

USC School of Architecture

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

Instructor: Alexander Robinson, Assistant Professor, School of Architecture,
Landscape Architecture + Urbanism Program
Email: alexander.robinson@usc.edu

With: Aurora Tang, Center for Land Use Interpretation, independent curator
Email: aurora@clui.org



Sun Tunnels, Nancy Holt, 1973-1976, Great Basin Desert, Utah. © Holt/Smithson Foundation and Dia Art Foundation. CLUI photo.

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 in) 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,

Manzanar National Historic Site,
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; syllabus; logistics; lecture; field exercise and discussion

Meeting 2 — lecture; field exercise and discussion; field methods/tools brainstorm

Meeting 3 — travel and gear prep; field methods follow-up

Travel

The class will travel for 10 days, throughout Utah, Nevada, and California. The class will travel in school-provided vehicles. 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 <https://sait.usc.edu/recsports/fitness-and-recreation/oar/>. Students need not have any previous experience camping, 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 / work time.

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 stores and carry a camp kitchen). In some locations, optional dining (restaurant, cafe, etc.) will be offered.
- Camping equipment rentals from USC OAR for 10 days (if eq. is needed): ~\$80 (\$35 for tent, \$25 for sleeping back, \$20 for sleeping pad)
http://sait.usc.edu/recsports/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/OAR-Price_2018.2019.pdf
- 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):

Day	Date	Sites (bold: major sites)	Lodging Type
Prep 1	6/3	USC Campus, Lecture & Field Workshop	N/A
Prep 2	6/4	USC Campus, Lecture & Field Workshop	N/A
Prep 3	6/7	USC Campus, Prep for Trip	N/A
1	6/10	Hoover Dam, Double Negative	Camp near Double Negative
2	6/11	Capitol Reef, Green River	Camp in Green River
3	6/12	Epicenter, Powell Museum, Goblin Valley	Camp in Green River
4	6/13	Bingham Pit, Great Salt Lake State Park	Motel near Salt Lake City
5	6/14	ATK Rockets, Golden Spike, Spiral Jetty	Camp near Spiral Jetty
6	6/15	Sun Tunnels , CLUI Wendover	Camp/Residence at CLUI Wendover
7	6/16	Wendover, Bonneville Salt Flats	Camp/Residence at CLUI Wendover
8	6/17	Wendover (guest lecture: Steven Chodoriwsky)	Camp/Residence at CLUI Wendover
9	6/18	Manzanar, Alabama Hills	Camp at Alabama Hills

10	6/19	Owens Lake , CLUI Swansea, Fossil Falls	N/A
Post 1	6/24	USC Campus	N/A
Post 2	7/1	USC Campus (Final Review)	N/A

METHODOLOGIES

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 (4). 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.

GENERAL ASSIGNMENTS

Required Readings & Discussion

All students are expected to read and discuss all required readings. Each student will be assigned two texts that they are responsible for summarizing and discussing in relation to the field trip, at times staggered throughout the field trip.

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, and should include a site report for major sites visited. Site reports should include: site name, duration of visit, observations, method(s) of engagement, and supplemental materials (ie

drawing, map, photo, video, audio—which can be uploaded and included with the final logbook submission).

ASSIGNMENTS FOR ASSIGNED SITE

Each student will be assigned one of twelve sites we will visit during the trip. This site be the focus of the following two assignments.

Audio Introduction/Timeline & Questions

Prior to arrival at their assigned site each student will prepare and present a two minute audio introduction of the assigned site, in the form of a timeline. (What kind of timeline is interesting for this site? When does it start and end? What events and moments are included/excluded? You can be creative/imaginative about what and what kind of “events” on and off site are included!) These audio introductions are to be submitted as digital audio files/cell phone recordings, and will be played to the class in the vehicles before arriving at the site. A written transcript is due at the final review.

Additionally, come prepared with 3 questions about the site, to pose to the class after the visit.

Frame Final Assignment

Building on their Audio Introduction assignment, each student will develop a physical “frame” to facilitate an interpretative experience, for the current owner/caretaker—the client. This physical intervention will be informed by on and off-site research into the site, its current conditions, and the client’s needs. A revision (or more) of what the frame is now. In general the intervention will take the form of on-site tourist infrastructure, elements, or media (ie visitor center display, scenic overlook, or interpretive walking trail—though it may take many other physical 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:

1. A brief text (250-500 words) describing the intervention, its approach, and intending outcome. Address this text to the client in a formal letter.
2. A representation of the existing frame(s) onsite—this can take any form, but should demonstrate a thorough understanding of the site, its owner/caretaker, its current conditions and needs, and ways it is experienced. Also consider, what is the *nonsite* of the site outside of itself? This may serve as a critique and/or celebration of the existing frame conditions.

Representation references (if needed):

Hockney’s “Joiners”, e.g. *Pearblossom Highway, 11th–18th April 1986 & Seven Yorkshire Landscapes*

Lutsky & Burkholders’ drawings from “Curious Methods” <https://placesjournal.org/article/curious-methods/> (image grids, splices, collage, etc.)

Guy Debord *Derive* “Psychogeography” Maps

Mathur & Da Cunha drawings

Christo drawings (drawing over photographs, multiple formats)

Cezanne landscape drawings (selective illustration of site features)

Robert Smithson drawings (Movie Treatment for Spiral Jetty)

Annotated movie storyboard

A narrative description / a list / logbook (Hebdige)
etc.

3. A map identifying the location of the intervention in relation to the physical site, with accompanying itinerary, represented visually (on the map) and with a written description. Consider whether map is a communication device (to the general public) or for the purpose of presenting your proposal to the client.
4. Detailed representation/description of the intervention construction and materials (in any format). Must include critical dimensions.
5. Mock-up of communication materials that will be used to convey the intervention and site to visitors (e.g. any signs, placards, brochures, etc.). Copy requirements to be discussed with instructors.
6. Account of the experiential encounter—this can be a perspectival view, drawing, image, text, or another format.

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

REQUIRED READINGS

Simon Barnes, *The Meaning of Birds*, 2018 (excerpt), 262-279.

Robert M. Bednar, "Being Here, Looking There." *Observation Points: The Visual Poetics of National Parks*, edited by Thomas Patin, 2012, 1-28.

William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature." *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, edited by William Cronon, 1995, 69-90.

Vittoria Di Palma, "Is Landscape Painting." *Is Landscape...? Essays on the Identity of Landscape*, edited by Gareth Doherty and Charles Waldheim, 2015, 45-92.

Christophe Girot, "Four Trace Concepts in Landscape Architecture." *Recovering Landscape: Essays in Contemporary Landscape Architecture*, edited by James Corner, 1999.

Dick Hebdige, "Reeling in Utah: The Travel Log Trilogy," *East of Borneo*, 2011.

Nancy Holt, "Sun Tunnels," *Artforum*, 1977, 32-37.

Jennifer K. Ladino, "Mountains, Monuments, and other Matter: Environmental Affects on Manzanar," *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 6, 2015, 131-157.

Lucy Lippard, *On the Beaten Track: Tourism, Art, and Place*, 1999 (excerpt), 2-11, 135-152.

Shannon Mattern, "Infrastructural Tourism," *Places Journal*, July 2013.

Henrik Schultz, "Designing large-scale landscapes through walking," *Journal of Landscape Architecture*, 9:2, 2014, 6-15.

Robert Smithson, *The Collected Writings*, edited by Jack Flam, 1996 (excerpt), 68-77, 143-153.

John Stilgoe, *Outside Lies Magic: Regaining History and Awareness in Everyday Places*, 1998 (excerpt), 1-19.

Alena Williams (ed.), *Nancy Holt: Sightlines*, 2015 (excerpt), 18-36.

AUDIOBOOKS

- Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness*, 1968 (excerpt).
- J. G. Ballard, *The Complete Stories of J. G. Ballard*, 2010 (excerpt).
- John McPhee, *Basin and Range: Annals of the Former World (Volume 1)*, 1982 (excerpt).
- Jenny Odell, *How to Do Nothing*, 2019 (excerpt).
- Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing*, 1986 (excerpt).
- Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, 2005 (excerpt).
- Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*, 2000 (excerpt).
- Wallace Stegner, *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: John Wesley Powell and the Second Opening of the West*, 1953 (excerpt).

SUGGESTED READINGS

- Reyner Banham, *Scenes in America Deserta*, 1982.
- Kelly Baum, "On the Road," *New Jersey as Non-Site*, 2013, 11-55.
- Julia Bryan-Wilson, "Building a Marker of Nuclear Warning." *Monuments and Memory, Made and Unmade*, edited by Margaret Olin and Robert Nelson, 2003.
- Lucius Burckhardt, *Why is Landscape Beautiful? The Science of Strollology*, edited by Markus Ritter and Margrit Schmitz, 2015 (excerpt).
- Lucius Burckhardt, *Lucius Burckhardt Writings: Rethinking Man-Made Environments. Politics, Landscape & Design*, edited by Jesko Fezer and Martin Schmitz, 2012.
- Francesco Careri, *Walkscapes: Walking as an Aesthetic Practice*, 2017.
- The Center for Land Use Interpretation, *Overlook*, 2006.
- James Corner, *Taking Measures: Across the American Landscape*, 1996.
- Dennis Cosgrove, *Apollo's Eye: A Cartographic Genealogy of the Earth in the Western Imagination*, 2003.
- Vittoria Di Palma, "Zoom: Google Earth and Global Intimacy," 2009.
- Diedrich Diederichsen and Anselm Franke (eds.), *The Whole Earth California and the Disappearance of the Outside*, 2013.
- William L. Fox, *Playa Works: The Myth of the Empty*, 2002.
- William L. Fox, *The Void, the Sign, and the Grid*, 2000.
- Martin Hogue, "The Site as Project," *Journal of Architectural Education*, 57:3, 2004, 54-61.
- John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *A Sense of Place, a Sense of Time*, 1994.
- John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *Landscape In Sight: Looking at America*, edited by Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, 1997.
- Katherine Jenkins, "Field exercises," *Journal of Landscape Architecture*, Volume 13, 2018.
- Philipp Kaiser and Miwon Kwon (eds.), *Ends of the Earth: Land Art to 1974*, 2012.
- Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another*, 2002.

Karl Kullmann, "The Satellites' Progeny: Digital Chorography in the Age of Drone Vision by," *Forty-Five*, February 2017.

Pamela M. Lee, *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960s*, 2004.

Lucy Lippard, *Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory*, 1983.

Hikmet Loe, *The Spiral Jetty Encyclo*, 2017.

Karen Lutsky and Sean Burkholder, "Curious Methods," *Places Journal*, May 2017.

Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*, 1989.

Geoff Manaugh, *Landscape Futures: Instruments, Devices and Architectural Interventions*, 2013.

John May, "The Logic of the Managerial Surface," *Praxis 13: Eco-Logics*, 2014.

Shannon Mattern, "Cloud and Field," *Places Journal*, August 2016.

Jane McFadden, *Walter de Maria: Meaningless Work*, 2016.

W. J. T. Mitchell (ed.), *Landscape and Power*, 1994.

Laurie Olin, "Form, Meaning, and Expression in Landscape Architecture," 1988.

Pauline Oliveros, *Deep Listening: A Composer's Sound Practice*, 2005.

Thomas Patin (ed.), *Observation Points: The Visual Poetics of National Parks*, 2012.

Barbara Pichler and Claudio Slanar (eds.), *James Benning*, 2007.

Alexander Robinson, *The Spoils of Dust: Reinventing the Lake that Made Los Angeles*, 2018.

Anne Whiston Spurr, *The Language of Landscape*, 2000.

Freeman Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, 1957.

Marc Treib, "Must Landscapes Mean?" *Landscape Journal*, 1995, 47-62.

May Theilgaard Watts, *Reading the Landscape of America*, 1975.

Lawrence Weschler, *Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees: a Life of Contemporary Artist Robert Irwin*, 1982.

Sabine Wilke, "How German is the American West?" *Observation Points: The Visual Poetics of National Parks*, edited by Thomas Patin, 2012, 100-118.

GRADING

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

Participation, 10%

Required Reading & Discussion, 10%

Audio Introduction/Timeline & Questions, 20%

Logbook 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>. 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>.

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> or to the *Department of Public Safety* <http://adminopsnet.usc.edu/departments/departments-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/> provides 24/7 confidential support, and the sexual assault resource center webpage <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>, 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 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> will provide safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued by means of blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technology.