“The question is not what you look at, but what you see.”
Henry David Thoreau, *Walden or Life in the Woods* 1854.

“Get out now. Not just outside, but beyond the trap of the programmed electronic age so
gently closing around so many people. Go outside, move deliberately, then relax, slow
down, look around. Do not jog. Do not run. Forget about blood pressure and arthritis,
cardiovascular rejuvenation and weight reduction. Instead pay attention to everything that
abuts the rural road, the city street, the suburban boulevard. Walk. Stroll. Saunter. Ride a bike,
and coast along a lot. Explore.”

**Part 1: The normalcy of not really seeing our environment**
Most people who walk or drive through their city, neighborhood and home ignore it.
As we move through our day-to-day lives we are bombarded by an every increasing number
of mediated images and simulated experiences all demanding our attention. The average six-
year-old child today has been exposed to more experiences than their grandparents had
witnessed in their entire lifetimes. The average American sees 25,000 advertisements per year.
No wonder we walk and drive around in a “blind” haze.

“Deep down, at the very core of the American psyche, people know that they are unable to
make sense of the landscape and environment around them. They live in fear that someday a
stranger may come and see the jewel they missed, and after seeing it, will take it away.” John
Stilgoe, *Outside lies Magic*.

**Seeing is a discipline one can learn**
Seeing is not a unique God given talent, as George Nelson argues in his book, *How to See*
(1977), but a discipline that one can learn, like learning a foreign language.
To really see our environment, you must go beyond your opinion, “I like it,” or
“I don’t like it.” You need to learn how to see and read the environment, which means you
need to know the language of seeing.
Part 2: Seven Ways of Seeing

1) **To glance** (F “guenchir” to elude)
To take a quick look suddenly or briefly in passing.

Normal perception depends on ignoring. Most of the time we merely glance or look in a fast cursory way. We ignore 99% of what we glance at, if it fits an approximate schema of our past experience, preconceptions, or societal norms that is enough.

A glance out the car window
A glance across the dance floor

2) **To look** (ME “locian” to spy)
To direct one’s attention to try and see or find something.
(Sherlock Holmes on the crime scene, or CSI forensic investigations, etc)

As John Stilgoe observes, “learning to look around sparks curiosity, encourages serendipity. Amazing connections get made, questions are raised. To look is about awareness that builds mindfulness, into the enduring pleasures of noticing and thinking about what one notices.”

3) **To explore** (L “explorare” to search out)
To travel within a region previously unknown in order to experience, carefully examine, and look into it closely (John Stilgoe, *Outside lies Magic*)

Exploring ordinary landscapes and environments sharpens the appreciation and understanding out them. You start to see and understand great cultural, social, economic and political patterns that go unnoticed. You explore your own insights, “all the magic that comes from looking.”

“Exploration encourages creativity, serendipity, and invention.”

“To be surprised, to wonder, is to begin to understand. This is the sport, the luxury, special to the intellectual man. The gesture chrematistic of his tribe consists in looking at the world with eyes wide open in wonder. Everything in this world is strange and marvelous to well open eyes. The faculty of wonder is the delight refused to your football fan and, on the other hand, is the one, which leads the intellectual man through life in the perpetual ecstasy of the visionary. His special attribute is the wonder of the eyes.”

Jose Ortega y Gasset *The Revolt of the Masses.*

“Explorers quickly learn that exploring means sharpening all the senses.”
4) **To experience** (ME “experiential” to try out or experiment, to live within)
Personal involvement in or observation with all the senses of events as they occur.

What Diane Ackerman wants to explore in her book, *A Natural History of the Senses* (1990), “is the origin and evolution of the senses, how they vary from culture to culture, their range and reputation, their folklore and science, the sensory idioms we use to speak of the world, and some special topics that I hope will exhilarate other sensualists as they do me, and cause less-extravagant minds at least to pause a moment and marvel. Inevitably, a book such as this becomes an act of celebration.”

**Smell, Touch, Taste, Hearing, Vision**

**Synesthesia** (the fusion of the senses)
“The stimulation of one sense stimulates another. The technical name is aisthanesthai (to perceive). A thick garment of perception is woven thread by overlapping thread. Similar word is synthesis, which the garment of thought is woven together idea by idea, and which originally referred to the light muslin clothing worn by ancient Romans.”

The appreciation of design, like all disciplines, depends on not ignoring.
As David Pye in the *Nature and Aesthetics of Design* states “It depends on looking and experiencing deeply, the more you look the more you see. One must seek contemplative vision.” To slow down and experience with all your senses, and reflect upon its significance. The reward is the arousal or life changing revelation, like being awoken from a deep sleep. The experience will haunt you for days afterwards.

“In memorable experiences of architecture, space, matter and time fuse into a single dimension, into the basic substance of being, that penetrates consciousness. We identify ourselves with this space, this place, this moment, and these dimensions become ingredients of our existence. Architecture is the art of reconciliation between ourselves and the world, and this mediation takes place through the senses.”

**Juhani Pallasmaa, The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses 1996.**

5) **To see** (ME “seen” to observe)
To observe, to look intently to seek awareness and new knowledge.

In 1977 George Nelson, one of post war America’s leading designers, wrote *How to See*, techniques for paying greater attention to the visual aspects of the environment. He presented a series of his own methods: by means of comparisons, shift of focus, and attention to often neglected details.

“We are all taught to read and write and add and subtract, but we are not taught to see except in the sense that a seeing eye dog sees. You can see the curb so you don’t fall and trip in the path of traffic; you can see the difference between a red light and a green light; and you can see a Shell or Esso sign as you’re driving along the highway. I would suspect this is about the limit of most people’s seeing as a result of our curiosity crippled educational process. Why do kids become visually illiterate? American education emphasizes words and numbers. The language of vision uses light, shape, color, texture, lines, patterns, similarities, contrasts, and movement. Technological society is turning people into things.”
**Landscape**
Literally means the portion of the land that the eye can see and comprehend in a single view.

**Survey**
To look over, to delineate extent and position by measurement
Aesthetic and mathematical combined to inform a way of seeing, a form of knowledge.

**Location**
Specifically relating to or occupying a particular place

Every site is the unique intersection of land, climate, production and circulation, and conveys all sorts of messages. Settlement patterns are visual statements of human values. Not a closed product but an open work of nature and humanity, always evolving.

### 6) To perceive (L “percipere” to take hold of, feel, comprehend)
The mental process by which the mind becomes conscious of an external object or event through the senses; it is the mental completion of a sensation that would otherwise have nothing but a momentary existence.

Joseph Rykwert has noted that “Every moment of perception contains a whole personal and collective past; our body is the incarnation of that past and with every moment of perception this past is reordered and revalued.”

**Perception is learnt slowly over the course of your life and depends on your beliefs, experiences and memory.**

**Aspects of complete perception**
According to Hans Hofmann (1880 - 1966, artist- teacher), complete perception is comprised of the following four aspects:
(Example wedding ring)

1. **Reality** (“res” a thing)
The physical thing or event, authentic or genuine.

2. **Appearance** (“appaere” to come forth, to become visible)
The image of a thing or event, which becomes visible upon observation and comprehension.

3. **Effect** (“efficere” to bring to pass)
The result or consequence of our encounter with the thing or event.

4. **Empathy** (“empathia” affection, passion, feeling)
Our personal emotional responses, affection, passion and feelings.
The California artist, Robert Irwin has found four keys to perception. (Robert Irwin Being and Circumstance 1985).

1) That perception is embodied, that we understand our world from within it.
   “Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak. It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled.”

2) That all experience is conditional, that all understanding is understanding within a frame of reference, conceived in relation to the perceiver, grounded in circumstance.
   Seeing is intensely personal, no one else can do it for us. We see in the light of accumulated experiences, stored information, private interests and entrenched beliefs.

3) That intellectual habit and perceptual reflex obscure much of what we cannot deal with quantitatively and objectively. (Preconceptions & bias)
   We tend to see in terms of what we know or believe.
   We only really see what we are prepared to see or what we look at carefully.

4) That we can cut through our instrumentalized vision only by setting aside our assumptions.
   “Seeing is forgetting the name of the thing one sees.”
   Get beyond the names and labels: ask yourself, What is this? Why is it here?
   How do it come to be here?

   Bucky Fuller and Bill Wilder always were invited to the Eames office because of their ability to see something with child-like innocence and insightful perceptual depth.

7) To have an idea  (G “idea” to see)
   The ability to see, perceive, and understand the inner nature of some specific thing.

As your perceive the environment you create its ideas and image
   “The observer should play an active role in perceiving the environment and have a creative part in developing its image. You should have the power to change that image to fit changing ideas and needs. An environment, which is ordered in precise and final detail, may inhibit new patterns of activity. A landscape whose every rock tells a story may make difficult the creation of fresh stories. Although this may not seem to be a critical issue in our present urban chaos, yet it indicates that what we seek is not a final but an open-ended order, capable of continuous further development.”
   Kevin Lynch, The Image of the City 1960

“There are six basic properties in a beautiful environment, imageability, meaning or expressiveness, sensuous delight, rhythm, stimulus, choice.”
   Kevin Lynch, The Image of the City 1960
Part 3: Conclusion
"The materials that lie at your doorstep are beautiful if you are sensitive enough in impression. There is something in the ordinary that becomes extraordinary under continued observation."
   John Van Dyke The Desert: Further Studies in Natural Appearances 1901.

"Vision is the art of seeing things invisible."
   Jonathan Swift, Thoughts on Various Subjects 1711.

Weekend assignment
   Please get out now and begin to “read” your local environment.
   Take a pad of paper (or better still, a diary or sketchbook) with you to make notes to use as reference for next innovation.