

Critical Travel and Work- Mekong: Ho Chi Minh to Phnom Penh

A 'critical travel and work' model of travel demands an immersive, engaged, multi-sensory, approach to study and travel. A rapidly developing city provides a collapse of time and future urban conditions upon a physical location allowing for intense investigation of the possible future of both global urban conditions and specific manifestations of place. This paper describes the University of Houston College of Architecture's 2013 Pan Asia study abroad program sited in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam and Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

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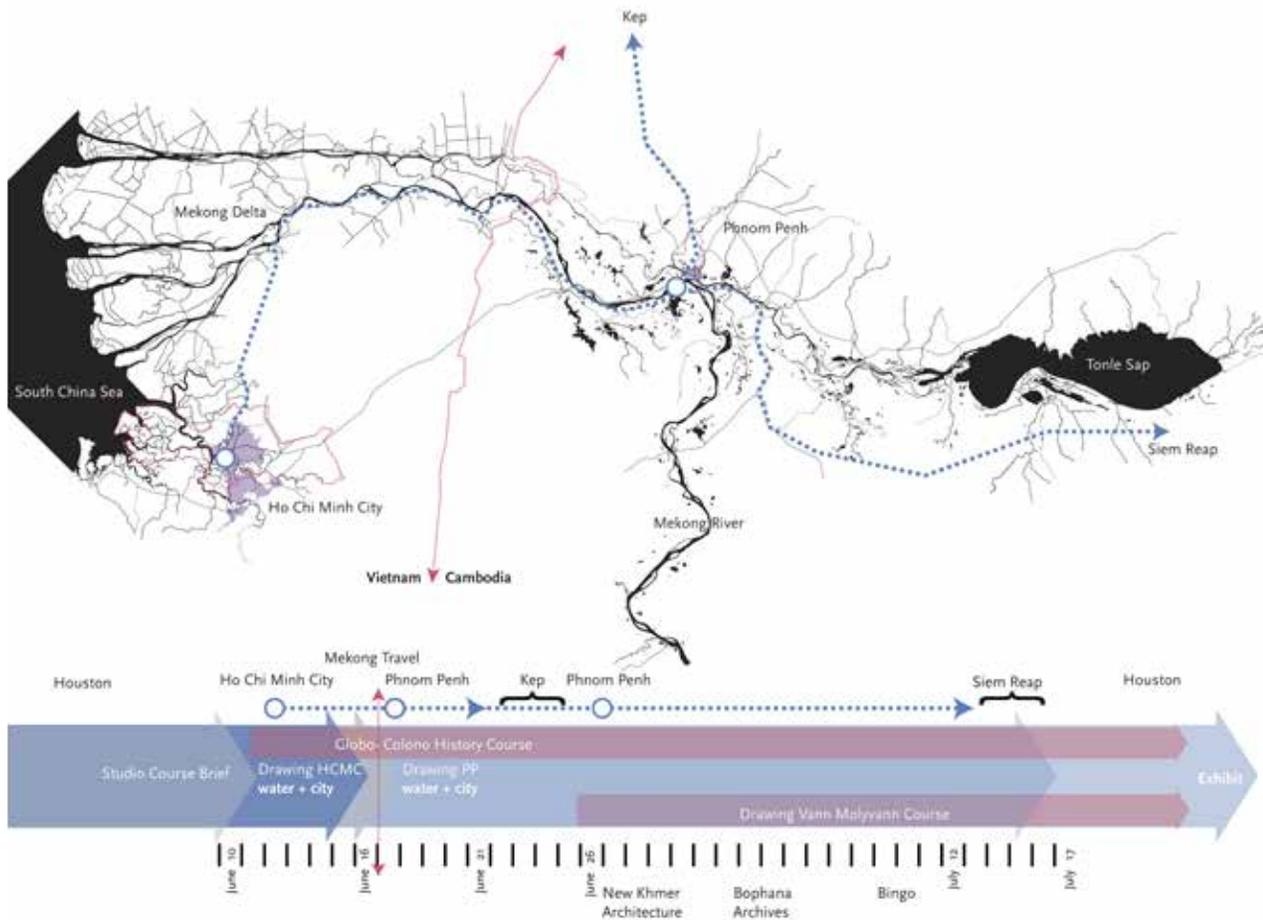
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ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Architectural study abroad programs have the potential to act as catalysts for students' engagement in global and local issues and to have a transformative effect on their perception and understanding of context and place throughout their careers. However, this desired result is only possible when a careful merging of curriculum and study topic is achieved: faculty must clearly define a mission for the program, administrators must devise a selective admissions process that is as financially neutral as possible, and students must be willing to challenge academic and cultural assumptions and take risks that lead to academic discovery. While this set of goals can be achieved with programs in varying locations and durations, we argue that an intermediate length course of study in a dynamic urban center of a developing country offers a particularly conducive environment for students and faculty to engage meaningfully with the city they are studying, in this case: Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam and Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

From our experience traveling with students in Southeast Asia and other challenging locations, we have seen the value of putting students in a position where they must be critically self-aware and open-minded: in a demanding urban environment, one can run through several paradigm-shifting realizations just while figuring out how to get dinner. The student work produced in response to these travels shows marked improvement in demonstrating sensitivity to and engagement with context, and the intersection of globalizing forces and local conditions.

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The challenge for faculty in the high-intensity setting is to help students to synthesize the surfeit of ever-changing information emanating from a dynamic context in a range of modalities: formal, political, economic, ecological, etc. For this reason, we have found that developing cities are a good fit for advanced studios, with students who already have formal fluency and are ready to truly and thoroughly investigate the context for their work and then formulate a critical, and sometimes controversial, response. In a sense, when a rich and synthetic product is desired from students, a city like Phnom Penh becomes an ‘easy’ destination, because the experience of daily life sparks critical re-evaluation of assumptions about urbanism more than any syllabus could. The syllabus is no longer a list of requirements but an organizational framework to prevent students from being overwhelmed by the flood of information. The development of specific topics to share and discuss before the trip, however, provides a lens through which to pursue readings, writing, and studio.

This paper describes the University of Houston College of Architecture’s Pan Asia study abroad program that was offered in the summer of 2013 and draws conclusions on how its successes and weaknesses can inform future study abroad programs in any locale as well as influence the established course of study at the home institution. Faculty designed the program to take place in Vietnam and Cambodia inviting important researchers to develop the curriculum and co-teach.

PREPARING TO TRAVEL CRITICALLY

The 2013 Pan Asia program examined urban development in the Mekong Delta and surrounds, where both natural ecology and built conditions are in perilous

Figure 1: Mekong map and travel itinerary.

flux. Despite political struggles between the countries of Vietnam and Cambodia, Ho Chi Minh City and Phnom Penh have always been tied by the Mekong River and its economic trade routes. Along the Mekong differences in culture and geography have created specific ecologies where water meets urbanism. However, developing trade, and now international capital, trends toward a homogenous post-colonial city where the water infrastructure is regarded as simply an impediment to growth. The program explored traditional Vietnamese and Khmer attitudes toward the city and landscape while studying the forces of global capital on those vernacular conditions. Students were charged with re-imagining both cities as different versions of a dynamic, hydraulic urbanism. Their design responses incorporated architecture, landscape architecture, and civil engineering in varying degrees depending on site and program.

The study of critical issues in a developing country supports the emerging trend toward basing study abroad programs in a professional curriculum. The Pan Asia summer semester complements the Comprehensive Design studio, an intense semester of total building design which Pan Asia students had just completed, and sets up the independent professional 5th year studios. This sequencing is ideal, as advanced students are well equipped to actively manage their travel experience and carry lessons learned abroad into future independent work.

During the six-week travel portion of the program, the group spent the first week in Ho Chi Minh City, where they studied the studio site, met with a local urban planner, and discussed critical approaches to mapping. During the second week they traveled via Mekong River boat to Phnom Penh, where they lived in a restored 60's Khmer villa for over a month. There they toured New Khmer Architecture, new satellite cities on the fringes of Phnom Penh, UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) heritage sites documenting the Khmer Rouge destruction, and visited local archives.¹ Visits here are important to comprehend Phnom Penh as a physical manifestation of independent Cambodia through the movement known as New Khmer Architecture,¹ which blended modern architecture principles with Cambodian tradition. This period of innovative architecture and urban planning made Phnom Penh known as the 'Pearl of the Asia'². During this month in Phnom Penh, the group spent a long weekend in the seaside town of Kep and documented abandoned villas from the pre-Khmer Rouge era. The final week was spent in Siem Reap to study the vastly different hydraulic city conditions of the historic Temples of Angkor and the contemporary floating villages of the Tonle Sap.

Students applied to the program in the fall of 2012 with regular meetings scheduled in the spring of 2013. The College of Architecture offers multiple summer abroad programs, and qualifying students were offered only modest stipends to offset the cost. It was important to the Pan Asia faculty group to keep travel costs low. Student fees were closely tied to travel and lodging costs. From previous trips to Cambodia, faculty knew of a good hotel and workspace in Phnom Penh. It would be preferable to have a proper studio space akin to the Studio-X travel program at Columbia, but given the 6-week travel time, a strategy was employed of working portably (and economically) on laptops while traveling and then following up with a more serious charrette once back home at the university for the second half of the summer. This also gave students time to process and reflect on their experience and respond with final design work conducted in a setting relatively free of distractions. An exhibit of work followed during the College's fall lecture and exhibition series, which opened on the first weekend of the fall semester.

Besides admissions and logistical planning, the faculty wanted to prepare students personally for travel to Southeast Asia. In the spring, faculty addressed the ethical issues of traveling to the developing world and laid out expectations for students. Students were warned that they needed to embrace flexibility, examine which necessities in their lives were actually luxuries, and reach outside their comfort zone to navigate unfamiliar territory.



CITIES AND COURSES

The inquiry in studio studied the relationship between rapid urbanization and water infrastructure. Half of the class used a site along the Saigon River in Ho Chi Minh City, and half worked with a rapidly developing lowland north of the now infilled Boeung Kak lake in Phnom Penh. The entire class participated in documenting and master planning each site. A single analytical document, prepared after site presentations during a planning charrette in each city, laid out issues for individual projects to address. Such cross-pollination between sites was seen as appropriate, given the intermingling of histories between the two cities.

Ho Chi Minh City has grown rapidly since the American-Vietnam war, from roughly 1 million to 9 million in 40 years. Traditionally a port city on the Saigon River and delta, the area developed a complex network of canals and docks for Chinese and European trade. As the industry shifted scales, industrial space along the smaller canals caused serious environmental problems for local residents. Larger canals became obsolete as growing international trade demanded larger boats and berths, and the port itself is consolidating functions further away from the city center. Possibilities exist for rethinking these large plots of land as the working part of the everyday city.

Phnom Penh was developed as a French protectorate against Vietnamese domination, and its original plans are entirely European.³ The 1960's brought optimism to the Khmer people, as the French left and Cambodia gained independence. Arts, education, and urban affairs were expanded under independence, albeit based on a French structure. These advancements were lost in the 1970's years of civil war were followed by the Khmer Rouge's forced evacuation of 2 million inhabitants from the city in 1975. After four years of vacancy, the Vietnamese from 1979 to the 1990's occupied Phnom Penh, during which time its current political structure was established through United Nations intervention.⁴

Today, government concessions give away parts of the city to foreign investors in order to gain some sense of the modernity that was lost in the 1960's. Only

Figure 2: Ho Chi Minh City aerial view and map with population growth and flood data.

now has the city recovered its population from 1970, and several factors point to the rapid urbanization of the low-lying rural area its edges.⁵ While many unremarkable projects are planned that bring global space and finance to the city, opportunities exist to extract a local condition that takes advantage of, instead of ignoring, the unique Mekong, Tonle Sap, and Bassac River conditions, their natural flood management, and their effect on the built environment. The studio explores challenges to local Khmer urban development in Phnom Penh and proposes ways in which designers can draw upon the existing local landscape, critical to the sustainability of the capital city.⁶



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A history elective, “Colonial to Global History,” was offered to complement studio. Drawing relationships between the European colonization of Saigon and Phnom Penh during the 19th century and the rapid development during the late 20th century city, students documented the hidden traces of a continuum of urban thought processes. Differences between the historical developments of the two cities provided additional evidence of the city as a colonial project, then and now⁷. Student papers explored the visible ways in which the struggle between colonial and local is manifest in the city.⁸

The “Drawing Vann Molyvann” elective examined the work of pre-eminent Khmer Modernist architect Vann Molyvann, who trained in Paris and worked for Le Corbusier before returning to Cambodia in the late 1950’s. His works shows a remarkable promise of modernity with careful attention to local Khmer history. Students worked in pairs to photograph, model, and diagram selected remaining, but endangered, works for their formal clarity and response to the challenging natural environment.

DYNAMIC IMMERSION AND HYPER-CONTEMPORARY DOCUMENTATION

In the summer of 2013, Pan Asia students and faculty lived in Cambodia during a month of heavy political campaigning leading up to the election for prime minister, the results of which are still in dispute. Campaigns still occur mostly in the streets, and talk of the current government’s corruption and land grabbing was prevalent. It was difficult for the group to leave Cambodia a day before the return of opposition leader Sam Rainsy from exile and a week before election day. They had become immersed in events unfolding in real time—drawn in most obviously via political activity and reinforced by their discoveries about rapidly occurring errant development and ecological damage.

Figure 3: Phnom Penh aerial view and map with population growth and flood data.

As architecture students with significant experience in analyzing the built environment, Pan Asia participants were well positioned to insert themselves into the conversation about development in the Lower Mekong Basin and contribute to the effort to document existing conditions. Both before and during the trip, faculty worked to frame the issues facing the Lower Mekong and suggest ways that student work might actively engage them.

Students were humbled by the industriousness and hopefulness of the Khmer people in the face of ongoing government corruption and human rights violations. With thorough preparation and a sensitive tone set by faculty, students quickly and empathetically saw the importance of shining a light on the vast potential thwarted by self-interested authorities and investors. There was urgency to the work there, as Phnom Penh development has been so clearly mismanaged. Documenting the site and the city, students were in effect visual investigative journalists, analyzing the physical evidence of obvious and ongoing urban and environmental destruction that is elided in government statements and reporting in the state newspaper. The process of bearing witness to a culture thriving in adversity and the admiration students felt for that culture led to studio work that was particularly sensitive to its context.

The following problems were engaged by students and addressed by developing observational documentation strategies:

- 1) **Lack of Access to Researchers.** Years of conflict have hindered academic dialogue in Southeast Asia, particularly Cambodia, and prevented designers from documenting its unique typologies, designs and urban data. The region has been in a state of occupation or conflict for much of the past two hundred years and has played a decisive role in the foreign policy of colonial and post-colonial regimes and American war efforts.
- 2) **Heavy Handed and Rapid Development.** As the region has stabilized politically, foreign investment contributes to an economic and construction boom. These new projects have neglected the existing water infrastructure or failed to provide new alternatives.⁹ Poorly constructed buildings have sprung up rapidly around the rivers. Additionally, treasured modernist buildings, such as those by Van Molyvann in Phnom Penh have been destroyed or are in danger of destruction
- 3) **Documentation of Disappearing Water Management Strategies.** The 3,000 mile Mekong, once the backbone of the Khmer Empire, now connects some of Asia's oldest and most complex societies. Previous research by the authors argues that vernacular solutions to water management could be employed in the context of contemporary environmental issues.¹⁰ However, they have not been employed in more urbanized contexts because they are not well documented or widely known. Such a study uncovers strategies for improved design and planning practices for urban environments engaged with flood zones. Coastal environments around the world are increasingly threatened by changes in climate and water level. This research contributes to expanding the tools available to designers to work meaningfully in these challenging environments.
- 4) **Observation of Water Rights + Access.** On April 19, 2011 the four countries that share the lower reaches of the Mekong River voted and failed to agree upon the construction of a controversial dam in Laos, the first dam on the

river south of China. All four countries retain the right to build dams without agreement by neighboring countries.¹¹ The impact of these dams may result in future conflicts between countries sharing the river.

- 5) Little Existing Design Literature. Design analysis and research offers a unique, and under-documented perspective of both cities. Particularly, little literature is available on the urbanisms of modern Phnom Penh. Studies are available on related topics such as: agriculture, irrigation, fishery resources, mineral resources, navigation, and hydroelectric power generation. Urbanism is considered in these texts as a related component. It is not, however, the lens through which Phnom Penh is viewed and remains a critical piece of missing research on the region.

By engaging these issues, students worked together to define methods of hyper-contemporary documentation, where an urban landscape is recorded as it is changing. This work occurs without the benefit of established academic resources and is needed before the city congeals into a more static form. Students must find a way to have a personal dialogue with an actively changing city rather than preparing an overlay upon a static environment. The realities of obtaining data and conducting academic research in this manner frame a larger question: what is design's agency to operate in this environment? This question can only be answered over time since each study abroad program is an active investigation into how architects can truly engage with the city. Students who have experienced the pressure to hyper-document first-hand will likely have many opportunities to revisit the skill as architectural careers become more global.



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LESSONS BROUGHT HOME

Developing nimble global programs within a school of architecture is important to the health of the home university and sheds light on important local urban issues. These programs bring real-world issues to bear on issues of curriculum and nudge the university, which is pressured by accreditation standards towards a static maintenance of tried-and-true course work, toward greater global relevance. Study abroad programs that efficiently immerse students in contemporary urban issues provide evidence of the value of critical engagement that reaches beyond educational requirements. The hope is that similar modes of inquiry will be introduced into regular coursework, and that students at the home university will engage the local urban context with as much intensity as the study abroad students do. Previous Pan Asia students continue to produce sophisticated contextual analyses in their subsequent studios, and our goal is to inspire all students at the College of Architecture to work to that level.

Through the experience of observing the challenges of high-intensity, uncontrolled development, pathways are laid for students and faculty to more readily perceive the subtler versions of those issues in the American landscape. Immersion in a rapidly

Figure 4: Pan Asia exhibit view.



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urbanizing context with uneven resources allows students to quickly see the consequences when key elements are not in place during development and gives them a more thorough understanding of the role of those resources in more stable cities: planning, water management, utilities, traffic control, surveying, title rights, etc.

Once out of school, Pan Asia students will have a unique skill set to offer prospective employers. They have experience navigating unfamiliar institutions, synthesizing conflicting, changing streams of information, and can quickly and sensitively ascertain site conditions. Most importantly, students come away with a deeper understanding of the privileges inherent in their personal and academic lives and a broader global perspective. Study abroad allows architecture to more surely establish itself as a vital component in a liberal arts education.

CHALLENGES + LIMITATIONS

Challenges and limitations of the study abroad model include compressed timeline, language and cultural barriers, and transfer of work produced to the local design community. These limitations were mitigated when possible or acknowledged and discussed when solutions were not readily available. Local guides and translators aided in bridging language and cultural barriers. The constraints of time were acknowledged and intense site engagement and documentation employed to make best use of available time. Back at home, the group relied on a few weeks to finalize written, analysis, and design work. Future studios will produce website documentation to distribute to local partners and design communities.

Figure 5: Drawing the city and water of Phnom Penh. Analysis and design work by Martha Gloria.

CONCLUSIONS

The visit to the Temples of Angkor at the end of the Pan Asia trip provided a moment of clarity for the Pan Asia group. We were humbled by the vast expanse of formal beauty and sophisticated hydraulic landscapes. It was a Khmer style “grand tour” experience, where one marvels at the accomplishments of a historic culture, but is also reminded of the instability of the monuments’ contemporary political and ecological context, as when we had to bribe groundsmen to let the group climb to the top of Angkor Wat or when we crossed the once filled but now dry Eastern Baray. Faculty intentionally saved this experience for the end of the trip, so students would not be paralyzed by history and could also bring to bear their newly acquired knowledge of contemporary Khmer culture. In this way, a visit to the temples is more than a pilgrimage to an important site. It is another step in expanding a continuum of global understanding.

This brings up an important lesson to take from this case study when designing study abroad programs: the faculty must set the tone for a program to be taken seriously by all involved. A dynamic contemporary environment is an ideal context for architectural students to make the transition from passively absorptive student to probing professional investigator, but this does not happen automatically. Faculty must prepare students to be ready for a difficult trip, while at the same time articulating all that can be gained by taking initiative, and owning their experience. Students who rise to the occasion by letting go of expectations and embracing challenges have a transformative educational experience.

ENDNOTES

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