Field School on the Frame

*Itineraries, Interpretation, and Intervention in the American West*

University of Southern California School of Architecture
Architecture 580, 4 units, Summer 2019 Semester, June 3rd – July 1st

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*The message [the landscape] conveys lies not in the object itself, but in its interpretation in cultural terms, in the cultural context through the prism of which we see the landscape and learn to understand it.*

—Lucius Burckhardt, *Landscape Development and Structure of Society*

*The investigation of a specific site is a matter of exacting concepts out of existing sense-data through direct perceptions... One does not impose, but rather expose the site... The unknown areas of sites can best be explored by artists.*

—Robert Smithson, as quoted in *The Lure of the Local*, by Lucy Lippard
There is good reading on the land, first-hand reading, involving no symbols. The records are written in forests, in fencerows, in bogs, in playgrounds, in pastures, in gardens, in canyons, in tree rings. The records were made by sun and shade, by wind, rain, and fire, by time; and by animals. As we read what is written on the land, finding accounts of the past, predictions of the future, and comments on the present, we discover that there are many interwoven strands to each story, offering several possible interpretations.

—May Theilgaard Watts, *Reading the Landscape of America*

INTRODUCTION

The American landscape as a whole can be thought of as a cultural inscription, that can be read to better understand who we are, and what we are doing, our culture and society. Learning how to read this text, these landscapes, is critical for anyone who occupies them, and especially useful for landscape architects and artists working in the public sphere, and, of course, with landscapes specifically.

When we “read” the landscape, we inevitably do so through various “frames”—explicit and implicit; physical and metaphysical—that form and inform our experience of whatever landscape subject we encounter and explore. In addition to our own perceptual machinery and the given architecture of the landscape itself, these frames include human interventions and instruments that shape and can enhance our experience. For instance, the course of signed path in a National Park, and Instagram posts of a National Park, each have a powerful hand in how we experience and ultimately know a landscape. Both function as critical and often unrecognized frames for our embodied reading of the landscape.

*Field School on the Frame*, will focus on these anthropogenic frames broadly, with landscapes of the American West serving as their living subjects and the course’s secondary focus. The course will study and practice diverse modes of reading, sensing, and understanding a range of physical landscapes in Utah, Nevada, and California. Through the field study and practice of itineraries, interpretation, and intervention, students will unearth and understand the frame’s role in defining our embodied relations with our environment, and gain fluency in its deployment. Such skills are essential in nearly any outdoor art or architecture project. Students will also benefit from an expert, on-the-ground, survey of seminal (and overlooked) landscapes in the American West.

Though designed to appeal primarily to landscape architecture, architecture, and arts students, the class is open to and appropriate for all students in (or interested) the arts, or landscape generally. The course is taught by one teacher in landscape architecture and in consultation with one in fine arts. Final enrollment is limited based on the number of vehicles and drivers.

The Frame & Landscape Architecture and Art

…it [A Web of White Gravel Paths Surrounding Water Storage Tanks, 1967] is a two-dimensional image to be viewed from the air and a three-dimensional thing to stand or walk on to view the airport on the ground. This ‘image/platform’ shuttles back and forth between these two functions, depending on one’s position in relation to it.

—Ann Reynolds, *Robert Smithson: Learning from New Jersey and Elsewhere*

Our experiences and understandings of landscapes are shaped by a variety of frames—the guided tour, the interpretive viewing device, the trail marker and sign, the museum or institution, the reassurance of a GPS satellite locating you, Instagram—each is a kind of frame. The frame focuses and informs our understanding of whatever is “inside” of it—even in the outdoors. In
landscapes, frames are both physical interventions that we encounter or navigate, or more abstract and portable conditioners, such as contrived itineraries, presented information, and technical practices of measurement. Such frames are often the central work of art, architecture, and landscape architecture practices. In most contemporary landscape projects—and particularly in “natural” or cultural landscapes—the existing landscape condition is treated as a subject in and of itself, that art practices seek to frame (or, in some cases, be framed by). This practice of framing is often the purpose of our interventions and inevitably lies at the center of our practice. Furthermore, how we intervene is, of course, critically influenced by previous frames. The frame both is and precedes our interventions. Studying the frame teaches us both about the landscape subject itself, as well as how our interventions effect and become part of it.

**Ground truth**

Even among an unending proliferation of new modes of interfacing, sensing, and knowing landscapes, such as Google Earth and virtual reality, the embodied experience of *being there*, on the ground, remains the most critical. This, the shared space of the earth, is physically and metaphorically what unites us humans, so we begin our investigation into a landscape from the ground up. Onsite engagement, starting with the basic practice of extended critical observation through looking and listening, followed by observation enhanced by external tools, reveals physical and phenomenological qualities that cannot be fully grasped through other methodologies. The phrase *ground truth* is testament to this. It was first used to describe the field work necessary to calibrate remote satellite sensing to the ground “truth” that only a human—on the ground—could effectively ascertain. Remote and virtual modes of “experiencing” a landscape have not eroded the significance of the embodied outdoor experience; rather they have collaborated with it to change its value, meaning, and consequence.

It also happens that this experience remains a primary (if not the) concern of art, architecture, and landscape architecture. Advanced expertise in the embodied experience of being there and the consequences of such is fundamental and increasingly exclusive to these practices.

**The American West**

The landscape of the American West remains a rich, influential, and attractive subject of study and tourism. It is a powerful and mysterious land, imbued by complex issues, cultural interpretations, and mythologies. Topics for discussion include: Land Art, land ownership, tourism, film, writing, mining and industry, wilderness, conservation, geology, time, site-specificity, scale, histories, and futures.

*Sites include:*

Alabama Hills,
Bingham Copper Pit,
Bonneville Salt Flats,
Capitol Reef National Park,
Center for Land Use Interpretation Wendover/Wendover Air Base,
*Double Negative* by Michael Heizer,
Epicenter, Green River,
Goblin Valley State Park,
Golden Spike National Monument,
Great Salt Lake,
Hoover Dam,
Owens Lake,  
*Spiral Jetty* by Robert Smithson,  
*Sun Tunnels* by Nancy Holt.

While the extremities of the American West provide a useful and alluring subject and setting to study and crystalize practices, the approaches covered in this course are not specific to any site or region; they can be applied to any landscape, urban or rural.

THE COURSE

This course engenders a multifaceted understanding of our relationship to landscape and includes:

1. an initial introduction into a range of modes of reading, sensing, and knowing physical landscapes in pre-trip lecture and seminar formats, with opportunities for student discussion

2. an initial introduction into key examples of interpretations and interventions in the American West, including Land Art, engineering, industry, waste, and other land uses, in pre-trip lecture and seminar formats, with opportunities for student discussion

3. once in the field, students learn about projects and places through a combination of on-site observation and exercises, lectures and presentations, and reflective writing

4. daily writing sessions are scheduled for students to record their thoughts, observations, and experiences on-site

5. a final project will be required, informed by the time in the field, and adapted to individual student backgrounds and interests.

SCHEDULE

Preparation: 3 days, June 3, 4, 7  
Travel and field studies: 10 days, June 10 to 19  
Post-reflective: 2 days, June 21 and July 1 (Final Review)  
Final project submission: 4 weeks after start of class, July 1

Preparation

Meeting 1 — introductions, Guided Tour and Text assignment introduction, Itineraries and Interpretation lecture (Tang), “Look and Listen” field exercise and discussion

Meeting 2 — Measurement and Intervention lecture (Robinson), measurement field exercise

Meeting 3 — travel and gear prep, Guided Tour and Text draft share

Travel

The class will travel for 10 days, throughout Utah, Nevada, and California. The class will travel in school-provided vehicles, driven by the instructors. Lodging (provided) will vary between campgrounds, motels, and research stations. Students will be expected to have a tent, sleeping bag, sleeping pad, personal mess kit, and appropriate clothing for early summer outdoor
cAMPING. Camping equipment rentals from USC Outdoor Adventure Rentals are available and will be reimbursed. [https://sait.usc.edu/recsports/fitness-and-recreation/oar/](https://sait.usc.edu/recsports/fitness-and-recreation/oar/). Students need not have any experience camping previously, but must be willing to sleep in a tent and camp. It will be fun and we will alternate between camping and more traditional lodging! Food and other equipment will be coordinated prior to departure. Please feel free to contact the instructors with any questions or concerns about this part of the class.

Time will be split between site visits, travel, lodging and meals, and reflection / worktime.

**Costs**

Some travel and trip costs are covered by the class’s tuition. These include speaker fees, various admittance fees, car rental & gas, and some camping equipment rentals. Day to day food, lodging costs, and personal supplies/equipment are not covered by the class.

Expected student costs outside of food and other personal sundries are the following:

- Motel in Salt Lake City: ~$99-150 (could be shared with another student)
- Daily food and water for a 10 day trip: Variable (we will visit grocery stories and carry a camp kitchen). In some locations, optional dining (restaurant, cafe, etc.) will be offered.
- Campground Fees: ~$10-20 total (1-2 campsites may require a small fee)

**Post-reflective**

The class will meet twice following the field trip, for a discussion and a final review. During the time between the end of travel and the final review students will continue to share field impressions with the entire class remotely.

**Class & Travel Itinerary** (subject to change):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Sites (Lead Instructor)</th>
<th>Lodging Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prep 1</td>
<td>6/3</td>
<td>USC Campus, Lecture &amp; Field Workshop (Tang)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prep 2</td>
<td>6/4</td>
<td>USC Campus, Lecture &amp; Field Workshop (Robinson)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prep 3</td>
<td>6/7</td>
<td>USC Campus, Prep for Trip</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>6/10</td>
<td>Hoover Dam (Robinson), <strong>Double Negative (Tang)</strong></td>
<td>Camp near Double Negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>6/11</td>
<td>Capitol Reef, Green River (Robinson)</td>
<td>Camp / Motel in Green River</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>6/12</td>
<td>Epicenter, Powell Museum, Goblin Valley (Tang)</td>
<td>Camp at Goblin Valley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>6/13</td>
<td>Bingham Pit, Great Salt Lake State Park (Robinson)</td>
<td><strong>Motel</strong> near Salt Lake City</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>6/14</td>
<td>ATK Rockets (Tang), Golden Spike (Tang), <strong>Spiral Jetty (Robinson + Tang)</strong></td>
<td>Camp near Spiral Jetty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>6/15</td>
<td><strong>Sun Tunnels (Tang)</strong>, CLUI Wendover (Tang)</td>
<td>Camp/Residence at CLUI Wendover</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>6/16</td>
<td>Wendover (tour area, work on projects)</td>
<td>Camp/Residence at CLUI Wendover</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>6/17</td>
<td>Wendover (work on projects)</td>
<td>Camp/Residence at CLUI Wendover</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. **Field Exercises and Guided Itineraries**
   The class will participate in and conduct tours, field exercises, and site itineraries throughout the American West.

2. **Lectures**
   The instructors will each present a lecture prior to departure and on the field trip. There will also be at least one guest lecture/tour during the field trip, schedule allowing.

3. **Readings**
   Readings selected from the bibliography will be assigned before the trip. Additional readings will be played from audio recordings during travel time.

4. **Class Discussion**
   Class discussions will be conducted following each day of site visits.

5. **Logbook**
   Students will be required to keep a logbook of the trip.

6. **Impression Media Sharing**
   Students will collectively share their impressions internally and on a group social media account.

7. **Film Projection**
   Films will be shared throughout the field trip at camp, technology allowing.

8. **Collective Field & Camp Practices**
   At times, students and faculty will work together when in the field and while camping. In the field we will conduct some group exercises. In camp, we will share meals and tasks to ensure a successful, nourishing, and comfortable experience. Please contact the instructors if you have any questions about this aspect of the course.

**ASSIGNMENTS**

**Guided Tour and Text Assignment**
Prior to the field trip each student will develop a guided tour/itinerary of an assigned site, accompanied by a short text. Upon arrival on the site each student will conduct their tour. In addition to the tour itinerary and short text the final assignment submission will include a reflection on the tour and the actual site experience.

- Itinerary, 1 page
- Itinerary site description, 150-200 words
Logbook and Post-Trip Reflections

Students will be required to keep a logbook/journal of the trip with a minimum of one entry per day. Following the completion of the trip, students will share multiple excerpts from their logbook with the class (with an accompanying photograph for each excerpt). A selection of these will be shared on a public social media account.

Frame Final Assignment

Building on their Guided Tour assignment each student will develop a “frame” to facilitate an interpretative experience, as informed by field research. In general this will take one of two formats: either a site itinerary composed in a portable printed format or a proposal for a physical intervention on the site. It may take many other forms as well; it is purposefully open-ended to accommodate different student backgrounds and interests. Project proposals must therefore be reviewed and pre-approved by the instructors to ensure appropriate academic integrity and workload (during the trip).

All projects must include the following:
- A final “frame” object, drawing(s), written work, and/or itinerary.
- A nuanced (and appropriate) reading of the landscape subject, represented in various formats.
- A brief text (250-500 words) summarizing approach and intended outcome.

The final assignment will be presented to the class in a final review and may be exhibited at a later time.

REQUIRED READINGS

- Lucy Lippard, On the Beaten Track: Tourism, Art, and Place, 1999 (excerpt).

AUDIOBOOKS


**SUGGESTED READINGS**

The Center for Land Use Interpretation, *Overlook*, 2006.


**GRADING**

Final grade evaluations for this class will be based on the following breakdown:

- Active participation in preparation, 5%
- Active participation in travel days, 10%
- Guided Tour and Text assignment, 25%
- Logbook, readings, and post-trip reflections, 15%
- Frame final assignment, 45%

**OTHER INFORMATION**

**Academic Conduct**

Plagiarism – presenting someone else’s ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in *SCampus* in Section 11, *Behavior Violating University Standards* [https://scampus.usc.edu/1100-behavior-violating-university-standards-and-appropriate-sanctions](https://scampus.usc.edu/1100-behavior-violating-university-standards-and-appropriate-sanctions). Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in *SCampus* and university policies on scientific misconduct, [http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct](http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct).

Discrimination, sexual assault, and harassment are not tolerated by the university. You are encouraged to report any incidents to the *Office of Equity and Diversity* [http://equity.usc.edu](http://equity.usc.edu) or to the *Department of Public Safety* [http://adminopsnet.usc.edu/department/department-public-safety](http://adminopsnet.usc.edu/department/department-public-safety). This is important for the safety of the whole USC community. Another member of the university community – such as a friend, classmate, advisor, or faculty member – can help initiate the report, or can initiate the report on behalf of another person. *The Center for Women and Men* [http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/cwm/](http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/cwm/) provides 24/7 confidential support, and the sexual assault resource center webpage [http://sarc.usc.edu](http://sarc.usc.edu) describes reporting options and other resources.

**Support Systems**

A number of USC’s schools provide support for students who need help with scholarly writing. Check with your advisor or program staff to find out more. Students whose primary language is not English should check with the *American Language Institute* [http://dornsife.usc.edu/ali](http://dornsife.usc.edu/ali), which sponsors courses and workshops specifically for international graduate students. *The Office of Disability Services and Programs* [http://sait.usc.edu/academicsupport/centerprograms/dsp/home_index.html](http://sait.usc.edu/academicsupport/centerprograms/dsp/home_index.html) provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange the relevant accommodations. If an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible, *USC Emergency Information* [http://emergency.usc.edu](http://emergency.usc.edu) will provide safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued by means of blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technology.