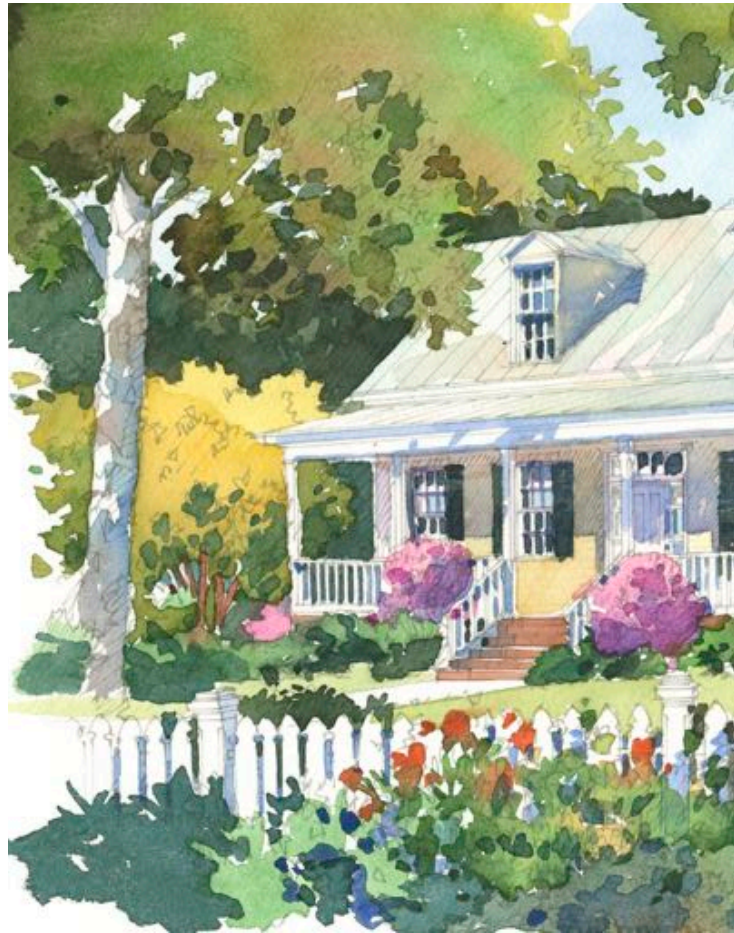


# Drawn to the City

Revitalizing existing cities and planning new ones is **Urban Design Associates'** mission, and fine art is a foundational tool in their process.

BY Allison Malafronte

One might assume that today an urban-design firm would use exclusively digital processes for conceptual imagery and plans. That's not the case at Urban Design Associates (UDA), a firm that still relies on the tradition of hand-drawn sketches and illustrations to bring their ideas to life. A recent interview with David Csont, a principal and the chief illustrator at UDA, revealed the major role fine art plays in the studio of these designers and architects.



## ▲ STYLE SETTER

This plain air watercolor sketch of an existing house in Summerville, South Carolina represents the lowcountry-style house that was to be built in a new community.



## ▲ THE RIGHT LOOK

This graphite sketch conveys the correct architectural vernacular and lot composition as part of a plan for a home in College Park, Maryland.



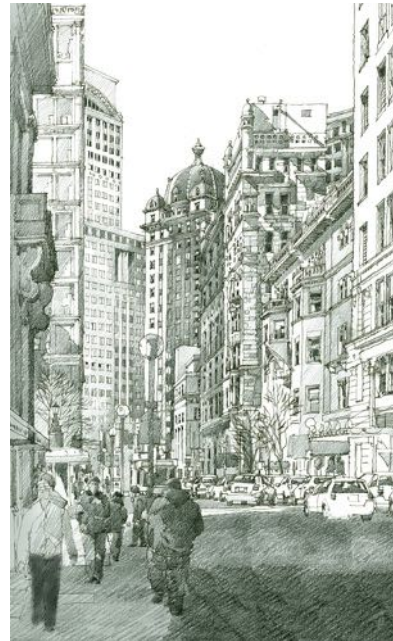
## ▶ JOINT EFFORT

The UDA team at work during an on-site meeting known in urban design as a charrette.



WATERCOLOR: © 2011 URBAN DESIGN ASSOCIATES; GRAPHITE: © 2015 URBAN DESIGN ASSOCIATES AND MWVA





**PITTSBURGH,  
SIXTH  
AVENUE**

This graphite drawing is part of a city-wide pattern book that explained and documented all of Pittsburgh's neighborhoods

Csont became involved with UDA more than 20 years ago. One of the first documented urban-design companies in the country, UDA pioneered many of the techniques that are now standard in the urban design and planning industry. "We're in the business of communicating ideas, and drawing has always been our first language," Csont says. "We developed a style that allowed us to make complicated design matters easier for the everyday person to understand, and that tradition continues today. UDA's plans are different from other architectural firms in that we are designing not only buildings but also environments. Some projects can last 20 to 30 years, and the original illustration is critical throughout that process."

UDA prides itself on being "portable practitioners" who mobilize their studio to meet clients wherever they are. The initial stages of creating and testing ideas on site require Csont to rapidly capture the essence of an idea in a believable manner. These quick sketches help the team chart the progression of a concept as it is formulated. Once the client gives them feedback, Csont begins to finalize the drawings. "Many years ago, I would hand draw the sketches and then add color with watercolor or colored pencils," the artist says. "Today, I still hand draw the illustrations, but now I add color by scanning the drawing into the computer and using

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**BEFORE AND AFTER**

UDA prepared the sighting for two new stadiums on Pittsburgh's North Shore and the development of the surrounding blocks. The digital hybrid watercolor characterizes the new buildings on a North Shore Drive intersection.



FOR MORE INFORMATION ON DAVID CSONT AND URBAN DESIGN ASSOCIATES, VISIT [URBANDESIGNASSOCIATES.COM](http://URBANDESIGNASSOCIATES.COM).

  
 “In urban design, it’s important to convey not only what the environment will look like but also how it will feel.”

— DAVID CSONT



brushes in Photoshop. Although this stage now includes a combination of traditional and digital approaches, drawing is still at the core of our creative process.”

Knowing that the three dominant words in UDA’s vocabulary are *collaboration*, *context* and *community*, I asked Csont to name the defining artistic skill in their design process. His answer: creating a composition. “You have to have an innate understanding of how an urban environment—people, nature, buildings, streets, cars—work together in harmony, as well an ability to look at a set of two-dimensional plans and see it in three dimensions,” he says. “This requires a strong understanding of scale, distance and proportions, and the ability to use drawing as a tool to understand and interpret those concepts.”

In addition to possessing strong compositional skills, an urban-design illustrator must also know how to convey a sense of place—something fine artists, especially landscape painters, know well. As an avid plein air painter, Csont brings the lessons learned in nature’s classroom into the design studio. “In urban design, it’s important to convey not only what the environment will look like but also how it will feel,” he says. “When I’m creating these drawings, I’m looking for the distinct characteristics that define a particular city and community so that it begins to breathe and come to life. If you look at artists such as Hopper and Homer, you see that they knew how to connect an environment and place to people. Concepts from plein air painting also apply. When you’re painting outside, the light is changing and there is limited time, so it’s all about edited reality. What you choose to leave out is almost as important as what you choose to put in.”

Because Csont and the team at UDA believe strongly in keeping these traditional skills alive at their firm, Csont often teaches workshops on the core principles of drawing and composition to the younger designers. “We also occasionally go out urban sketching and plein air painting,” he says. “It’s amazing how eager the younger generations are to learn these traditional skills, because several of them didn’t have access to this education as students. Some of them will go on to work for other firms, and they want to have that skill that differentiates them. We create that culture here.”

*Allison Malafronte is an arts and design writer, editor and curator based in the greater New York City area.*



## BEFORE AND AFTER

The watercolor sketch illustrates the boathouse site’s intended use as a gathering place as well as a boat-storage area.



## MANHATTAN CORNICE

This watercolor of a brownstone cornice is a demonstration painting created for a seminar at the Institute of Classical Architecture in New York City.