

Slowness: The Dialogue Between Architecture and Landscape in Scandinavia

“The degree of slowness is directionally proportional to the intensity of memory. The degree of speed is directionally proportional to the intensity of forgetting.”

- Milan Kundera, *Slowness: A Novel*

A RAINFALL OF IMAGES

Architecture as a three-dimensional, inhabitable construct requires first-hand experience for a more comprehensive understanding and analysis to occur. Thematic overlaps can be found in contemporary critiques of current trends in architecture and the way we engage it. These critics include Michael Meredith of MOS Architects in New York and Finnish architect and theorist Juhani Pallasmaa, both of whom call for a multi-sensory encounter. The disengagement from the embodied experience of architecture is described by Meredith as a corruption of the attitude towards the study of architecture abroad. He explains: “The tension between the empirical knowledge of experience and the knowledge of imagery and signification has become part of the history of the Grand Tour itself. The codex of signification, of imagery, has triumphed over the empirical. During the Golden Age of the Grand Tour, architecture was meant to be seen and experienced; now it is a media event, a two-dimensional event.”¹ The prioritization of the visual in the engagement of architecture results in a “rainfall of images” to quote Italo Calvino – perhaps a mental or photographic catalogue of diverse aesthetic moments, but lacking depth and criticality. Meredith describes the intent of the Grand Tour as a deliberate and intentional immersion that has devolved to satisfy the need for instant gratification. “The slow empiricism of the journey – where you would spend months, sometimes years, surveying a building, drawing and dissecting it – was eventually replaced with speed, efficiency, and representation (prints, photos, and souvenirs).”² The rapid accumulation of trivial artifacts has replaced the gradual accumulation of knowledge.

Juhani Pallasmaa relates speed not just to the way in which we encounter architecture, but to Architecture itself. He writes: “Architecture requires slowness in order to develop again a cumulative knowledge, to accumulate a sense of continuity and to become enrooted in culture. We need an architecture that rejects momentariness, speed and fashion; instead of accelerating change and a sense

JENNIFER SHIELDS

University of North Carolina -
Charlotte



1

of uncertainty architecture must slow down our experience of reality in order to create an experiential background for grasping and understanding change.”³ We are challenged with how to reinforce the empirical and analytical nature of the Grand Tour—rejecting speed and instantaneity—while offering a diversity of experiences in a thirty-day study abroad program.

NORDIC FORM

We found an opportunity to address these concerns in Scandinavia. A cohesiveness of cultural values with a diversity of natural and urban environments can be found in the Nordic countries. The unique and dynamic natural landscapes of the Nordic countries have profoundly influenced the development of distinct forms of Modernism, rooted in a respect for the *genius loci*, or spirit of the place. According to Norwegian architectural theorist Christian Norberg-Schulz, “In architectonic terms, then, Nordic space is topology, Nordic form collage, and Nordic gestalt a hybrid that unites contradictions.”⁴ Prioritizing the dialogue between architecture and landscape, the design response demonstrates variations from country to country. Norberg-Schulz identifies these variations, echoing the character of the landscape. He describes the subtle landscape of Denmark which lacks expansive views as resulting in an architecture of nearness and intimacy, while the vast scale and extremes of the Norwegian landscape produce an architecture of contrast.⁵ The fragmented coast of Sweden (recognized by its archipelagos) effects an architecture of memory, while the Finnish landscape of forests, lakes and filtered light engenders an architecture of incompleteness.⁶ These themes were explored as subsets of the Nordic sensitivity to the natural landscape.

WRITTEN REFLECTION

The revelation and prioritization of process in both our analytical methods as well as our methods of exploration offered a sense of slowness to the study abroad experience. Both written and graphic reflection *in situ* became important tools for processing the experiences of one culture before becoming immersed in the next. Transportation within and between countries was an important part of acknowledging slowness and allowing for reflection. It also eliminated the discontinuities that result from the near-immediacy of air travel. Train and ferry travel facilitated the perception of the changing landscape. An overnight ferry from Copenhagen to Oslo took us along the coast of Sweden into the Oslo fjord

Figure 1: Student photograph of the Oslo Opera House as landscape.

by morning. Students, unencumbered by an infinite number of potential new sights and experiences, spent time discussing their adventures in Copenhagen, as well as writing and collaging. The same opportunities occurred on our train trip from Oslo to Stockholm, and another overnight ferry across the Baltic Sea from Stockholm to Helsinki. Written reflection conducted in parks and hostels, on ferries and trains, and scribbled in sketchbooks, was then published via our study abroad blog. One student wrote:

Contesting The Ethics of Now – The Cities of Stockholm

(If politics is a process of materialization.)

We may define architecture as political plastic in order to describe the elastic way through which abstract forces slow into form. These forces are thus defined by the motions of political, economic, and even militant actions within architecture's autochthonous culture. As a result, the space we are looking at is not solid; it is in motion, or transformation.

(If material reality is a mediation of forces into form...)

...Then we might be able to, under certain circumstances, read politics through form. The corresponding details of space are in continual processes of transformation. Complexities of space continually fold and rearticulate socio-political relations into them. The task of architecture is thus, to read within this very complex and specific form of arrangements, the political reasons that have shaped form. This is the initial relationship we may deduce between force and form in a historical criticism.

Inevitably, these processes become an archeology of matter in movement. We leave behind the image of the static remains of the object by refusing the assumption that it (architecture) may resist change. Instead, this form of archeology focuses on the study of transformations and mutations within the ruins of form. This study leads to a new assumption that physical structures and built environments are always in motion, whether through the slow processes of social mutation, or the violent episodic rifts of war.

GRAPHIC REFLECTION

The graphic process was more personal, without instant dissemination—the traditional sketching on site was augmented by analytical collage-making. According to Pallasmaa, “Collage and assemblage are favoured techniques of artistic representation in our time; these media enable an archaeological density and a non-linear narrative through the juxtaposition of fragmented images deriving from irreconcilable origins. Collage invigorates the experience of tactility and time.”⁷ As a more tactile medium, collage-making became a means of capturing the material and cultural substance of the architectural encounter.

The founders of Cubism valued collage as a hybridization of painting and sculpture, existing at the threshold of two and three dimensions. Collage was used here as a tool for analysis, a means of diagramming a spatial event. Collage has the capacity to abstract and communicate both formal and phenomenal characteristics. Like a collage, revealing evidence of time and its methods of construction, a work of architecture contains this accumulated history. Analyzing existing sites and buildings through collage can capture the givens, the unknowns, and the elements in flux.



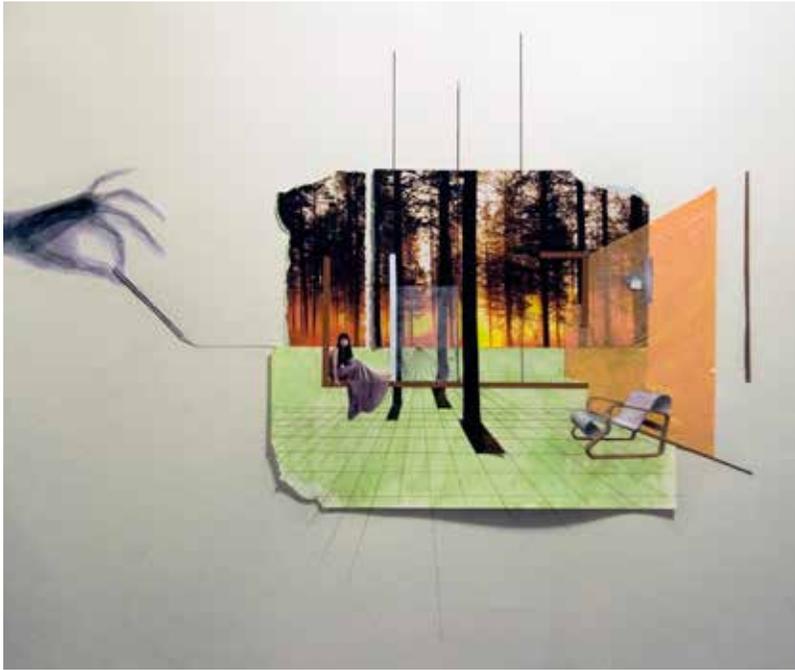
2

IN SITU COLLAGE-MAKING

The in situ analytical collage-making took two forms: collage postcards and ‘continuous’ collages. In each city, students created one collage postcard as a graphic analysis to support their blog post topic. The 4”x6” format allowed them to compose a series of discreet, contained compositions. These postcards were mailed back to us in the US, acquiring a patina and transformation during their overseas journey. The second form of in situ collage-making was the linear or ‘continuous’ collage. Meredith describes: “Architecture is a situation, a series of events, an established context or continuous conversation.”⁸ A daily ritual of collage-making served as a means of graphically reflecting on architectural and cultural experiences, unfolding over time. The Moleskine Japanese notebook, which expands to 8.25” by 10-feet served as the substrate for a continuous collage documenting their experiences through Scandinavia. The students collected paper fragments throughout their travels to use in their collage. However, using Richard Meier’s collage process as precedent, the students were challenged that the meaning inherent in the image is less important than the color, grain, texture, and/or form. This practice could integrate sketches created at various sites with elements of collage added later, as a reflective practice. The transition/translation between collage moments became crucial.

Students experimented with collage-drawing and photomontage techniques, referencing artists and architects presented prior to their departure from the US, and utilized readings and themes from writers including Norberg-Schulz, Pallasmaa, Aalto, and Asplund as conceptual fodder for collage-making. We explored collage-drawing as a sub-set of collage in which select fragments of color, texture, or image are combined with line, exploiting the canvas as a three-dimensional (potentially infinite) space. The plasticity of space plays a primary role in collage-drawing compositions. Precedents include László Moholy-Nagy, Marianne Brandt, Mies van der Rohe, and James Corner. Photomontage, in contrast, is a composite image consisting exclusively of multiple photographic images extracted from various sources. The image sources can be divided into two camps: the found and the constructed. Artists and architects working in photomontage may appropriate images from print media, found images, or they may themselves take photographs for use in their photomontages, constructed images. The students’ in situ collage-making employed found images, while their final artifacts could draw from both

Figure 2: Student collage postcards.



3

found and constructed images. Precedents include Max Ernst, Hannah Höch, Nils-Ole Lund (found), and Miralles Tagliabue (constructed).

PHOTOGRAPHY

Photography as both a tool for singular analytical images and a contributor to constructed photomontages served as another means of cataloguing embodied experience. The role of photography was not to duplicate a visual image but to reflect an emotional or physiological response. The lens became a medium for a dialogue between the observer and the observed. Once again valuing process, the accumulated images necessitated editing and curation: To deem one image more appropriate than another creates both a feeling of pride and abandonment. Composition, clarity, depth of field, etc. are all measures of the visual quality of a photograph but it was of the utmost importance to present the haptic sense of place identified in the analytical subject. The multi-sensory experience could not be unlocked with a reproduction for the eye but an artifact distilled from the hands of the observer. In this program, the student photographer was challenged to be analytical, and to capture a sensory experience rather than a purely visual one. Students were asked to investigate Norberg-Schulz's themes at three scales through photography: the landscape or urban fabric, the building, and the body. Thematic prompts continued to frame the observation and analysis of the cultural and architectural context throughout our travels.

EMBODIED EXPERIENCE

We were fortunate enough to be able to end our Nordic travels with a visit to Juhani Pallasmaa himself, spending several hours in a round table discussion in his Helsinki office. Here, he and the students began to synthesize the concept of slowness, the value placed on the subtle inhabitation of the landscape, and the role of collage as a tactile method of representation. He explained: "The very essence of the lived experience is molded by hapticity and peripheral unfocused vision. Peripheral vision integrates us with space, while focused vision pushes us out of the space, making us mere spectators."⁹ His words helped to reinforce the

Figure 3: Student analytical collage reflecting the foregrounding of nature and light in Aalto's Paimio Sanatorium, Paimio, Finland.



4

agenda of the embodied experience, and the challenge to capture what is beyond the purely visual through our graphic and written methods.

SYNTHESIS

Our explorations throughout Scandinavia placed an emphasis on slowing down to allow an awareness of this multi-sensory encounter, which must then be reflected upon. Pallasmaa describes the phenomenological experience of Alvar Aalto's Villa Mairea in Noormarkku, Finland, saying: "The composition aims at a specific ambience, a receptive emotional state, rather than the authority of form. This architecture obscures the categories of foreground and background, object and context, and evokes a liberated sense of natural duration. An architecture of courtesy and attention, it invites us to be humble, receptive and patient observers."¹⁰ This patient observation, conducted at Villa Mairea and numerous other Nordic sites, is reflected in the in situ written and graphic work of the students, as well as the more in-depth analytical work conducted upon our return to the US. Building on process to create a series of final artifacts, student produced a written case study analysis through the lens of one of Pallasmaa's themes, as well as analytical collages that serve as graphic support for the written analysis. The graphic complements employ techniques of collage-drawing and photomontage that the students honed in process work, using found or constructed photographic material, or both. The extensive body of work produced by the students both in situ and upon their return provided the opportunity for the curation of a gallery exhibition to share their investigations with other students and faculty at the university, highlighting both the process work and the most successful final collages and photographs from each student.

Michael Meredith claims: "...we need to be looking more at buildings, the particularities of their situation and history, unafraid of inclusion, *radical inclusion*. Narratives of inclusion call for networked relationships of engagement instead of fortified boundaries."¹¹ Our explorations of the dialogue between architecture and landscape in Scandinavia - experienced through an intentional, embodied, interaction - was imbedded in an inclusionary vision for the program. The students began to understand the interdependence of architecture, landscape, art, and culture, revealing that: "The degree of slowness is directly proportional to the intensity of memory..."¹² in the words of Milan Kundera – forging these embodied experiences in their minds as resources to draw from throughout their careers.

Figure 4: Student photograph capturing the intimacy of the constructed Danish landscape at the waterfront aquarium in Copenhagen.



5

Figure 5: Gallery exhibition of student work, including both process and product.

ENDNOTES

1. Meredith, Michael. "Radical Inclusion! (A Survival Guide for Post-architecture)." *Grand Tour. Perspecta*, Vol. 41. (2008): 10-16, 13.
2. Meredith, 14.
3. Pallasmaa, Juhani. "Six themes for the next millennium." *The Architectural Review*, July 1994: 74-79.
4. Norberg-Schulz, Christian. *Nightlands: Nordic Building*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996, 197.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Pallasmaa, Juhani. "Hapticity and Time: Notes on Fragile Architecture." *The Architectural Review*, May 2000: 78-84, 80.
8. Meredith, 12.
9. Juhani Pallasmaa, in a round table discussion in Helsinki, Finland, 17 June 2013.
10. Pallasmaa, Juhani. "Hapticity and Time," 82.
11. Meredith, 15.
12. Kundera, Milan. *Slowness: A Novel*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1997.