A remote view of the city: Experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The work reports the experience in the teaching of design and representation in architecture and urbanism, from the discipline Perspectivas (cód. 1703.000.295-7), offered in the course of Architecture and Urbanism of the Federal University of Mato Grosso do Sul, campus of Naviraí (MS), during the period of isolation due to the pandemic of COVID-19. Its starting point was the record of urban space through observation. One of the challenges faced was to make the content taught - traditionally associated with workshop practices, on-site visits, and face-to-face orientations - to virtual platforms. It was then decided to conduct the discipline through virtual meetings, using as tools the online meeting platform Google Meet, institutional email, as well as messengers such as WhatsApp (Meta). Thus, after the conclusion of the semester, it was found that the class not only welcomed the adaptation proposal but also engaged in online debates and discussions about the techniques of design and representation in architecture and urbanism. The results were satisfactory and the experience can support new incursions that require the interface of the practice of drawing between screens.

Keywords: Observation drawing, COVID-19, Teaching practices.

1 INTRODUCTION

This work seeks to present the experience and challenges experienced by professors of the Architecture and Urbanism course of the Federal University of Mato Grosso do Sul crowded in the campus of Naviraí (MS), specifically in the discipline of Perspectives, offered in 2020 for a class of the second semester. The country's public universities have long dealt with challenges that go beyond issues associated with the physical structure of institutions, such as demands for appropriate workspaces, resources for research, lack of faculty and technicians, and work overload among others, but they had never experienced the problem of social distancing, caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which triggered new perspectives and visions about teaching.

Education systems around the world have had to adapt to the new reality. When faced with the new challenges, it was evident that the teaching methods would move towards a remote version of learning, very much in the style of Distance Learning (EAD) courses, already quite widespread in the country. The area of Architecture and Urbanism was no different. Although the distance learning methodology is not recognized by the Ministry of Education (MEC) and the Council of Architecture and Urbanism (CAU) as a form of graduation for architects and urban planners, distance education maintains little acceptance among teachers and students in the area.

Social distancing, for those who were able to comply with it, conditioned people to new habits and a daily confrontation of activities once considered simple, such as the act of going out into the city and living with people nearby. The moment brought insecurity and considerable impacts on public health, politics, the economy, and the urban and private way of life. When searching for the term "coronavirus statistics" in the *Google* search engine, it is observed in the graphic data that at the beginning of August 2020, when the discipline of Perspectives was initiated, the state of Mato Grosso do Sul recorded 671 new cases of coronavirus infection and 14 deaths in weekly averages.

It is in this context that it was proposed an adaptation of the discipline to the online format [1] offered to a group of students in the second period of the Architecture and Urbanism course. Originally, the syllabus of the discipline foresaw in its methodological basis the development of meetings in the open air (through the streets of the city) and in drawing studios (internal), both face-to-face environments of contact and discussion. This format had to be postponed when the pandemic was officially enacted in March 2020, at which point health authorities exposed the risks of the disease to the academic community, recommending immediate social distancing.

Thus, a new format for the discipline was proposed, with practical effects for the teaching of perspective techniques to students of the Architecture and Urbanism course at UFMS in Naviraí. It was thought to use *Google Street View* as a pedagogical tool for urban immersion (Figure 1). However, the fear caused by the novelty of the proposed online format, as opposed to the traditional model of teaching drawings and representations from urban experiences and contact with their daily lives, brought some anguish and issues that throughout the process were dissipating. "However, given the present reality, it was believed that it would be an opportunity to test alternative forms of interaction with the city, despite the limitations imposed" (PEREIRA, 2021, p.4).

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[1] The elective course "Perspectives (cod. 1703.000.295-7)" was conducted by professors Ramon Fortunato Gomes, Marcelo Carlucci, and Adalberto José Vilella Jr.com students of the second semester of the Architecture and Urbanism course of the Naviraí (MS) campus of the Federal University of Mato Grosso do Sul (UFMS) during August to December 2020.

Figure 1 – Record of walking the streets in *Google Street View.*
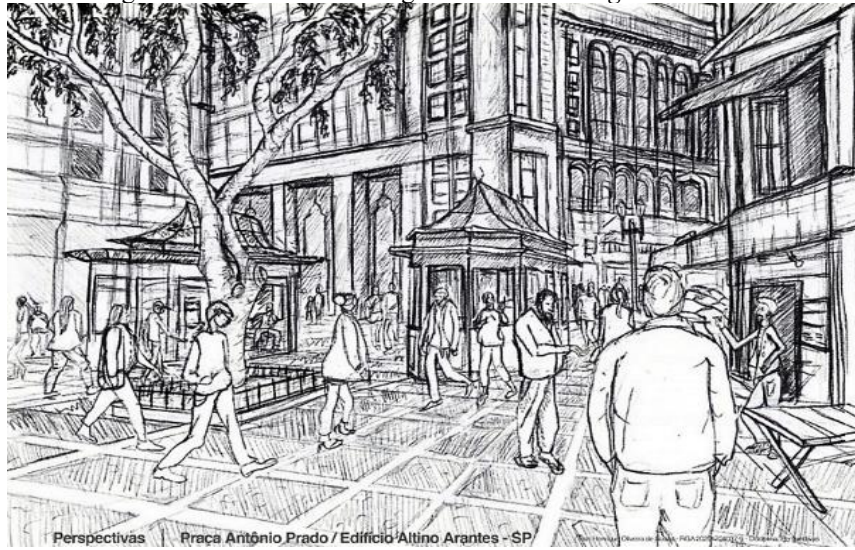
Source: Archives of the discipline Perspectives. Author: Ivan Henrique Oliveira de Souza (2020).

Physical presence, something inherent in this experience, was unfeasible in the context of total isolation to which we were subjected at that moment. Could the physical presence in the urban space, with its smells, sounds, lights, and contacts, be replaced by the intermediation of digital tools? What would it be like to undertake a discipline of a remarkably practical nature remotely? Is a distance education course being offered, contesting the demands of the MEC, the CAU, and our faculty and students? The answers to these questions permeated the entire development of the discipline throughout the semester.

> It was necessary to develop new technological skills and master tools such as Google Classroom, Moodle, Google Meet, Zoom, Google Books, Scielo, or Google Scholar – because, like classrooms, libraries were also closed. It was also necessary to adapt the teaching methods, without contradicting what was established and to build a new model of work, mediated by what was already practiced. The option to this would be to fall into the trap of exposing content to students with cameras off and asynchronous classes without any kind of control of pedagogical development. (BITENCOURT, 2022, p.88).

Through digital tools, the possibility of broadening the gaze and "presence" to places in the world where students would hardly have the possibility of being or going (Figure 2), such as Rome, Paris, Bogota, New York, or Tokyo, was opened. Walk through its streets, glimpse its landscapes, know the daily life of residents and their diversities that were there, visible, present virtually, and available on the screen for the students, simply exercising abstraction and sensitivity to feel the local daily life researched and record the scene analyzed in sketches, *sketches*.

Figure 2 – Schematic location map (A), frontal view (B), and perspective (C) of the Hirosaki Castle building located in Japan.

Source: Archives of the discipline Perspectives. Author Fabielle Carvalho Alva (2020).

The activity of the urban register in their daily lives in the form of free drawing has been practiced worldwide by *Urban Sketch groups and* [2] has proved to be an important tool for students of Architecture and Urbanism in the construction of a more precise look at the city, accentuating meanings and stimulating a way of representing ideas on paper, through strokes and sketches (PERRONE, 2018). Thus, "... they have in the location design the possibility of discovering the cities and the world where they live, bringing to light what is imperceptible or commonplace" (VALGAS, 2016, p. 352). To Silva (2019, p.26): "drawing reveals what is no longer present. It makes it possible to reconstruct the history of the place to understand the present. It takes up moments lived by others."

2 OBJECTIVES

The proposal in the discipline of Perspectives had as its main objective to promote the practice of drawing of observation and creation, having free drawing as a means of recording. In addition, develop skills and perceptions about urban space and its relationship with architecture and urbanism through the drawing of observation (urban *sketching*), propositions of maps of location and situation. For Silva (2019), drawing is an instrument of synthesis and through it the author exposes his look, being this act, the moment to rationalize the part and suggest the whole emphasizing what one wants to show, question, and argue.

Other specific objectives permeated the proposed activities such as: recognizing and developing techniques and forms of representation through observation drawing; developing plastic

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[2] The Urban *Sketch (USk)* group was created in 2007 by Spanish illustrator and journalist Gabriel Campanario and is currently a group of international dimensions. In Brazil, the USk *was born from the initiative of the architect Eduardo Bajzek and the plastic artists João Pinheiro and Juliana Russo. Today the* USk Brazil is distributed in different Brazilian cities and regions. Every year, they promote regional, national, and international meetings stimulating practice, meeting, and sharing urban experiences, which can be consulted on the *Instagram.com* and *facebook.com* pages of the *USk group*.

expression skills; Developing a more precise and attentive look at the urban space, its complexities, subtleties, and its visual and special structure. In addition to the proposed objectives, it was proposed the study of the means of composition, scales, and the use of materials as a means of stimulating creativity in the forms of representation in observation drawings.

3 METHODOLOGY APPLIED

The discipline was developed from design works of observation of urban spaces, carried out at a distance, through the *Google Street View* platform, a resource used due to the social distancing established as a result of the pandemic. At the beginning of the course, it was proposed that academics perform a "virtual drift" in *Google Street View* in cities of the world, of free choice, to discover new places and build a vision of urban spaces beyond everyday experience.

The "drift" through the paths *of Google Street View* proposed the identification of strategic locations, where the scholar can virtually circulate, observe and elect the best angle of view of the urban landscape for his observation record. In the urban landscape, there is a set of elements that constitute the city, the place. The act provides a more attentive analysis of the predominant features of the urban scene through which it is possible to achieve the synthesis of the image, through sketches, detached from small details. Thus, it is possible, above all, to record memories, moments, and places: "The drawing seeks synthesis through the understanding of the parts" (SILVA, 2019, p.28).

Figure 3 – Schematic maps of (A) Czech Prague and (B) Prague, central region, (C) Prague National Museum.
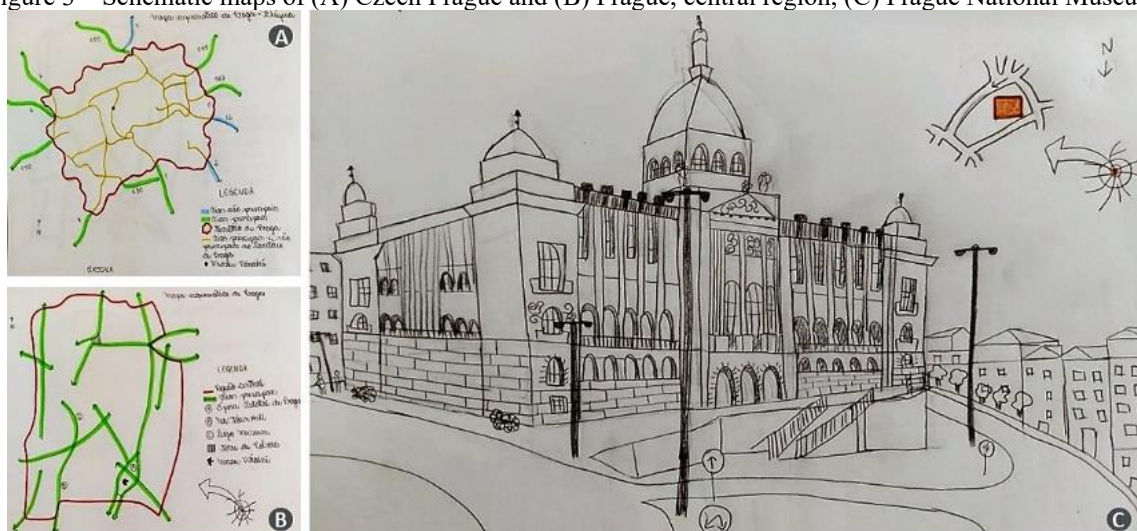
Source: Archives of the discipline Perspectives. Author: Kevelin Mayara Oliveira Silva (2020).

For the realization of the drawings, (Figure 3), the academics could choose only one of the following proposed metropolises as an example: Paris (France), Prague (Czech Republic), Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), Buenos Aires (Argentina), Recife (Brazil), São Paulo (Brazil), Berlin (Germany),

Rome (Italy), Medellín (Colombia), Barcelona (Spain) or another of their affinity. The criterion for choosing cities should meet the metropolitan phenomenon, whose characteristics are urban complexity, the diversity of landscapes, and the breadth of their cultural significance.

After choosing the metropolitan city, the observation drawings were conducted and guided by the teachers in four thematic groups, which guided the deliveries and discussions in the meetings made through *Google Meet*. It was suggested that the representation of the observation drawings be shown on location and situation maps for a better understanding of the urban context in which they were inserted. All maps should be freehand with the graphical scale from the information provided by *Google Street View*, as shown in Figure 3. About buildings for institutional use, it was suggested the inclusion of sketches on the technical drawings related to the building.

The thematic groups were divided into i) buildings of institutional use (temples, schools, public administration buildings or administrative centers, public markets, theaters or concert halls, museums); ii). squares, urban parks, and urban furniture; iii). monuments (landmarks of the urban landscape, not necessarily historical or commemorative); iv). urban scenes (landscapes that portray the specificities of the daily life of the city and its users, such as fairs, residential areas and their relationship with the street, spontaneous leisure areas, specific appropriations of urban space by users, urban furniture, etc.).

Each thematic group resulted in an evaluative delivery according to the schedule of classes. The deliveries were made by posting a portfolio called a *digital sketchbook*, prepared by the academic in a single portable document format file (PDF) in the virtual environment (*Moodle*). The *digital sketchbook* was composed of the observation drawings and along with the drawings, the students should carry out brief research on the place represented. Research that refers to history, cultural, social, or economic relevance, peculiarities about habits and customs related to the place, or any other data that would allow a more effective knowledge of the scene portrayed. Each drawing should be accompanied by sketches of the location map (urban scale) of the situation map (square scale) regarding the place depicted, both made by hand.

Seven remote meetings (lives) were held through the *Google Meet platform,* where the discipline was presented, and classes were held on observation drawing techniques (DOYLE, 2018), providing synchronous chats to resolve doubts and feed debates and reflections. Perhaps one of the most significant actions of all the work was the proposition of moments of the collective analysis of the products delivered by the students (digital sketchbook) and the process of elaboration of the observation drawings. Regarding the results obtained, the participation of the students in the discussion and the engagement of the class in the debates were quite satisfactory.

4 RESULTS

Through virtual tours in the foreground and at the level of the observer – guaranteed by the *Google Street View tool* – a new possibility of going to the streets, and observing the urban landscape, without, leaving home, was opened. Through observation, they constituted results that were the bases of discussion, exposure, and collective learning. As in the studios of the Architecture and Urbanism courses, where it is recurrent the assembly of exhibitions with the students' works at the end of each academic semester, broadens the debate about the results achieved, identifying advances, derivations, limits, and expansions concerning the proposed activities.

The exhibition itself becomes irrelevant without this important moment of collective reflection. It serves both for the student to contextualize his production before the group (and thus minimize the inhibition of expressing himself before the other) and to reflect on the infinite possibilities of thinking of solutions for a proposed action. Looking at the work of the other is, above all, to incorporate knowledge and universes beyond one's individuality, to recognize the importance of collaborative work, and to understand that the myth of the "isolated artist in the crystal tower" is far from what is expected of architects in contemporary times.

In the circumstances of isolation found, the exhibition proved to be unfeasible, hence the idea of sharing the work delivered remotely by the students in a digital meeting. The professors selected some works, presented them before everyone, and asked the author to comment on the elaboration process found, with the difficulties and discoveries undertaken, making some considerations about the product. Then, debates were opened so that the students could express their impressions about the work put up for analysis, such as an opening of a face-to-face exhibition, when there are sessions of debates.

About the set of drawings elaborated by the students of the discipline, some results stood out. In addition to the pure representation of the landscapes collected *in Street View*, the free research in other digital bases about the places portrayed allowed students a true immersion in other dimensions of urban space: the customs, traditions, symbols, and icons that mark cities around the world. What does Rome represent, besides the street images? In Figure 4 (A), the student seeks to identify and represent this symbolic dimension of the city. Imagine. To Ching (2012), the mind creates images that we try to draw, but the representation goes beyond a manual skill and goes through the construction of visual images that stimulate the imagination and feed our desire to draw.

We knew that in cases like this, there is a risk of approaching the city from stereotypes coined by tourism and its mercantilist logic (the city that sells itself as a product). That was one of the open discussions during the debates. But another Rome, hidden beneath the surface of its immediate symbols, could only be identified in a more specific and time-consuming approach, leaving the objectives of the discipline and entering the area of urban phenomena (Figure 4). The idea of the image

of the city as a cultural and ideological construct intermediated by the logic of capital was perhaps still a very complex debate for first-year students of an undergraduate course, especially in critical moments of isolation, uncertainties, and fears in which we were immersed.

Figure 4 – (A) Assembly from the symbols of the city of Rome. (B) Latin America Memorial Records, São Paulo (SP).

Source: Archives of the discipline Perspectives. Authors: Daniela Thiesen Pientka (A) and Mariane Gino Pereira (B) (2020).

Another result that has potentially been achieved is the development of students' perception of historical and political aspects of the city, in the sense of purging the idea that drawing is ideologically neutral.

> "In addition to perfecting the techniques of free drawing, [urban sketch practices] emphasize the critical eye, attentive to the urban landscape. It reinforces the practice of observation in the movements, in the social dynamics, in the contrasts that the city opens, in the inequalities, in the urban segmentation, and in the landscape that is static when one has a distracted look." (COZARUS, 2022, p.5).

The image as a manifesto is part of the urban form itself: the form is established as the language of the residents, communicating their values and desires, translating their experiences, and bringing to the surface anguish and dubieties. The use of text and infographic schemes by the students in their work was stimulated throughout the course to contextualize the form represented in the face of the political dimension treated here (Figure 4). The static and inert landscape acquires life and meaning from the effort of understanding and structuring an investigative and curious look: why this form and not another? Why in this place and not in another?

Within the limits imposed by the objectives of the discipline, the focus of the work should be the development of plastic expression by students, especially free drawing. Subsidiarily, the interest in the urban landscape appears as a corollary of this practice: "There is the development of the technique of free drawing, of the urban experience, of the affinity for the city [...]" (COZARUS, 2022, p.3). The recording of detail (Figure 5) matters more as a tool of knowledge and stoning of the gaze than as a

technique, or artistic virtuosity of the author. The drawing, the poring over the form, allows us to establish the deep relationship between the architectural object and its participation in the definition of the urban landscape. To draw the city is to draw the building.

Figure 5 – Observation drawing on the city of (A) Rio de Janeiro and (B) Buenos Aires.
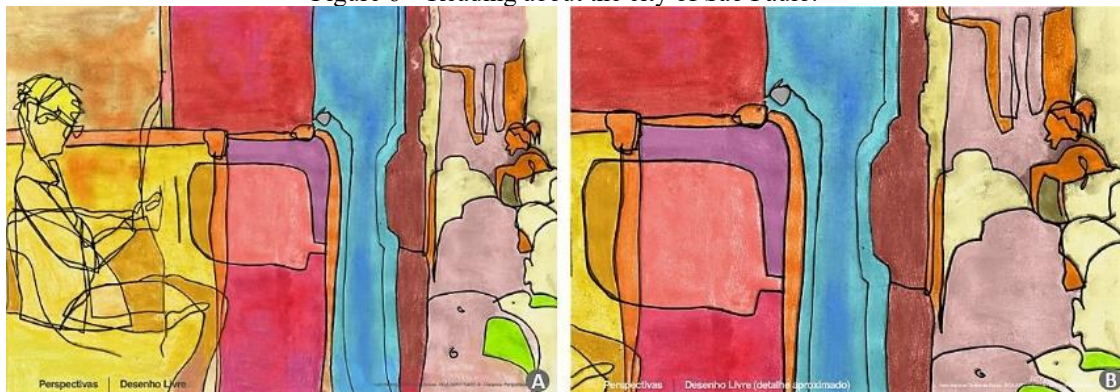

Source: Archives of the discipline Perspectives. Authors: (A) Gabriel Silva de Azevedo and (B) Edilaine do Santos de Souza (2020).

Another important result was the research undertaken by some students regarding the possibilities of using different graphic languages and techniques of representation drawing. During the discussion meetings on the papers, the students were asked to experiment with forms of expression beyond the realistic mode, if it is possible to say so.

A way of looking at urban space was also suggested through urban scenes, ways of life, activities, and emblematic actions that *Street View* images could show (Figure 6). Snapshots, rich and visually powerful about the city were present in the digital tool: this was an important discovery made by the students.

Figure 6 – Reading about the city of São Paulo.

Source: Archives of the discipline Perspectives. Author: Ivan Henrique Oliveira de Souza (2020).

Thus, it is believed that the experience brought to the students the possibility, although timid because mediated by the remote digital, to understand the space as something dynamic and intimately linked to the movement, to "move through", to "pass-through", reinforcing concepts linked to the relative scale of the body about the city, as Bruno Zevi (1992) defends:

> All those who, however fleetingly, have reflected on this theme, know that the essential character of architecture – what distinguishes it from other artistic activities – lies in the fact that it acts with a three-dimensional vocabulary that includes man. The painting acts on two dimensions, although it can suggest three or four of them. The sculpture acts on three dimensions, but the man is left outside, turned off, looking from the outside at the three dimensions. In turn, architecture is like a large excavated sculpture, in whose interior man penetrates and walks (ZEVI, 1992, p. 34).

The observation drawing proved to be a powerful tool in the development of this perception and understanding of the scale of the urban landscape. To this end, the students were presented with the possibility of representing drawings that indicated a serial view of the landscape, precisely to provoke this notion of movement as something inherent to the urban space, also an important challenge in the case of a work with the use of remote digital resources in the circumstances described.

For CHING (2017) the serial vision can be used not only to convey the experience of being in a place but also to demonstrate the experience of movement, the representation of the place in a sequence of spaces. However, the results brought surprises in the sense of extrapolating the conventional serial vision representations, giving way also to the poetic and subjective (Figures 7 and 8).

Figure 7 – Sequential drawing of the landscape (A, B, C).
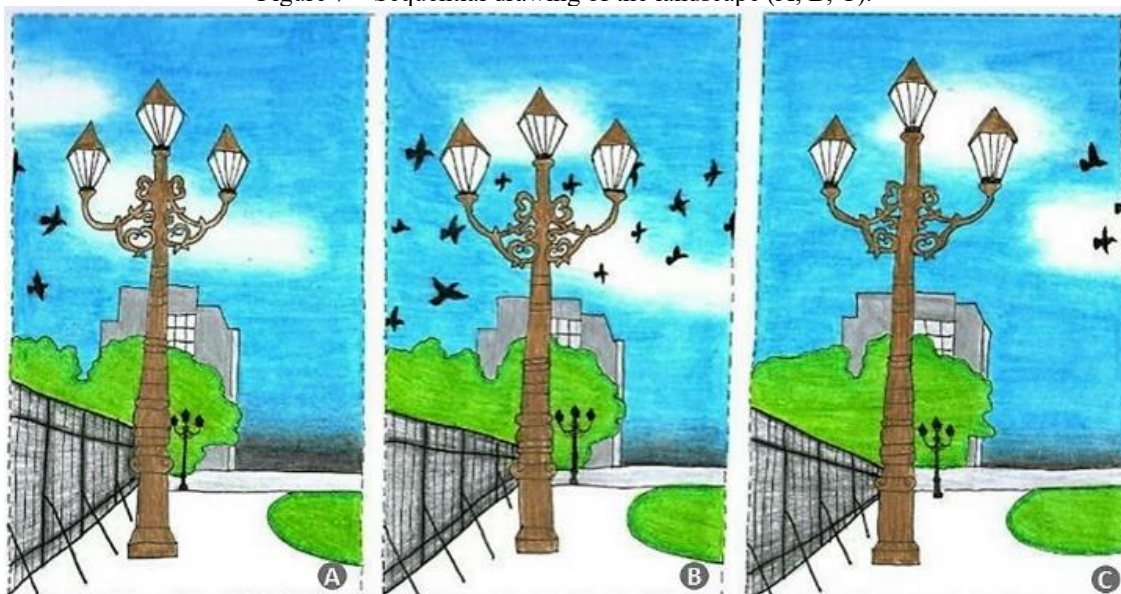
Source: Archives of the discipline Perspectives. Author Tayla Caroline Rodrigues Pinto (2020).

Figure 8 – Sequential drawing of the landscape (A, B, C).
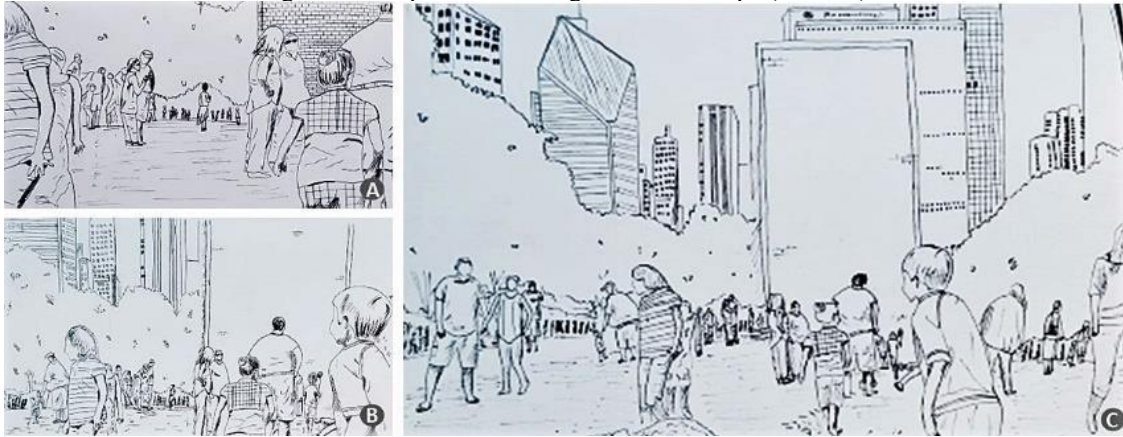
Source: Archives of the discipline Perspectives. Author: Bruna Laís Cózaro. (2020).

Finally, the new format resulted in new possibilities to look at urban landscapes and envision alternatives to live, know and register the city. Alternatives expressed in results that dialogue with what Bajzek (2019) reveals about the act of designing the city. For Bajzek (2019), drawing the city goes beyond recording a scene. To draw the city is to become part of it, it is to engage with its material and immaterial dimensions, it is to recognize its realities and dialogue, it is to awaken to its daily life, it is to allow oneself to stop in time, to discover memories, details of the urban daily life, and to open one's eyes to the urban totality.

5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Through the products presented in the *digital sketchbook* delivered by the students, it was possible to mark the absorption of knowledge and the proposed content. Despite the question posed, of a possible adaptation in the way of conducting a discipline of a notably practical nature remotely, it is noted that the exchange of knowledge, discussions, and debates was possible virtually. However, it was observed that the virtual teaching model brought a certain discomfort to the students and that over time it became tiring or distressing to the students. It became annoying to be on the other side, at the window of the computer or cell phone, inside the house, entering the intimate space. A reciprocal feeling between teachers and students mixed with the uncertainty that this circumstance carried. Despite the limitations and insecurities attributed to the moment, it was possible to understand that the obstacles were overcome and the objectives achieved.

It should be noted that visual records become more intact as a process when it is proposed to the academic to abdicate scenes and landscapes plastered and framed classically and conventionally, such as the "postcard" scenes. By launching themselves into the search for more intimate, personal, circumstantial frames, the unexpected and the unusual allowed the capture of the moment, of the fleeting scene in drawing. Result of the deconstruction of the vitiated and preconceived look about the

landscape and a new construction towards an interpretive and peculiar look, where the "kitsch", the vulgar, the minor and "unimportant" detail, the deviations, and the ruptures fit.

It was possible to debate the teaching and methodology mediated by digital platforms. Also understand that the importance of physical presence in the urban space, allowing physical contact and sensations caused by smells, sounds, and the intensity of lights will not be supplied by the intermediation of digital instruments. They can meet emerging demands or be complementary tools to teaching and proposed methodologies.

Finally, it was possible to understand that the proposed discipline was never intended to be configured as a course offered in the distance learning modality, although the methods employed have converged to do so. At that moment, a collaborative and collective methodology was being built, so that it would be possible to meet the circumstances of the pandemic and social isolation, without renouncing creativity and the exercise of a new look at the city, even between screens.

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