

Cultural Exposure: Alternatives to Traditional Travel Abroad

Traveling abroad is an experience as simple as placing oneself outside of one's comfort zone and into a foreign culture. That culture could be experienced through volunteering at a local homeless shelter, discussing poverty with returning citizens, or constructing latrines in rural Nicaragua. Traveling to a foreign country isn't required to travel abroad, but traveling to a foreign culture is.¹

CULTURAL EXPOSURE: ALTERNATIVES TO THE TYPICAL TOUR

The typical European architectural tour brings students to new places where they can engage new things, but it does not immerse them in a culture. If architecture schools are going to effectively prepare students for this discipline, we must immerse students in the cultural issues that are prevalent across our society. This paper explores several variants on the traditional study tour. In all cases, the intention is to more deeply immerse students into a given culture that is different from their own.

The most effective way to learn a language is through full immersion. A person can spend years in another country and never learn the language if they are not forced to use the local language. But, if they are required to immerse themselves, they will quickly adapt, by necessity.

"Travel abroad" serves many roles, but the exposure to other cultures is the aspect of travel abroad that is most critical. All students of Architecture must have their perspectives broadened if they are to be culturally and socially responsive designers. In the past, we emulated Kahn and Corbusier on the traditional European tour. However, in this century, there are alternatives to the traditional European tour that embed students within situations that can more effectively prepare them for the 'globalized' world in which we are working and living.

While traveling to Europe can be inspirational and educational, bringing students to areas where they are culturally challenged enables students to expand their perceptions of culture, economy, society and sustainability in fundamentally different ways. I have taken students to Kenya and Africa multiple times. Traveling to 'developing' areas of the globe is a phenomenal learning experience and one that I encourage for all interested students, given the appropriate support and structure for the experience. Traveling to 'developing areas' of the globe is one great option for those who can afford it, but there are other options available.

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THE EVOLUTION OF TRAVEL ABROAD

As a student of architecture, I was deeply inspired by trips to France and Italy during my undergraduate education. I lived in Florence for several months and took courses in an Italian Villa that was owned by Syracuse University. I studied the Italian language and spent thousands of hours drawing buildings and piazzas. But, I never gained any deep understanding of the cultures that I was visiting. I learned about formal characteristics of architecture and urban design in these places, but I learned very little about the nuances of culture, society and the people that were the inspirations for these masterpieces.

When I became an architecture faculty member, I had no interest in replicating these travel abroad experiences. I co-led a travel abroad trip to Australia in 2009 for undergraduate students of architecture and interior design and have taken interdisciplinary groups of students to East Africa in 2011 and 2013. On all of these trips, my intention was to immerse these students in aspects of local culture which will force them to think more deeply about who they are and what their role in society will be. These immersive experiences are the ones that most deeply connect individuals to a sense of shared humanity. As a proponent of public interest design, I believe this is often what is most critically neglected in contemporary architecture education.

Comparing my travel abroad experience from 1988 to a travel abroad experience in 2014 requires us to consider how changes in culture and technology have affected all experiences and perceptions of travel, culture and difference. When I traveled abroad, there was no internet, no cell phone and no ATM. Even traveling in a country where there was no language barrier required a student to quickly understand how to navigate banks, phones, bus schedules and other aspects of daily life which are now basically the same experience in most industrialized nations. Today, we can use our personal cell phones for communication and information on transportation and access an ATM at any corner. We can use Google Maps to make sure we are never lost, even in the deepest corners of Venice. What used to be a cultural challenge to navigate is now eradicated due to technology.

Technology has enabled this 'globalized world' in which we are more aware than ever of the actions of individuals, societies and governments across the world. At the same time, there are significant increases in the numbers of students who are traveling abroad while in college. This is both a great opportunity for the students, and often, a great financial opportunity for the university or the private travel abroad programs that are advertising heavily with these students.

CULTURAL EXPOSURE THROUGH TECHNOLOGY

Technology can also provide opportunities for alternatives to traditional 'travel abroad' by connecting people in the US with communities across the globe. Traveling is ideal, but through sharing of stories, photos and videos one can also begin to communicate the sense of a place. Video conferencing and recorded interviews provides a means of connecting students with people in other parts of the globe. Working with non-profits that travel to these regions can provide relationships to people who are deeply involved with these places.

CULTURAL EXPOSURE THROUGH DESIGN RESEARCH

Another type of 'travel abroad' is focused, culturally specific research. Historical, cultural, social, political, economic, technical and design/construction related background research is essential whether students are traveling or not. Applied research

to address regionally-specific design issues, that have been identified through research, can be a tremendous tool to engage students in real-world design development and innovation. My students have utilize mock-ups to replicate the design and construction conditions for the communities with whom we are working. Through these means, we are able to introduce students to one central aspect of cultural difference, especially as it relates to design sensitivity and innovation.

CULTURAL EXPOSURE NEAR HOME

One variant of ‘travel abroad’ can be experienced within one’s own locale. For five years I have taught seminars and studios that engage students with non-profits and the communities that those non-profits serve. We have worked with communities in rural Tanzania as well as in impoverished urban areas within the US. While a student traveling to rural Tanzania is expected to have their world shift as a result of that experience, a student can also be powerfully impacted and educated by working with local communities. Through engagement with local communities, students have had experiences that have challenged their identity and their sense of their role in society. If Architects are responsible for the health, safety and welfare of occupants of our buildings, we should expand that to include occupants of our society.

CULTURAL EXPOSURE: TRAVEL ABROAD FOR OUTREACH

The Millennial Generation has provided us with students who are very focused on a desire to ‘do good.’ There is a strong drive to see what they can do professionally that will benefit communities in need. This aligns with changes in the profession and education of architecture. The rise of Architecture for Humanity, Public Interest Design and other similar organizations are a direct response to the recognition that designers and communities in need have much to gain by working together.²

Anyone who has led a travel abroad trip knows that, when all goes well, students gain new perspectives on the world. But, for many, the experience can be quite insular. They often remain surrounded by their classmates and may have very little direct engagement with the people and culture that they are visiting. In travel abroad for outreach, there can be a level of engagement that connects students with a different culture in a manner that touches their own sense of identity and humanity. I have introduced students to these communities in a variety of ways including actually traveling to the region. When students do experience life in impoverished, developing areas, in an appropriate and supported trip, their lives can open up in ways that are not possible with the typical European study trip.

It is important to state that there are many examples of outreach trips that do not engage the local culture. Groups from our own university plan trips to impoverished areas several times a year during which they will all work on building a house or do something that will benefit some part of the community. But, without someone giving them the tools to engage experiences of difference, they can often leave these trips with no real sense of the place they have visited. They often work with other Americans on these projects and leave with a sense of accomplishment, but little cultural growth.

TRAVEL ABROAD IN EAST AFRICA

I have taught two interdisciplinary undergraduate classes (2011 and 2013) in which students from multiple disciplines, including architecture, interior design, product design, industrial design, international studies, anthropology, philosophy,



Figure 1: UC students interacting with community members in Roche, Tanzania, 2011.



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accounting, biology and others traveled with me and members of the non-profit Village Life Outreach Project, to East Africa. In each case, we met twice per week for class and had 10-12 weeks of preparation before traveling.³ Students had a series of readings and projects that were intended to introduce them to this specific location and non-profit, but also introduce them to many issues that should be considered before traveling to a place where one engages a culture of difference.

We read articles on post-colonial theory from Edward Said, Amos Rapoport and others.^{4,5} We study the history, culture, societal norms, construction norms and languages of the place we will be visiting. We have presentations from many who have traveled or lived in the region. The students also research other non-profits who are working in the region to understand what they are doing, what is working and what is not working. We then critically assess the work of Village Life Outreach Project, with whom we will be working. Students identify the goals and projects of Village Life and slowly develop proposals to further the work of the organization while they are on the ground in Tanzania. This comes after weeks of study and iteration. The projects have to be deployed or developed with only six days in the villages, so we have multiple back-up options and contingencies.

This trip runs very smoothly. It has been led by the Cincinnati-based non-profit Village Life Outreach Project twice per year since 2004. We have Kenyan drivers who are trusted friends, we know people at the borders and at our hotels, we have already experienced most of what can go wrong on the trips, so the students experience little disruption. We have nightly de-briefings to discuss both practical and emotional experiences of the day.

When students arrive at the Nairobi airport, they generally feel relieved that it is not that different than an airport in the US. But, transitioning from the urban conditions of Nairobi to rural Tanzania is always illuminating for the students. Driving from Nairobi to our base in Shirati, Tanzania is ideal because of the speed at which the change occurs. We leave Nairobi and pass through the slums at the edges of the city. This is the beginning of cultural discoveries for the students.

Most of these students are seeing deep-seated poverty for the first time in their lives. Our first stop is at an overlook where we can view the Great Rift Valley. Local vendors sell goods here and the students are aggressively hassled by individuals who are clearly impoverished and in need of their money. This type of

Figure 2: Students from Humanitarian Design Honors Course with community members in Roche, Tanzania, 2011.

experience can be traumatic for a student if they have not been prepared for a tangible experience of poverty.

Our next stop is at the Kenya-Tanzania border where we have to exit the vans and walk through gates, fill out paperwork on both sides of the border and wait while the drivers go through a lengthy interrogation process. There are military personnel with machine guns walking around and impoverished individuals trying to sell us bananas or peanuts. This is also the first bathroom where the flies, odors and open pits make the students keenly aware that things have changed.

The work that Village Life does is only possible because we have a local non-profit partner on the ground in Tanzania, working with the local villages. While in Tanzania, we stay at dorms within a compound built by our partner, the Shirati Health, Education and Development (SHED) Foundation. We share meals together with SHED and others from the local community.

For seven days, we work in the three villages with whom Village Life partners. We have vans going in multiple directions to transport students to different projects. We have meetings with our partners and communities in the villages where we work. The students and faculty are continually adjusting to the constantly changing conditions that are emerging while we are there. Working in rural Tanzania requires extreme patience and flexibility.

When we discuss the experience at the end of the trip, the students inevitably describe their interactions with the local members of the community as the most transformative component of their experience. Many admit that they signed up initially because we would be going on safari. But, after spending time with individuals in the villages, the students typically debate whether we should skip the safari to extend our time in the villages.

While on safari, we have an evening discussion about the students' overall impressions of their experience. They typically reiterate that the preparation was critical, but additionally, how much their experience was completely unexpected. There is variation in regards to what had the greatest impact on each student. It can be a conversation with a driver, a cook, a villager or any of the others with whom we interact, but it is always a human *interaction* that has the greatest impact.

These students were generally interested in community outreach before taking the class, but following the class, the understanding of their role and potential of humanitarian work increases immensely. Many have become deeply engaged with non-profit work for communities in need.

These trips are expensive and their carbon footprint is extremely high, but the positive impacts upon students, the university and the communities with whom we work make it an essential opportunity for students at our institution.

Cultural exposure is essential for a culturally relevant architectural education, but travel abroad may not be viable due to cost, time or other reasons. Luckily, we can define travel abroad more broadly. It is ideal when we are able to leave the country to travel abroad, but there are also viable alternatives that deeply engage the unique characteristics of another culture without traveling to that place. Nothing can replace actually spending time embedded in a community, but there is also inherent value in using alternative means to engage another culture. We can also look to sub-cultures within our own region to identify communities with whom we can interact, who provide another opportunity for cultural exposure.



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CULTURAL EXPOSURE THROUGH TANGIBLE DESIGN RESEARCH

Collecting data does not inherently engage a student or individual with the nature of a given place, but the transformation of data into information and knowledge can deeply connect a student to specific aspects of a culture. A research-based design studio is one productive way of engaging many of the benefits of travel abroad without leaving the country.

In the Global Design Architecture studios at UC, we dive deeply into all issues related to construction in the region in which we are working. This includes deep research into construction practices, materials, local skills and customs around habitation. We produce extensive mock-ups as a means of testing and innovating.

I have taught three graduate architecture studios in which I, and others, acted as cultural intermediaries and translators for the students. Several individuals, who had spent time in the region where we were working, told stories, showed videos and photos and provided a basis for some level of understanding of a foreign place. We had individuals from that region come into class to speak directly with the students. The students then engaged in their own specific research about the place with the intention of attempting to gain some grasp on the culture. Together, we triangulate research to identify critical information.

The research in my global studios begins with readings of post-colonial theory to gain a shared understanding of how we can approach conditions of cultural difference. We study the history, culture, language, climatic conditions, topography, landscape, vegetation, design and construction customs of the communities where we are working. I and others share stories, photos and videos with the students. I also bring in guests who can dialogue with the students about the place. Through this process students begin to recognize the unique characteristics of the culture.

In the Roche Health Center studios, our analysis of the buildings in the region identified several critical issues with existing buildings. One example is the

Figure 3: Students in 2009 Roche Health Center Global Design Studio testing acoustic transfer through assemblies built of locally-available roof materials.

acoustic impact of torrential rains on school buildings that have un-insulated metal roofs. We addressed this by identifying all available materials that could be used for the roof and ceiling construction. We then made a series of mock-ups and compared the sound level directly underneath the roof under comparable rates of rain (from a hose). We used an acoustimeter to measure the levels as we compared different combinations of the materials. Eventually we dropped from 99 decibels directly below the roof to 84 decibels.

This research directly influenced the construction of the health center roof. Everyone who has spent time in the Roche Health clinic has noted that it is much quieter during heavy rains than other comparable local buildings. We are teaching others how to build to achieve quieter roofs and this approach to construction is spreading in the region.



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CULTURAL EXPOSURE INTERNSHIPS

The University of Cincinnati School of Architecture and Interior Design requires all students to work at firms while they are enrolled in the Architecture program. As a result of the recession, we expanded the traditional definition of the internship to include “experiential internships”. These are one or two semester internships that directly engage an experience that will positively benefit their education. One of the students from my 2009 Roche Health Center studio chose to join one of the groups traveling to Tanzania during the studio and then returned a few months later for a six-month co-op.

This student, Emily Roush, lived on the ground in rural Tanzania from March through August 2010. She worked with our Tanzanian NGO partner to identify a local Architect firm to help put together the drawing set, take the project through the permit process, interview and identify a lead contractor, put together and train a construction team, identify material sources and get them delivered, put together a budget and schedule, and begin the construction of this project. It would have never happened without her. I was in contact with her nearly every day by phone or e-mail to work through issues of coordination, management, construction or design. I traveled to the region in June 2010 and worked extensively with her and her partner (a skilled design/builder from the US) to work through many unresolved details in the construction.

Figure 4: UC Graduate Architecture student Emily Roush with construction team at Roche Health Clinic site in Roche, Tanzania, 2010.

We are looking at the possibility of having other students return to Tanzania to continue leading the construction of future buildings for the Roche Health Center. However, finding students with the particular combination of skills, responsibility, intelligence and capacity to get things done is rare. We do foresee the possibility of training a select group of students for this role, if they can be identified early in their education. Travel abroad as an experiential internship is a great opportunity when the needs of a project align with the skills of an interested student.



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CULTURAL EXPOSURE NEAR HOME

If the goal of travel abroad is to open up students to cultural difference, we don't have to travel far to encounter these experiences. One alternative to provide cultural exposure opportunities is to engage students in community design projects within poverty-stricken areas or culturally unique areas within their region. Introducing students to parts of their community that are of different socio-economic or ethnic conditions can be more culturally illuminating than a typical student tour to Europe.

Through community meetings and outreach work within the Cincinnati community, I have had several opportunities to meet with individuals and groups and travel through some of the poorest communities in Cincinnati. This experience can be as eye-opening as travel to any part of the world. In one sense, working with these communities is a greater risk than working abroad because we don't get on a plane and leave at the end of the trip. Working within our community is more loaded for all of us, but the benefits for the students, community and university are immense.

In fall 2013, I co-taught a class on issues of poverty in Cincinnati with Dr. Victor Garcia and Dr. Ilma Barros in association with the Cincinnati-based non-profit CoreChange Cincinnati.⁶ During the class we set up meetings between our students and individuals from our community with whom the students would typically not be interacting. This included some individuals living in concentrated disadvantage and others who had spent time in prison. These individuals had all gone through personal transformations and were now working to help others

Figure 5: Students and members of CoreChange Cincinnati interacting with community members in Price Hill, Cincinnati in fall 2013.

stay out of prison. Our students found this meeting to be completely revelatory. Many students had perceived these 'returning citizens' to be fundamentally different from themselves. The interactions we had with these individuals left the students feeling that these people were, at some level, no different than themselves. The individuals had some bad luck or made some bad choices, but they were not so different. This type of cultural realization can occur by interacting with people speaking Swahili in rural Africa or in poor communities in Cincinnati. However it occurs, this type of cultural exposure is critical for the broadened perspective of humanity that is essential within our discipline.

ENDNOTES

1. University of Cincinnati student Daniel Ruter who traveled to Tanzania with me and took course on Cincinnati poverty with me.
2. www.architectureforhumanity.org
www.publicinterestdesign.com
www.publicinterestdesign.org
3. www.villagelifeoutreach.org
4. Edward Said, "Culture and Imperialism", Lecture at York University, Toronto, February 10, 1993, <http://www.zmag.org/zmag/articles/barsaid.htm>. Accessed November 4, 2008.
5. Amos Rapoport, "Development, Culture Change and Supportive Design", *Habitat International*, Vol. 7, No. 5/6 (1981): 249-268.
6. www.corechangecincy.com