

Day 4: Architectonic Draft

Today we think about shape. (I've taken to the word "shape" over words like "structure" or "form." They mean the same thing in this context—something about the overall design of the whole, and about the sequence of focal points along the timeline between the start and the finish—but I find "shape" a little more liberating, less imbued with the mysteries of aesthetics.)

Today we write the architectonic draft. Think of this not as "draft 2" but as an independent cousin of your musical draft. It's an experiment in story (/essay/etc.) shape. As an element of this 3-draft series, it will be most productive when its license is taken up freely.

Today we use a few mapping exercises to wrap our heads around what we've already written and envision what we're going to write today (allowing always the adaptive swerving away from your plan mid-writing as something new announces itself). You'll need paper for the maps. The overview of the draft's values precedes the mapping exercises below—it's helpful to know what we're aiming for before diving into the exercises.

Make a new file. You might transfer material copy/paste–style from the musical draft, but start from a blank file instead of editing and augmenting what you already wrote.

A value to hold in mind for the day: compose at a large scale. Today is not the day for line edits or prose tuning or even fully finishing a scene. Today you're thinking in sections, adjacencies, and the intervals between them. You're zooming way back to discern and play with the shape of the whole.

Architectonic Draft: Values and Guidelines

We are working in a compressed timeframe so you probably don't have a habitual relationship to your existing draft, but if you were working over a longer span, this phase would be a time to significantly refresh and rethink your idea of what this play can do; this is not just about making your first draft better. In micro-season, it's maybe the first time to really imagine what it can do. Think of what it does in terms of the experience in time of an audience. How does it act on them? What is it like to be in its room?

Approach your architectonic draft as a re-vision in the most elemental sense of that word: an attempt to see the possibilities and the shape of your play anew.

Again, we're guided in this draft by values rather than procedure:

Experimentation with Sequence and Proximity

Embrace the idea of architectural thinking as model thinking, and consider your play loosely as a house. Sketch quickly in large units: make the floorplan of the house, not the pencil marks on the doorjamb marking the height of the kid who grew up here. Think of each scene as a room in a house tour and play with secret staircases, new wings, missing windows, prize atriums. Consider a non-contiguous sequence within the house: What is it like to go from the entryway directly to the attic and then the closed-up bedroom with the last century's dust still in it? From the ballroom to the greenhouse to the basement to the fire escape? What if you went to the basement then the greenhouse then the basement again then the ballroom?

Think about how meaning shifts or grows through these neighboring relations. Make a few bold sequence decisions/experiments in this draft. Do you need to go to the roof to look at the stars? Did you get stuck in the bathroom with its faulty doorknob and have to climb out the window? Or did you wait for someone to open the door for you? What did you see when you finally got the door open again? Is it the same wing of the house you thought you were in? Did everything decay while you were trapped in there?

Introduction of New Spaces

To whatever degree or scale, introduce at least one new “space” into your draft that wasn't present in the musical draft. This might literally be a different location, but it also could be a scene in an existing location that feels like a very different experiential chamber, in a metaphorical sense.

Conceptualize your Play Via a Non-Geographic Map

Think of this draft as a play in the form of a _____. You can borrow an existing form or image or use a generic one. What's the difference between a play in the form of a rubix cube and a play in the form of a sphere? A play in the form of a mural or a play in the form of a triptych? A play in the form of a dormant volcano vs a play in the form of an extinct volcano? I suggest embracing a cross-disciplinary imagination here—get away from narrative forms (act 1, act 2, act 3, or the triangle of stasis/crisis/resolution) and think in other terms. I like to borrow musical structures (theme and variations, sonata form, concerto form). I've also made plays in the form of gardens and plays in the form of particular art-historical images (a life of the Buddha, with a large central image and a hundred small chronological scenelets). Gertrude Stein called her writing portraits and her plays landscapes. Understanding your play as having a secret affinity in its bones can give you freedom to let it surprise you with possibilities that don't fit the shape of a narrative form you already know.

Mapping Exercises

Exercise I: Geographic Mapping

This exercise takes up “mapping” literally but orients itself toward inviting the imagination to produce new places your play might occupy. If you’re not writing a story that unfolds in real or fictional geographic space, freely transpose this exercise to the images/spaces within your writing.

Procedure

On a blank sheet of paper, choose a location from your existing play, maybe one belonging to the part of your draft that has the most energy. Put it on your map (use whatever combination of cartooning and captioning your hand enjoys but be efficient).

Then add a second location from your existing play, something that seems important or intriguing. Notate the physical link or distance between them in some way.

Next, imaginatively expand each location: populate it with objects, people, landscape or architectural elements. Allow yourself to add objects and people and land/building elements that you haven’t thought of before, alongside ones you know are there.

What traffic or resonance might there be between those locations? Notate the lines of connection and the means of getting in between those two places.

Now let the two locations suggest a third location, one that is new to you. Add it to your map. What are the secret links between these three locations? Notate the links. Expand the new location as you did before—objects, people, land or built structure features.

Fruits

Record any thoughts you have off the top of your head about something new you could add to your play based on the discovery of one of the secret links or the expansion of locations. This “something new” might eventually significantly change your play or might show up as only a passing moment. But let it expand the radius of your play.

Look again at your map. Look at the elements (objects, people, features of the environment) you recorded in your two already-known locations. Think about how you might use their presence to dig back into an existing scene and bring it to a new dimension or point it in a new direction. Record any thoughts you have about how that could unfold.

Exercise 2: Abstract Mapping

This mapping exercise is speculative. I personally love this exercise—this is how my brain works. But even so, I often have to do it several times over before I land on a map that feels right.

First Map

Draw a map, or schema, of your play as it exists in its musical draft. There's no right or wrong way to do this. The task is to create a visual, spatial representation of the play's elements, allowing yourself to organize them in a non-chronological fashion. The narrative-time element of the play, we could say, belongs to the way it moves through the map; it is not determined by the map. Choose simple, elemental images to stand for whole swaths of your play's interactions and moods. Consider the idea that a play can understand its movement as between images as well as plot points.

New Map

Next, choose a key image from your musical draft and sketch out a new possible development from that image, not down a storyline/timeline logic, but in a visual map that moves in radiant directions. You might include additional elements that already exist in your resource material; you might generate new ideas or images. Try for a mix of both. Keep it simple—three or four images might be plenty here. What new images crop up? What existing images offer themselves in new relationship? How do you want to organize them in the map? It can be fun to embrace geometrical figure or pattern here, or a particular shape. What would, say, a play in the shape of a circle be? A circle with a box inside it? A circle with tiny segments? A ladder? A constellation? A classic mandala? An electrical circuit? A spiral?

Complete both mapping exercises and then write your architectonic draft. Keep the two maps in your field of vision as you write, and meditate on them periodically.

Share and Respond

Repeat the same sharing and response process as yesterday. As a responder, give particular attention to your experience of the thing in time, the way it moves, your perception of the thing's architecture from inside the experience of it.