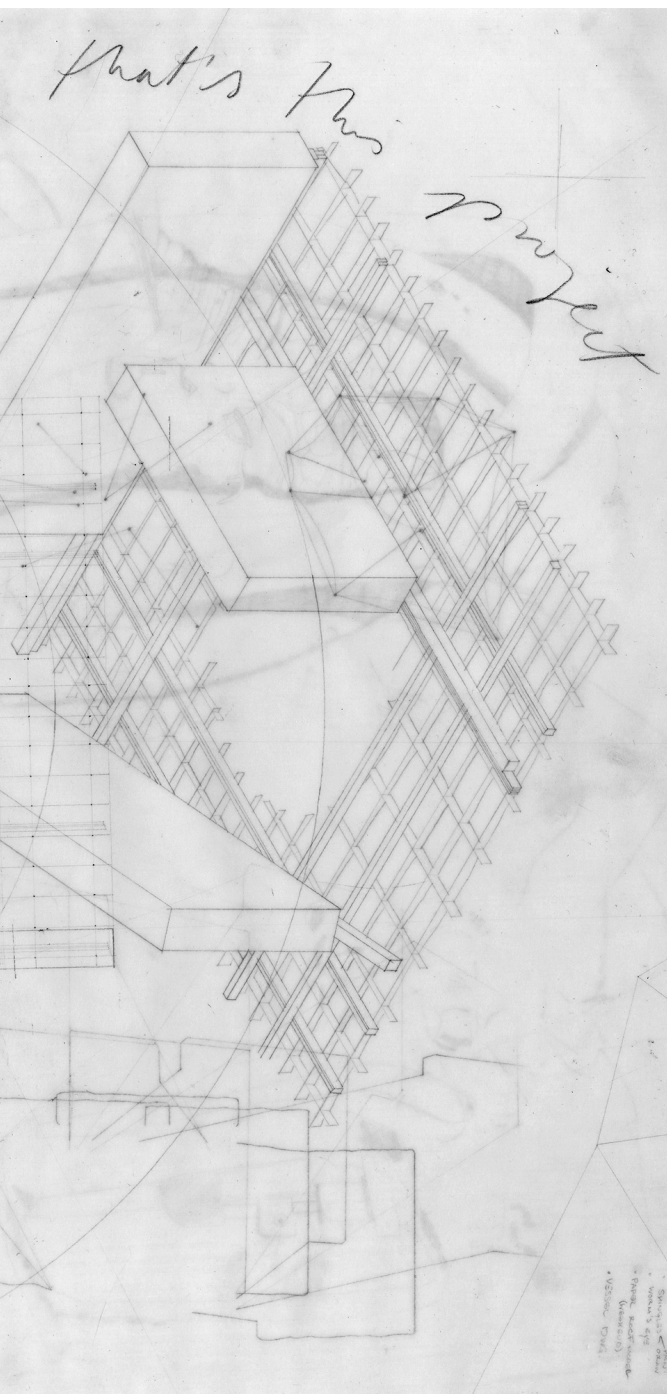


Fig. 4. GSAPP students Zackary Bryson, Anoushka Mariwala, and Juliana Yang, *when you're not Indigenous that is this project*, 2024.