

## Chapter 01 | Session 1C

### Is it Me (f)or a Moment: Reconciling Past and Present with Time Windows

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#### Abstract

They say a picture is worth a thousand words, a way to create a visual framework of sorts for documenting past experiences and accessing them at later dates (memories). Perhaps that is so, but I suggest its value is limited to a couple of hundred words at most. In order for words to participate with a sketch or drawing, they are required to represent themselves clearly, completely, and concisely. However, it is hard to 'speak' ink especially when one is compelled to record a memory in a viscerally palpable manner. It is here that drawing can perform as a unique act of reclamation - an attempt to recover the ephemeral visual layers of a past connected to the soul of a place we once occupied. Exploring the visual definition of piedmont North Carolina tobacco barns has afforded me an opportunity to explore the link between memory phenomena (similar to available, physical and virtual memory we have in computers) and notions of the virtual rooting itself in the actual and/or vice-versa.

#### Keywords

Sketching, memory, drawing, time window, barns

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They say a picture is worth a thousand words. Perhaps...but I suggest it is worth a few hundred at best. For me, words frequently struggle to capture the picture; the literal rarely is as rich as the figurative. However, in the hand and mind of a talented writer, the opposite is true – the picture fails to effectively express what a choice set of words in a unique arrangement can accomplish.

In mapping my own world construct, they are one in the same when it comes down to what my pen 'speaks' and how my paper 'listens' as I record an experience in

support of a memory. Each is a singular physical part of a system constructed to hold and manage components of my life's data. One physical system we often use to frame and perhaps capture an image is a common, glazed window, a 'structure' employed to compose a clearer expression of an actual impression. Windows are also associated with the virtual world that addresses memory in its own unique way via the notion of physical, available and virtual memory. Accepting that my existence has roots in both worlds, the actual and virtual, I suggest it is the physical hand mechanics of both activities, writing and drawing, which support capturing an event or experience, storing it, and then framing it for (re)collection and (re)presentation.

My curiosity with memory retention and retrieval and the role drawing may play in their effectiveness has crept up on me with my own age. I sense this subtly comes from the realization that memories do indeed wax and wane with the finer points becoming a bit dulled with each access attempt. I liken this to the fading in and out of virtual memory assigned to a computer task. As I call on my own (brain/mind) hard drive's physical memory, available memory becomes taxed, and ready access to stored information is more difficult to obtain. In the digital world, in order to increase physical memory on a computer we buy more memory and physically install it on the hard drive. Buying more brain has yet to become a viable option in the human world. It is here that I suggest drawing and sketching can become a way to increase the physical, permanent memory necessary for efficient memory recall and retention. The drawing itself could be considered the currency for purchasing more physical memory (passive) and thereby increasing available memory, all the while taking advantage of virtual (active) memory for transferring thoughts, feelings and images from one place (in my brain) to another in an efficient manner.

The author of my memory explorations is an accidental architect - the tobacco farmer - who has unconsciously layered on a level of past, present and perhaps future memory in a rural landscape of everyday utility. My drawing explorations with barns are reconnoitering missions looking for edges, cracks and handholds that will help me peel back those layers. I am drawing, literally and figuratively, on my past to define a measure of my present. For me, my growing up in the agrarian landscapes of rural North Carolina created a rich storehouse of impressions that only recently have I started to memorialize with sketching and drawing. They are memories based in a once were actual

dimension and not relegated to a temporary existence in the virtual.



Figure 1. Mr. Flint drove the tractor. Image by author, 2016.

The barn is a vernacular architecture. It is a reflection of the people and history of the region. Few of us can determine the age of a barn or its specific purpose at a glance, but we admire the classical proportions, the honest design and sturdy construction, and the use of native materials, and we can imagine how the building represented the aspirations and success of its first owner (Leik, 2000).

The place I grew up in was constructed of an architecture rural in its roots and eternal in its existence: the barns and outbuildings of small tobacco farms. The visual backbone of many a rural North Carolina tobacco farm, the tobacco barn is a most fascinating building – the farmer as accidental architect. It preoccupies a vivid childhood memory of mine of a summer picking tobacco in Randolph County – ‘priming baccor’ as we called it.

Tobacco farming was a huge family affair in our town that involved several generations coming together during harvest, curing, and selling. The largest family in our town was the church family. Turns out that the head of that church family, my dad, had two young boys available once school was out. I guess we were fair game for summer labor since they were paying dad’s salary. So during the summer of 1975, Mr. and Mrs. Flint thought it would be good to have the preacher’s kids work on Mr. Flint’s brother’s tobacco farm.

The very first morning we had a choice of hanging the leaves in the barn with the girls or going out in the field and picking the stuff with the guys. Clearly, we made the wrong choice. We picked tobacco in the early morning heat and humidity of a piedmont North Carolina summer. We loaded the tobacco in a decaying wood sled Mr. Flint pulled behind his tractor which he would haul to the barn. Susan Kelly (2013) captures the scene as such:

The aroma of tobacco still clung to the barn’s interior, a scent at once acrid and comforting, deeply masculine, and of the earth... Workers loaded the sticks on a V-shaped structure, then passed it person to person inside the barn, where someone straddled a network of parallel, horizontal rafters, or “tiers,” strategically placed so the sticks would fit between them. Hence the tall, narrow shape of the barn. One by one, the laden sticks were positioned across the tiers, leaf stems tied to the stick, leaf tips pointing downward.

The rows were never-ending, but the day was. Mr. Flint worked us hard but fair and did not let us broil too long. Mrs. Flint would bring us homemade peanut butter crackers and cold Cokes in those little glass bottles when we were done. Mr. Flint would hand us a \$10 check, load us onto his flatbed truck, and haul us into town to the local bank when the day was over.

The time and place of the foregoing memory persistently weaves in and out of my thoughts. As my years advance, I sense access to that memory, among others, is gained through an opening that keeps trying to close itself. I fear my virtual memory is becoming less able to transfer information in a recall task that is both quick and clear. In the past, I have considered my memories as fixed events or experiences along a timeline that I constantly move by and, as age would have it, beyond. Unfortunately, this tends to flatten a memory into nothing more than a photograph – a two-dimensional representation of a multi-dimensional

experience. Photographs have traditionally been a keeper of memories, if only as physically memory; reduced to a singular moment rather than a richly layered memory – the picture of a thousand words. My efforts with that medium merely captured the visual and not the visceral, the virtual in place of the actual. With the benefit of hindsight, I see it now as an attempt to compensate for a weakness when tasked with anything related to high school creative writing, especially as I watched my classmates naturally and without hesitation compose written works with clever and meaningful words. At that time a confidence in sketching and drawing had yet to mature as an effective tool for communication.

With all due deference to the gifted creative writers out there, my sense is that it takes several pages (effectively layers) of words to adequately express one's thoughts, observations, or feelings when pulling events and experiences from one's memory. More words typically allow for deeper meanings, better expressions and richer visualizations. With more photographs (my high school version of sentences and paragraphs), I only gained better insight into the object, the barn, rather than the memory. Equally disappointing was that the writing that accompanied my photographs failed to capture what I was trying to express; as descriptive as they were, the words themselves fell short of visual meaningfulness.

So, if one exhibits a grammar deficiency, what is one to do? Well, draw the words of course! Recent research by Wammes, Meade and Fernandes (2016) explored using drawing versus words to remember objects – a type of encoding strategy. Their work “sought to determine whether drawing was an efficacious strategy for boosting later retention and memory performance” (Wammes et al.). Diaries or journals are often used to record thoughts, moments and feelings via word in the hope that by writing clearly about them we will be better able to understand them. We record the parts (words) so that we can understand their relationship to the whole (a story for instance).

Wammes and his colleagues hypothesized that:

in order to transfer a verbal item into a drawn visual representation, participants must first generate some physical characteristics of an item (elaboration), create a visual image of the item (visual imagery), engage in the actual hand movements required of drawing (motor action), and then are left with the

picture as a memory cue for later retrieval (2017).

Through seven different experiments, they discovered that indeed, drawing improved memory retention. Their results indicated that “drawing pictures of words presented during an incidental study phase provides a measurable boost to later memory performance relative to simply writing out the words, once or repeatedly” (Wammes et al., 2017).

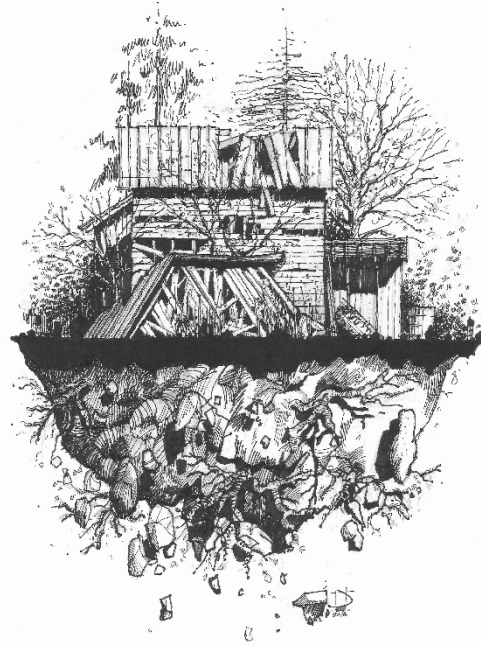


Figure 2. of the earth. Image by author, 2016.

It was not until my college years did the layering of tracing paper sketches reveal the rich world of creative expression (and retention) of an equally rich visual world. Reflecting on my drawing process, I can see how its ‘grammar’ parallels the way words form sentences, paragraphs and eventually (possibly) stories. In similar fashion, my sketching of rural barns starts as a singular part (the word, the first trash paper mark) in a setting that includes water towers, silos, houses and farm equipment (sentences, trash layers) that, in turn, form and re-form unique contexts (paragraphs, top layer sketches); a literal background to a figurative location (my story). My barn structures (and they are mine) exist

within a landscape at once familiar and imagined, framed within a memory grounded by real people, real places, and real landscapes. It is in this construct of sorts that I allow myself to be fixed and let the memory do the moving.

In *'Drawing Now: Between the Lines of Contemporary Art'*, an exhibition in book form, the editors consider the notion of blindness as discussed in Jacques Derrida's *Memoirs of the Blind*, by stating that "drawing circulates around vision and seeing, whether it is literal vision or the psychic vision of dreams and the imaginary" (Adams et al, 2007). They further this notion by stating that:

Sight is understood as an equivalent to understanding and knowing ("I see"). Thus, if we deny sight as a means of making reference, we can only access understanding at the point of making the mark, and drawing the drawing. We can understand drawing as conjecture at the point of perception and at the point of remembering, for one can only appraise a memory once it is represented (drawn).

We often hear that the eyes are a window to the soul, and to look there affords the chance of seeing something we have convinced ourselves we can only feel. Our orbital sockets allow access to and literally frame our gathering of visual data. Relative to accessing memory information, Kukushkin & Carew (2017) advance the notion of knowledge access by suggesting memories nest themselves within a hierarchical framework called a 'time window,' a layered compilation of individual memories not limited to any one portion of the brain. In keeping with notions of a computer's management of memory, we could consider our brains as having several physical memories, and it becomes necessary to supplement available memory with virtual memory in order to organize any one complete picture. It is here that perhaps one can make a more meaningful connection to, and potentially have a clearer view of, the lines, forms, and shapes of one's past as recorded in drawings if we connect the time window to its physical manifestation: an architectural window.

As an architect, I define openings with doors and windows. Unlike doors however, we typically associate windows with transparency and their allowing us clear, and to some extent organized, views (if we specify clear glazing) through to another side. Architectural window systems can be constructed as a complex multi-layered

system with several layers of glazing and options for framing or it can be as simple as a single-paned, flat-muntin assembly. Either way, the system creates sides: inside and outside, this side and the other side. Moving through and to either side of the glazing allows one to create depth which could be measured abstractly as an extent of time – the idea of reflecting on one's past for instance. To look back (from either side), as in the past, one must abandon the comfort of observational drawing with its clear and precise definitions of shape and form for the discomfort of an obscure memory and its lack of clarity. It is like trying to capture the back and forth movement of a computer's virtual memory as it accesses physical memory through available memory (loosely applied). Adams and her co-editors suggest this position results in "the kind of drawing that derives from reflection rather than from observation, and which accesses a different sort of knowledge to that gathered from perception" (2007). I can only imagine that if one could reflect from within the window's glazing, separating the infinitely thin layers of the structure that binds the glass/memory by using a virtual memory process of access, it would be a rather fascinating experience.

Accepting Kukushkin and Carew's 'time window' and their description of a memory as a "fundamentally multi-leveled system for extraction of temporal information from past experience" (2017), perhaps we could consider the physicality of our brain when defining this time window. Windows are a system as well as part of a system. Frames, mullions, stops, thermal breaks and glazing characterize the window itself. That particular window is then installed in a larger window system or wall system. Fortunately for me, the architectural connotations of the 'time window' are metaphorical conveniences I am able to enjoy as an architect drawing rural structures. When transferring both window systems to the space between my skull and grey matter, I realize that the window's glazing thickness is microscopically thin at this point, conforming to the mushy landscape of the brain's form. I perceive it to be vacuum-wrapped with a multi-layered film continuously connected from lobe to lobe. Past events and experiences are flattened in the various layers regardless of their depth in years. Accessing the individual layers in this form of glazing necessitates a careful choice of tools. Interrupting the continuity of the glazing may result in breakage and once broken, it is relatively difficult to return it to its original state. But I suggest that re-forming the glazing is not necessarily ruinous. "[Drawing]... is a more complex process of seeing, thinking, relating and remembering...the recognition of fragments goes beyond the designation

of appearance to something more like an understanding of their function and our previous experience” (Adams et al, 2007). Examining the parts, once broken or during their re-formation, affords an opportunity to gauge their association with the whole.

As with the glazing, a memory can be a very fragile thing, and sometimes a smaller amount of breakage helps prevent creating a larger mess. My tool for this prying apart of my glazing’s layers, a wedge of sorts, is my pen. If possible, I peel away the layers like a carpenter with a planing tool. More often than not though, this wedge produces some rough edges and chipped surfaces as I attempt to separate the layers – places and events that are often incomplete. The results typically translate into re-collected fragments etched into the paper fibers rather than rolling gracefully across its smooth surface; the more toothy the paper, the greater the struggle to create the mark. The barns I sketch, along with the other rural structures and silhouettes I endeavor to recall with particular shapes and forms, could be considered the fragments, the parts essential to an assembling of the whole. Adams and her co-editors (2007) describe it in this way: “Drawing lends itself to the expression of its subject matter in a direct way, and allows a model of representation that maps the fragmented simultaneity of thought, accessing memory, visual fragment and intangible imagination.” Further, they assert that:

...the act of drawing is fascinating in the way that it struggles to translate experience, particularly experience besides that of the appearance of objects. Without representation, which requires definition of some sort, experience remains continuous, ambivalent, incomprehensible and irretrievable (Adams et al, 2007).

Leaving a mark, it would seem, has its merits when we literally draw on our memory. On occasion, the highly textured activity of drawing provides a measure of connection that transcends mere sketching; the memory becomes as real as the paper and ink.

Wammes and his colleagues propose that “drawing improves memory by encouraging a seamless integration of semantic, visual, and motor aspects of a memory trace” (2016). A memory trace is “a hypothetical permanent change in the nervous system brought about by memorizing something; an engram” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2017). Wammes and his colleagues maintain that “the mechanism driving the effect is that engaging in drawing promotes the

seamless integration of many types of memory codes (elaboration, visual imagery, motor action, and picture memory) into one cohesive memory trace” (2016). To shed light on the neural link, researchers have created a framework that describes our memory system in terms of synaptic plasticity, the “principal implementation of information storage in neural systems” (Kandel et al., 2014).

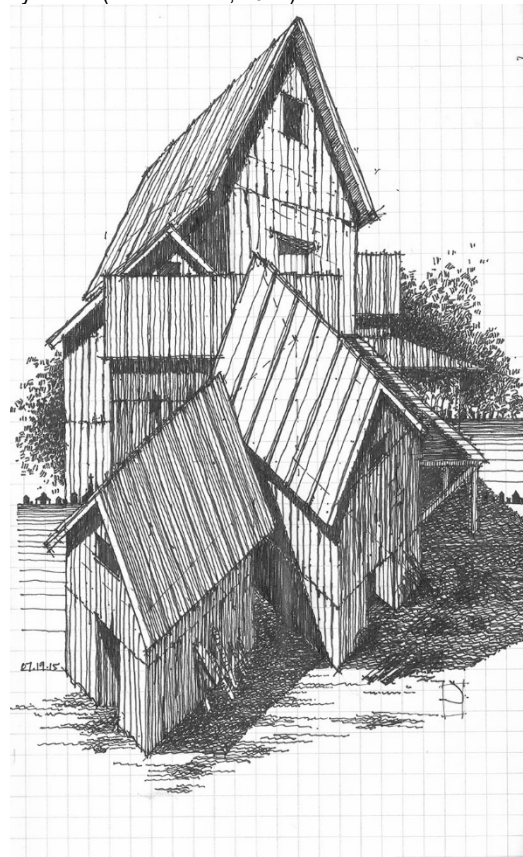


Figure 3. from whence cometh my help. Image by author, 2016.

Neural systems involve networks; linkages between nerves and cells. These connections function more freely as our brain adapts and changes to new information, or in this case, the retrieval of past information. Synaptic plasticity is a measure of time and can help describe the notions of short-term and long-term memory (Kandel et. al., 2014). If we can leverage the pliability of our memory then perhaps we can bend our window’s glazing without breaking it. The view might be a tad distorted, but we would be able to avoid the resulting fragments of shattered glass. In this

scenario, we could view our memory as a more complete sum of parts rather than relying on the parts to create a fractured whole.

A unique (and antique I'm afraid) 'sum of the parts' can be seen in old, fold-out paper road maps used by pre-Google Maps travelers. Here one could combine Kandel's neural map with Kukushkin and Carew's (2017) window framework and form one's own diagram for accessing memory. Within this particular framework (a visually textured one at that) it is easier to think of memory fragments as the small rural towns and farm intersections that dot the geographic landscape. Back country roads form the neural (rural?) links and in some way help make sense of the connections between communities (events and experiences). Here the paper map functions as a physical representation of virtual memory, "an idealized abstraction of the storage resources that are actually available on a given machine" (Haldar and Aravind, 2010). The paper map, as a storage device machine, organizes the memories into a gridded framework where one can connect the smaller to the larger, can evaluate scale and proportion relative to time and distance and, in reference to the notion of text discussed earlier, create paragraphs out of well-formed sentences using precisely chosen words.

Returning to a more physical interpretation of the window system analogy, one could layer on the concept of Alberti's window (Alberti, 1991). To capture and hopefully more accurately depict the depth of what is beyond (a memory), one utilizes the window's glazing and frame. It is a matter of argument whether we 'see' what is in the frame or on the other side of the frame. I suggest memory is relative to where we store it: as it exists (beyond the frame) or as we perceive it (within the frame). Alberti would have us look out, capturing what is seen through the window. But as we seek to memorialize a memory, perhaps one's drawing acts, the marks, are to record what is within the window rather than what is on the other side. Given the transparency of most glazing, it seems we must see with greater clarity what cannot be seen.

...we look at drawing as a mediating representation that derives from experiences other than visual perception. We look more closely at drawing as an alternative means to imitate experience and to conceive realism... We focus on those drawings that do not attempt to trace the visible, but rather seek to experience what is not visible – the invisible (Adams, 2007).

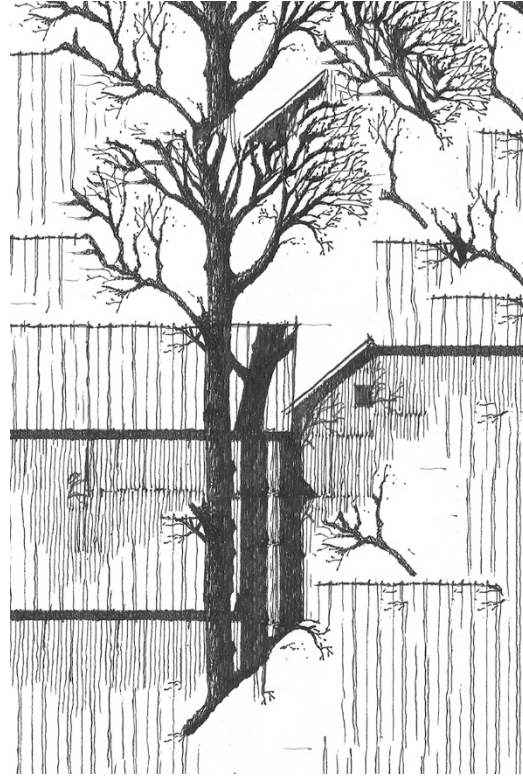


Figure 4. down the road in pieces. Image by author, 2016.

The text that supplements my drawing explorations merely attempts to fill in the gaps between pen marks. Text is the paint on the window frame, the coating on the glazing. It decorates my memories and describes the system in which they are held. It is hard to speak ink, especially when one is compelled to record a memory in a viscerally palpable manner. Drawing can become a unique act of reclamation - an attempt to recover the ephemeral visual layers of a past connected to the soul of a place we once occupied. A simple drawing of a simple rural building can lend a much needed measure of high touch in a world increasingly defined by high tech. It is my way of reclaiming actual memory rather than merely transferring it virtually from one place to another. My sketches of rural structures are backgrounds to my own adult transience. I see similar places now but only from a distance and always in motion. I am drawing with words and pictures, literally and figuratively, on my past to define a measure of my present.

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