Rene Salas

Stewardship of Lines: Drawing as a Humanistic Tradition in Architecture

La custodia del significado: El dibujo como tradición humanística en la arquitectura

Guardiões do significado: O desenho como tradição humanista na arquitetura

Abstract | **Resumen** | **Resumo**

Drawing has long been a foundational practice within the humanistic tradition of architecture. Beyond its role as a means of representation, drawing is a medium through which architects cultivate judgment, intuition, and empathy. Through the act of tracing lines, architects engage in a form of thinking that unfolds over time, allowing ideas to be explored, questioned, and refined. This process parallels traditions of architectural craft, where knowledge emerges through attentive making rather than instantaneous production. As digital tools and artificial intelligence generate architectural imagery with increasing speed and precision, the culture of drawing risks being displaced by less reflective processes of selection. This article examines drawing as a discipline that shapes architectural cognition, preserves cultural memory, and supports meaningful dialogue between architect, craftsperson, and client.

El dibujo ha sido durante mucho tiempo una práctica fundamental dentro de la tradición humanística de la arquitectura. Más allá de su función como medio de representación, constituye un instrumento a través del cual los arquitectos desarrollan el juicio, la intuición y la empatía. Al trazar líneas, el arquitecto participa en una forma de pensamiento que se despliega en el tiempo y permite explorar, cuestionar y depurar las ideas. Este proceso guarda relación con las tradiciones de los oficios de la construcción, en las que el conocimiento surge de una práctica atenta, más que de una producción instantánea. A medida que las herramientas digitales y la inteligencia artificial generan imágenes arquitectónicas con una rapidez y una precisión cada vez mayores, la cultura del dibujo corre el riesgo de verse desplazada por procesos de selección menos reflexivos. Este artículo revisa el dibujo como una disciplina que configura el pensamiento arquitectónico, preserva la memoria cultural y favorece un diálogo significativo entre arquitectos, artesanos y clientes.

Há muito tempo que o desenho tem sido uma prática fundamental no âmbito da tradição humanista da arquitetura. Para além do seu papel como meio de representação, o desenho é um meio através do qual os arquitetos cultivam o discernimento, a intuição e a empatia. Através do ato de traçar linhas, os arquitetos envolvem-se numa forma de pensamento que se desenvolve ao longo do tempo, permitindo que as ideias sejam exploradas, questionadas e aperfeiçoadas. Este processo está em consonância com os saberes tradicionais das práticas arquitetónicas, onde o conhecimento surge através da criação atenta, em vez da produção instantânea. À medida que as ferramentas digitais e a inteligência artificial geram imagens arquitetónicas com velocidade e precisão crescentes, a cultura do desenho corre o risco de ser substituída por processos de seleção menos reflexivos. Este artigo examina o desenho como uma disciplina que molda a cognição arquitetónica, preserva a memória cultural e apoia um diálogo significativo entre o arquiteto, o artesão e o cliente.

Drawing and Meaning in Architecture

Architecture has traditionally depended upon drawing as the means through which buildings come into being, as it still does at Michael Imber Architects. Drawing is often misunderstood as a mere tool of representation, a way to depict ideas already conceived. In reality, it is a discipline through which architects think and feel their way toward the realization of architecture. Through drawing, we cultivate intuitions and shape spaces that resonate with place, culture, and memory.

Today this humanistic practice faces uncertainty. The advent of digital modeling and artificial intelligence has made it possible to generate architectural images with remarkable speed and sophistication. In many cases, these technologies produce visualizations that appear complete before an architect has fully reflected on what is involved. The issue is not technological progress itself, as architecture has always evolved with new tools, but what may be lost if drawing as a culture disappears from our practice, of which it has long been an intellectual and emotional mainstay.

Drawing in the Humanistic Tradition

The relationship between drawing and architectural thinking goes far back. In the writings of Vitruvius and of Renaissance thinkers such as Leon Battista Alberti, architecture was seen not merely as design for construction but as an intellectual art grounded in proportion, judgment, and reflection.

Alberti described architecture as existing first in the realm of *lineamenta*—lines conceived in the mind prior to materiality. These lines, more than diagrams of future buildings, were the medium through which architects explored form, proportion, and order. Drawing was therefore not mere illustration but the arena in which architecture emerged.

In this tradition, drawing had ethical significance. Before any erection of stone or timber, the architect was responsible for thinking through the consequences of design. Drawing forced architects to deliberate and reconsider. The lines on paper made imagination accountable, and drawing was a discipline of thought.

A precise yet soft elevation stimulating the imagination (Michael Imber)





Line, Plane, Form, Memory, Reflection. St. Pauls II (Alexander Ford)

Drawing as Thinking

When architects draw, the process often reveals new ideas. One line leads to another, a proportion invites adjustment, a form begins to suggest a spatial experience not initially intended. The hand moves, the eye evaluates, the mind responds.

For practicing architects, the feedback loop between hand, eye, and mind shapes a special form of cognition. Drawing slows thought just enough to allow reflection. Hesitations appear in the line, erasures reveal doubts, and variations accumulate until an idea takes form. The drawing becomes a field of inquiry rather than a statement.

Unlike digital commands that produce immediate output, drawing allows a productive delay between intention and outcome in which architectural thinking thrives. The architect may ask: Is this proportion too heavy? Does this opening feel generous, or too restrained? Is this gesture necessary, or merely decorative?

Through drawing, architects learn to recognize subtle differences in scale, rhythm, and spatial tension. Such distinctions cannot easily be reduced to formulas, and emerge from repeated observation and correction. Drawing trains perception, not just recording but also cultivating thought, while facilitating self-discovery.



Materials and form existing and imagined (Michael Imber)

Time and Judgment

Drawing allows time to architectural thinking, as a sketch unfolds gradually, requiring care and patience. As it evolves, the architect revisits earlier decisions in the light of new insights, which prompts revision.

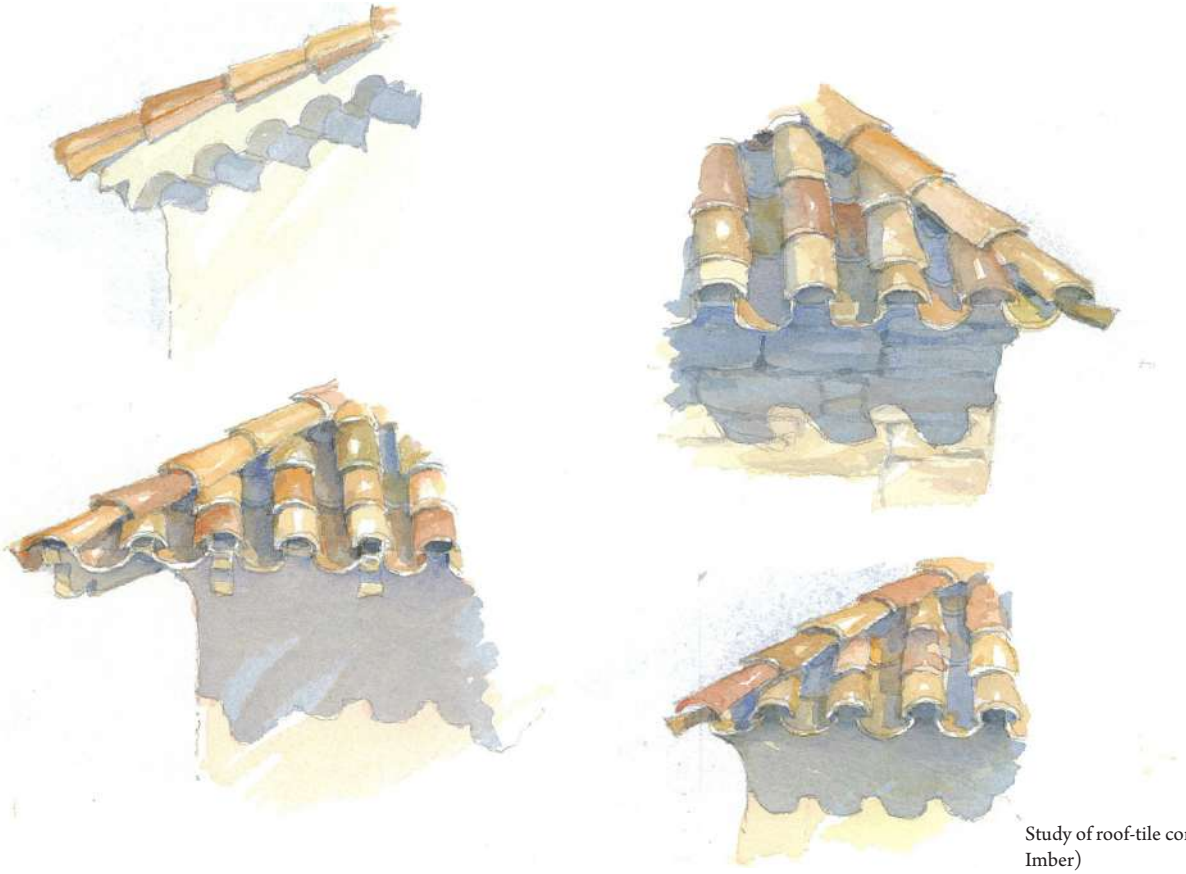
This slowness is not a limitation; it is a source of intellectual discipline. Architectural judgment develops through repetition, through the continual adjustment of lines, proportions, and spatial relationships, with each drawing being an opportunity to judge better.

Contemporary technologies often prioritize speed. Images can be produced instantly, in endless variations and with minimal effort. While this can be useful, it may compress the reflective moments that drawing naturally involves. When ideas appear fully formed without the time required to think them through, we lose opportunities to develop judgment. So the value of drawing lies precisely in its resistance to immediacy, setting a gentle pace of thinking that allows ideas to mature.

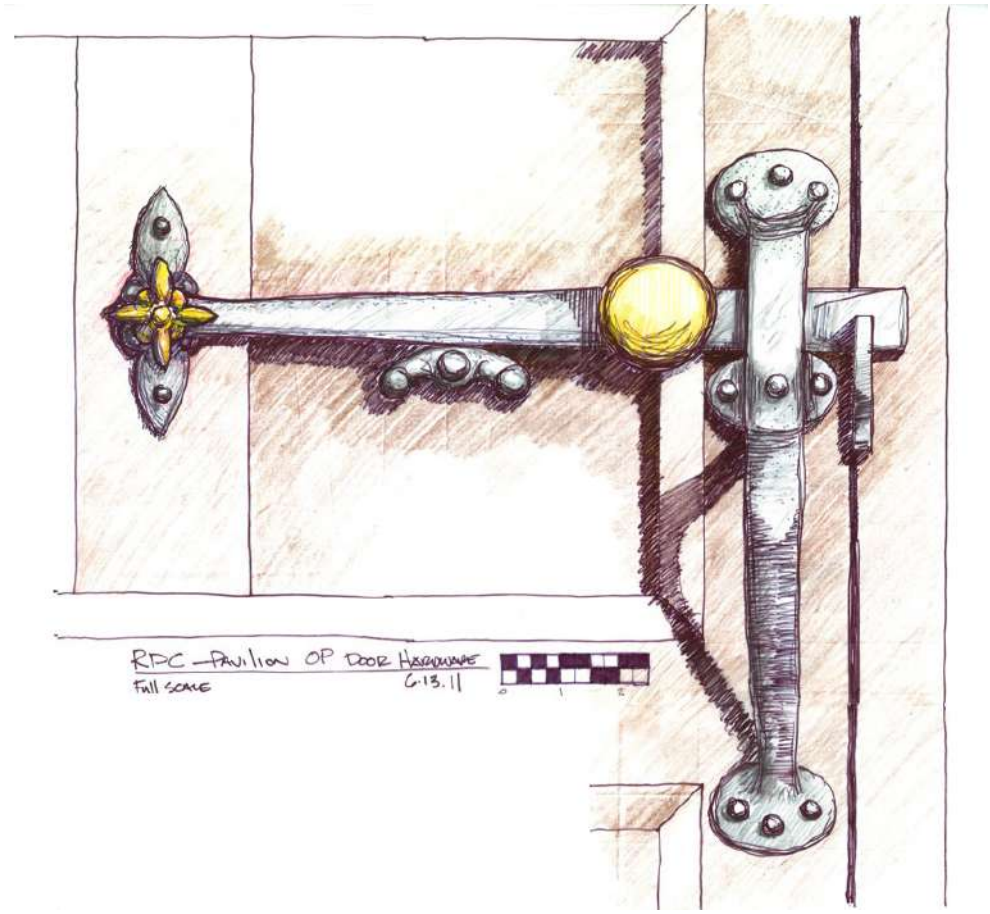
Drawing and Craft

The pace of drawing parallels that of another architectural tradition: craft. Craftspeople shaping stone or carving wood do not so much execute specifications as engage in a conversation with materials, as tools meet resistance, surfaces reveal unexpected qualities, and gestures require adjustment. A carpenter learns the behavior of wood by cutting it, as skill develops through experience.

Drawing operates in a similar way. Paper, scale, and lines offer their own resistance. The hand presses firmly or gently, crosses the page quickly or slowly, and pauses. A thick pen requires thinking at a different scale than a fine one, and watercolors and charcoal evoke different qualities of space than a fountain pen. The small decisions involved cultivate know-how.



Study of roof-tile corners (Michael Imber)



Door hardware (Brandan Moss)

Thus drawing is the craft of architectural thought, shaping ideas like materials. And while drawings guide construction, they do not eliminate the need for interpretation. The most meaningful architecture often emerges when drawings and craft (and craftspeople also draw) engage in dialogue.

Ambiguity and Interpretation

A line on paper can carry multiple meanings. It might represent a wall, the edge of a shadow, or simply a possibility not yet defined. These ambiguities allow drawings to remain open in the early stages of design.

Craft traditions similarly rely on interpretation. A craftsman reading a drawing translates lines into actions; the drawing guides the work but does not dictate every detail. In this space of interpretation, knowledge and experience shape the final realization.

If drawings are excessively precise, they risk suppressing this productive dialogue, in which a degree of ambiguity allows architecture to develop through collaboration between designer and builder. Thus drawing and craft have a common philosophy, allowing humanistic architecture to emerge through collaborative discovery.

Drawing as Cultural Memory

Beyond its role in design processes, drawing also functions as a repository of architectural knowledge. Sketchbooks, studies, and working drawings preserve traces of how architects have thought through problems across generations.

These drawings show the hesitations, corrections, and experimentation in the intellectual journeys behind works of architecture. A sketch by Michelangelo or Le Corbusier does not merely depict a building; it reveals a mind grappling with proportion, structure, and space.

This accumulation of drawings forms a cultural memory for the discipline. Students learn by studying them. Architects revisit them to see how others have approached similar challenges. The tradition of drawing is a shared language that connects architects across time.

Without this tradition, architectural culture risks becoming detached from its intellectual history. Images may proliferate, but the traces of thought that once accompanied them may disappear into a chaotic plurality.



Gestural forms allowing for ambiguity
(Drew Gander)



Sketch expressing memory and natural rhythms (Alexander Ford)



Capturing natural texture, rhythm, and mood. Maine (Michael Imber)



Design for a bench at Alys Beach
(Mac White)

Intuition and Experience

Over time, repeated drawing cultivates an intuition that is not mystical but a product of accumulated experiences of buildings visited, spaces remembered, or lessons learned through trial and error.

Each sketch carries fragments of this memory. A proportion may feel correct because it echoes a cathedral nave seen years earlier. A window placement may feel excessive because the architect recalls a space where too much light dissolved the sense of enclosure. A basement vault may emulate the massiveness of a cave. A bracket may branch upward in the way of a plant.

Through drawing, such memories are internalized. Architects develop a sensitivity that allows them to sense if a design is balanced or needs restraint, and the hand moves with confidence founded on judgment formed through years of observation.

Intuition, in this sense, is the sediment of experience. Drawing is the medium through which it settles into architectural thought.

Emotional Inquiry

As well as being experienced rationally, architecture elicits emotions. Buildings create atmospheres of coziness, tension, openness, intimacy, etc., and before we think critically about a space we respond to its feel.

Drawing is a way to explore emotional qualities. A soft pencil line may suggest a gentle enclosure. A bold stroke may imply monumentality. Through sketching, one explores the emotional character of the space under design.

This requires empathy. To draw a space is to imagine inhabiting it, to anticipate how light may enter a room, how movement may flow through a corridor, or how a threshold will mark the transition between public and private.

While digital tools can simulate lighting conditions and spatial configurations, they often yield results that appear fully resolved. Drawing, by contrast, invites reflection. It leaves room for doubt and adjustment, as architects feel their way through a design, engaging in emotional inquiry.



Study in spatial occupation after Wyeth (Michael Imber)



Form and light at Santa Elena Canyon (Mac White)

Drawing and Clients

The humanity of drawing also influences the relationship between architects and clients. When architects share sketches, they show not only ideas but also a process. The unfinished nature of a sketch signals openness and humility, inviting conversation.

Clients often respond to sketches in ways that differ from their reactions to polished renderings. A sketch suggests a possibility, allowing clients to imagine themselves participating in the evolving design. This shared exploration can foster trust. The drawing becomes a meeting ground where architect and client negotiate aspirations, constraints, and even values.

By contrast, highly resolved images can close the conversation. When a design appears complete, clients may feel their role is limited to approval, editing, or rejection, with the collaborative nature of architectural creation being inhibited. Drawing therefore plays a part not only in design but also in the associated human relationships.

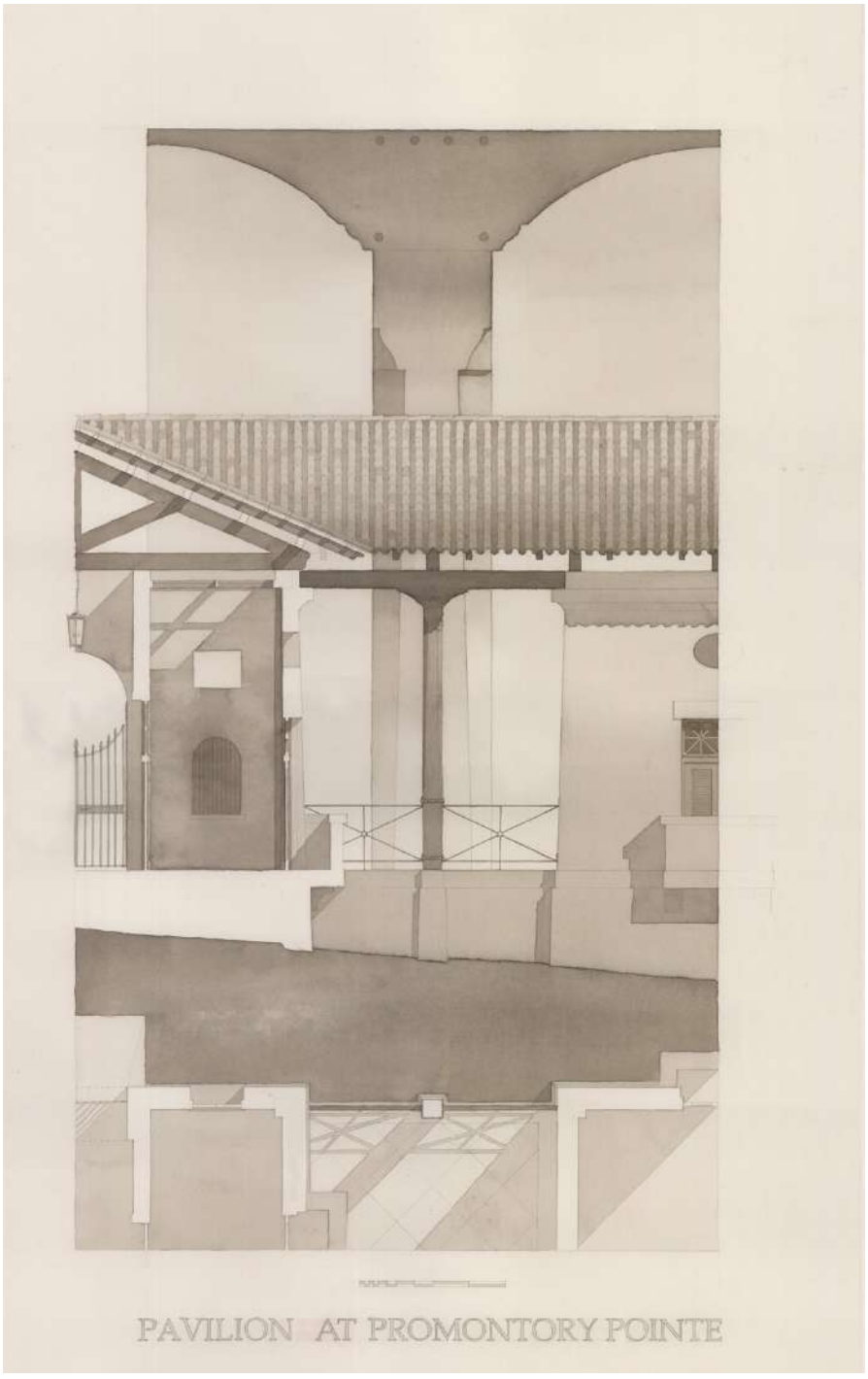


Scale and softness of form leaving room for imagination. Boathouse (Nathan Walz)

Technology and Drawing

The emergence of artificial intelligence introduces new possibilities for architectural visualization and exploration. Algorithms generate compelling images in seconds, producing vast libraries of formal variations. These tools may be valuable for experimentation, yet they alter the nature of creative work. When images are generated instantly, the architect's role becomes one of selecting, and creativity is replaced by curation.

This trend raises questions. If architects spend less time drawing and more time choosing between options, will this impair their judgment? Might intuition, empathy, and reflection, cultivated through drawing, be displaced from architectural practice?



Analytic sketch expressing coordination, study, and reflection (Mac White)



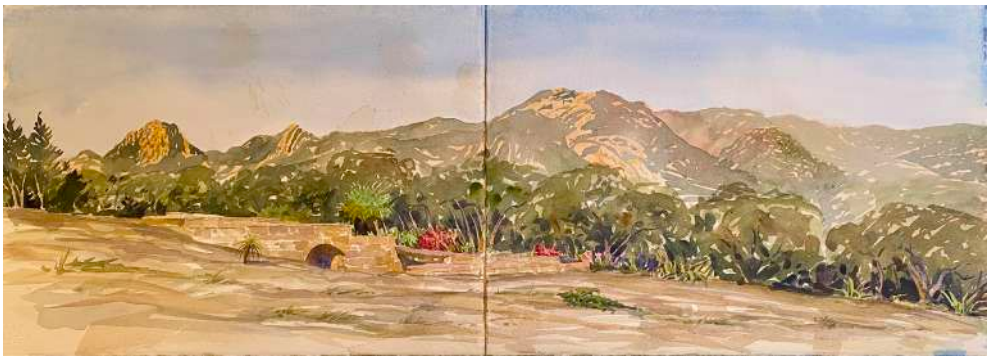
Architecture of place, memory, and meaning (Michael Imber)

The issue is not whether architects should use new technologies, as innovation has always shaped our work. The challenge is to ensure that the humanistic disciplines that have long grounded architecture are not thereby supplanted. Drawing remains a powerful medium for thinking, and preserving the practice may be essential to maintaining architecture's character as an art. The office of Michael Imber Architects, for one, seeks to steward this practice.

Stewardship of Meaning

Architecture is a cultural act that shapes how we inhabit the world. Buildings frame rituals, anchor communities, and carry memories, and drawing can be a thread in this, as designs become part of our shared landscape. Michael Imber Architects sees itself as embedded in this cultural effort. To create architecture of significance requires care, judgment, and empathy, and in drawing all of these are cultivated.

Technologies will continue to evolve and architecture will undoubtedly adapt. Yet our task remains: to create buildings that speak across time and culture. Architecture may continue without drawing, but it is drawing that preserves the patient conversation between imagination, memory, and the lived experience of those who inhabit its realizations.



Plein-air watercolor of a Montecito landscape (Michael Imber)





Sketch Club pencil drawing (Alexander Ford)

Through drawing architects slow their thinking, test their intuitions, and engage in dialogue with craft, culture, and clients. With this instrument of reflection, architects examine not only what they are building but why it matters. In this sense, the act of drawing is one of stewardship. Each line carries the possibility of meaning, an opportunity to shape spaces that resonate with our life.

Biography | Biografía | Biografia

Rene Salas

Rene Salas is an architectural designer at Michael Imber Architects whose work explores the continuity of architectural culture through drawing, craft, and the study of enduring buildings and places. Informed by an interest in architectural history and traditional building practice, his approach views architecture as a living body of knowledge that connects people to place, memory, and the cultural legacy of our built environment. Through drawing, travel, and observation, Salas engages with the humanistic traditions of architecture and urbanism, exploring how time-tested principles can inform the design of meaningful and enduring places today.





Plein-air watercolor of Piazza del Popolo (Michael Imber)

Sketch and watercolor of Piazza del Popolo (Michael Imber)