

Incremental Initiatives: Global Programming X6

To travel is to encounter the strange and unfamiliar.¹

Marshal McLuhan

CHRIS JARRETT

University of North Carolina at Charlotte

ZHONGJIE LIN

University of North Carolina at Charlotte

In an era of rapid globalization, emerging design professionals must be both globally aware and culturally adept. Studying in a foreign country typically represents one of the most significant and unforgettable experiences in one's architectural education. The perceived walls of an educational institution dematerialize when students travel internationally. Traveling abroad gives students the opportunity to gain first-hand experience of the larger global community of which we all take part. To travel, as McLuhan cites, is to encounter the strange and unfamiliar. In so doing, one discovers insights into other cultures, develops new perspectives, and learns to reflect on how one's own culture has shaped their own understanding of the world around them. But how do such travel opportunities come to be? What is required of architecture schools to develop and expand innovative international programming for students? What steps, processes and strategies might facilitate increased engagement globally? This paper describes an evolutionary model, a set of incremental initiatives undertaken by the School of Architecture [SoA] at UNC Charlotte, a mid-size architecture school with ambitious plans to significantly increase its breadth and depth of global engagement, immersion and collaboration, in the context of both teaching and research.

INCREMENT_1: GLOBAL UNIVERSITY PROGRAMMING

Most accredited schools of architecture are located in educational institutions that strive, at one level or another, to make international understanding and global awareness an integral part of campus programming, and in some cases a fundamental part of the curriculum. Many of these universities dedicate a senior administrator to provide overall leadership and direction, charged to develop, support, and organize a wide range of on and off campus programming, as well as faculty development support through various initiatives. They also typically guide the development of institutional agreements with foreign universities, and provide leadership and advice to promote campus internationalization efforts across a range of scales and activities, near and far.

Departmental efforts to expand its global programming are advised to coordinate its goals with the structures and global planning in place across the university. This is a good first incremental step. At most US universities, there exist a number of resources that will support ones international initiatives. There are also typically policies that cannot be readily dismissed, and it is prudent for departments to become familiar with them in advance of making plans. As one begins to broaden their international programming, first steps should include inviting university level leadership to the table early on in the process. There is often much to learn and uncover that will, surprisingly, serve the ambitions of the department.

INCREMENT_2: INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGES, GLOBAL WORKSHOPS

Today, students have numerous opportunities to engage in international experiences, education, and travel while earning their degrees. These opportunities include spending a semester or academic year in another country while earning course credit. The number of university students participating in exchange programs has risen dramatically in the last two decades. To date, analyses show that student exchange programs are associated with higher starting salaries and an increased likelihood of opting for graduate and postgraduate study. The current emergence of university-wide 'Global Programs' heralds new challenges and constraints for architectural educators.

For more than two decades, the SoA has supported a number of semester-long international student exchange programs with universities in England, The Netherlands, Sweden, Germany, China, and Australia. Exchange agreements generally require an equal number of students to transit between universities. Students arriving from abroad tend to invigorate the atmosphere of the school and contribute to the diversity of perspectives on any given situation. Home students studying abroad benefit from all the dimensions of encountering the strange and unfamiliar in a foreign country.

As well, for several summers over the past five years, students in the SoA participated in an intense, short-term urban design workshop at Tongji University. There were student representatives from several schools and countries. Cross-institutional teams were established. In addition, in 2012, an international workshop was hosted by a leading urban design and landscape architecture firm in China, to study the redevelopment of an historic Grand Canal Area in Suzhou, with student participants from the US, Russia, Italy, and China.

INCREMENT_3: DEMOCRACY IN SUMMER STUDY ABROAD PLANNING

For the past decade, the SoA has offered a series of unique summer study abroad programs to its undergraduate and graduate students. Unlike many schools who offer the same one or two summer study abroad programs, year in and year out and typically led by the same faculty member(s), the SoA has offered different travel options each summer led by different faculty. As such, the SoA embraced a more 'democratic' model for determining program leadership and regions of study. Every fall semester, the process has entailed an 'open call' to faculty, inviting study abroad proposals from any full-time faculty member of the school. Typically, 4-6 proposals were submitted each year, and result in 1-2 proposals selected to develop and execute the following summer. This procedure provided the greatest number of faculty to have the opportunity to lead students to some of the greatest cities in the world. Brief example descriptions follow:

CENTROeuro. In the past two centuries Central Europe has experienced rapid and dramatic political changes and the region's art, architecture, and cities both bear



1

witness to and attempt to respond to this complicated and troubled history and its legacies. Exploring six countries, students learned about the parallels among them and the differences between their artistic, architectural, and urban experiences with imperialism, historicism, nationalism, fascism, communism, and democracy. Students and faculty spent the majority of the time in six key cities: Munich, Vienna, Budapest, Krakow, Prague, and Berlin.²

SWISSenigma. Precision and rational construction is the hallmark of Swiss culture. From watchmaking to architecture and urban planning, the Swiss consider craft and beauty as inseparable qualities. At the same time, Switzerland is the birthplace of DADA, which epitomized irrationality and chance. Throughout the period between the Wars, Zurich maintained an avant-garde culture that was among the most influential in Europe. This duality in Swiss culture, between precision and experimentation, framed the itinerary of a five-week study abroad program in Switzerland.³

ROMAmor. The Rome program was created as a multi-disciplinary effort between the departments of art history and architecture that sought to foster enhanced opportunities for both faculty and students. Two faculty from each department taught concurrently over a five week period, drawing students from both departments, and from further afield. Each faculty member taught one of four 3-credit courses relevant to his or her research interests and expertise – architectural history, drawing and digital media, art and architectural history, and digital photography - drawing upon the transcendent cultural and historical milieu that is Rome.⁴

Some students have chosen to participate in multiple programs during their course of undergraduate and graduate study. However, this approach is not without its challenges. Faculty undertake an enormous amount of time and work to prepare these programs, including research, promotion, itinerary planning, logistic preparation, and design of courses for a new program. As one-off programs, they're creative but also time intensive. Substantive research and collaboration with local institutions and organizations proved very difficult. As a result, it has been challenging to generate measurable impact or influence on the curriculum in the school. Acknowledging this condition, the SoA has begun a gradual and strategic revisioning of its international programming.

INCREMENT_4: STRATEGIC VISIONING OF AN INTERNATIONAL CURRICULUM

Architecture is a key lens through which to see, understand, and participate in

Figure 1: Tugendhat House, Mies van der Rohe.

the world. In the context of rapid change, new forms of creativity, expertise and responsibility are needed. Design professionals must be both globally aware and culturally adept. The SoA celebrates these responsibilities by placing an emphasis on the need to experience and study cultural, social, legal, economic, industrial, and other contextual differences throughout the world in order to better understand how they may affect the built environment both at home and abroad.

In the spring of 2011, a core group of architecture faculty led the development of a five-year “international education plan for a global curriculum.”⁵ The proposal was ambitious and bold, targeting a 50% increase in study abroad at the undergraduate level, and a 90% increase at the graduate level. The plan entails a three-part approach, focused on: 1) study abroad; 2) international education on campus; and 3) the internationalization of SoA culture. Analysis of the economic and institutional context of the school presents assumptions. Availability and affordability were key drivers. Peer institution research was conducted, seeking to uncover the most innovative approaches to international education.

The SoA determined that broad opportunities exist to better prepare its students for success in an increasingly global society. These occasions are established to achieve the following: to further enrich and expand the international experiences available to students and faculty; to broaden and creatively develop new study abroad programs in strategic areas; to build/expand an international network of campuses, educational alliances, and research partnerships; to leverage exchanges abroad; to enrich international dimensions of the curriculum; to foster international cooperative education programs and dual degrees; to financially assist students participating in international student exchange or study programs; and, to develop international service learning, research, and outreach projects.

The SoA has set out to define “international education” as a particular learning objective of the curriculum. A mission and vision statement on international education was developed and student learning outcomes were established. A five-year road map was drafted for faculty wide review, input and revision. The mission focused on preparing globally ready architectural and urban designers who have an experiential understanding of cultural diversity gained through an integrated approach to international studies. The vision was predicated on a critical awareness of the increasingly dynamic global context of our profession.

The plan entailed developing travel opportunities that provide first-hand knowledge of the trends that underwrite global markets and culture, as well as the historical contexts that have brought them into being. Within the SoA, this meant situating the practice of architecture within the social, historical, economic, and material contexts that will condition the designer’s future response to an increasingly diverse public. It also meant providing opportunities for engaging in original research that integrates cross-cultural analysis with the aesthetic modes of investigation so unique to the arts and architecture.

INCREMENT_5: MASTER OF URBAN DESIGN (MUD) SUMMER IMMERSION PROGRAM IN CHINA

In 2010, the SoA revised the curriculum of its Master of Urban Design (MUD) program. The original curriculum was a one-and-a-half-year program: fall–spring–fall semester sequence. The curriculum was subsequently consolidated into a 12-month long program: fall-spring-summer semester sequence. This change not only condensed the time of study while keeping the same number of credits, it also enabled the introduction of a significant global education component into the curriculum.

The summer semester, starting in mid May and ending in early August, is divided into two, full-time five-week sessions. The first session takes place overseas, and consists of an intensive advanced urban design studio and urban seminar. The second session returns to campus, giving students the focused time to assimilate and develop their research and design investigations initiated abroad. The study abroad component of the MUD program is situated within a 3-year cycle. Each cycle is located in a specific region of investigation for three consecutive years. This enables more structured and consistent teaching, and allows students to investigate more thoroughly urban design questions pertinent to a particular region of the world. It also provides an opportunity for faculty members to be engaged in sustained research and collaboration.

The first cycle of the MUD summer immersive program has been based in Suzhou, China. Faculty contacts and previous collaborations facilitated this arrangement. More importantly, China is well positioned to study new patterns of urban growth and contemporary practices of urban design. With its rapid urbanization on a massive scale, the country has been undergoing dramatic new town buildings and urban redevelopments for decades, and has become the world's laboratory for new technologies and designs where global talent seek to realize their futurist visions.

The MUD_China program was tailored to explore issues relevant to Asian cities but with a global influence. It was also designed to provide students the opportunity to examine a range of topics not typically studied in American urban design studios due to the different challenges of urban environments in China and those in the U.S. Structured around the title of "Vertical Urbanism: Density, Complexity, and Verticality," the studio aimed to examine emerging patterns of urban growth and transformation in high-density urban areas, using concepts of vertical urbanism to provide alternative visions and strategies for the revitalization and expansion of urban centers. The seminar component of the abroad program focused on China's emerging new town movement and explored a number of compelling contemporary spaces, including the industrial park, theme town, and eco-city.

In the summers of 2012 and 2013, the MUD_China program attracted 14 students each year. The program was led by one faculty member and joined by adjunct faculty in China. While based in Suzhou, overnight stays (5-nights each) in Beijing and Shanghai were incorporated into the curriculum. There were also a number of day visits to other towns, including Tianjin, Hangzhou, and Wuzhen. About half of the students elected to travel to Hong Kong at the conclusion of the Suzhou-based program, before returning to campus to develop their design work. In addition to numerous historic and contemporary sites, the program incorporated visits to several urban design firms and conducted exchanges with a few peer institutions, including Tongji University and Tsinghua University. Teaching took place in different settings, in the form of guest lectures, drawing assignments, discussions, and exhibitions.

MUD_China operates in collaboration with Suzhou University of Science and Technology (SUST), making it a joint workshop that involved 10 students and 2 faculty members from this institution. Design teams were composed of American and Chinese students. Each working group consisted of four or five students. The studio questions were chosen with real sites and potential developments in the city. Local governmental agencies and developers participated in the studio, introducing the project, leading discussions, and participating in design reviews. In return, the students' projects provided them with fresh insights into the site and alternative ideas for the development. Students were excited and noticeably motivated given the opportunity to collaborate with Chinese students and clients, and the chance to

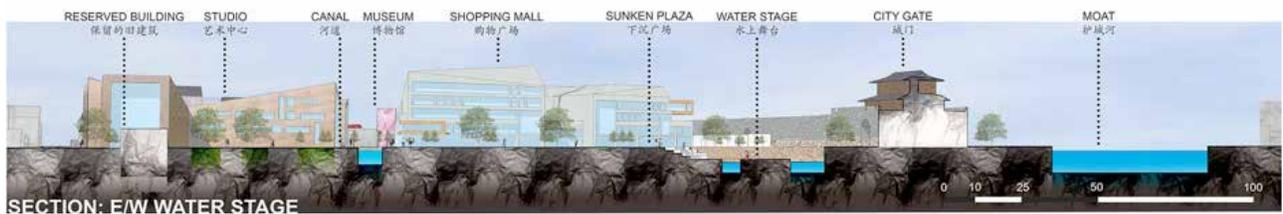


2

work on a real design project in a foreign country. The large-scale projects they visited along the trip and the dynamic urban change in the country they observed also challenged them to approach urban design in a fresh, and often more bold, way.

The project of summer 2012 studied the development of a new business and residential district in front of the high-speed train station in Suzhou Industrial Park (SIP). The 110-acre area had been built as a low-density industrial zone since the mid 1990s. However, with the continuing expansion of tertiary industries in SIP and the introduction of a high-speed rail station, the site was rezoned as a high-density business district, with plans for a state-owned developer to build office towers, hotels, and high-rise residential areas surrounding a 20-acre central park. Two proposed metro lines will intersect at the site. The new infrastructure centered on the multi-level transportation node, the high-density and complex programs, and various open spaces prompted a combinatory approach to urban design with particular attention on urban verticality.

The site for the 2013 studio was located in Suzhou’s historic center characterized by a unique double-chessboard network of streets and canals, surrounded by a few world-famous classical Chinese gardens. The redevelopment of two blocks within such a significant historic setting presented challenging urban design questions. Students were asked to consider three important aspects—history, infrastructure, and ecology—in proposing new interventions in the historic district that should maintain its cultural continuity and identity while stimulating its evolution with new programs and activities.



3

INCREMENT_6: DEVELOPING AN ASIAN URBANLAB

Building on the success of the Master of Urban Design’s summer programs in China, the School of Architecture is now considering the development of an Asian UrbanLAB. Based in China, the lab will extend to other countries in the region. This new research and outreach arm will allow faculty members to conduct research and teaching collaborations in China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia. The lab will consolidate and further develop partnerships between the School of Architecture and local institutions and practices in China. With these partnerships, the Asian UrbanLAB will also facilitate new

Figure 2: Cross-Cultural Team Presentations, MUD_China.

Figure 3: Team Cross Section: History, Infrastructure and Ecology.

opportunities for international study and internships for students.

The Asian UrbanLAB is expected to serve as a platform to investigate important issues of Asian urbanism including urban form (compact city, vertical city, metabolic city), urban sustainability (eco-city, low-carbon city, and other sustainable concepts and strategies), urban and social transformation (massive urbanization, new towns, and urban renewal), and Asian urban culture. The Lab will also collaborate with local faculty in related research fields, from the use of digital technologies in mapping cities to conducting comparative studies between Asian cities to the study of high-performance building façades to improve urban sustainability. Research funding is expected to come from trans-pacific grants for international studies in the US and Asia, as well as funds from local agencies generated through workshops and applied research projects.

The Asian UrbanLAB will also have the capacity to lead urban design workshops similar to the MUD summer studio. The MUD studios have proved that a team consisting of international and local researchers can be quite effective in studying urban design problems and providing innovative ideas and strategies for urban development. To date, this model has been well received by local communities and governments, as international experience related to urban design research is considered invaluable. The Asian UrbanLAB will provide more effective outreach and better connect the research interests in the school with research and collaborative opportunities in Asia.

CONCLUSION

In light of SoA's incremental approach of increasing its global programming, in breadth and depth, a number of conclusions have been reached. First, study abroad does not simply have to be centered on 'travel experience' alone. Second, there are parts of the world missing from architectural study abroad programs that are worthy of our attention and collaboration. Third, study abroad has the capacity to serve as a vehicle to develop mid and long term global partnerships and networks, sharing ideas, and bringing new vitality to our schools. And lastly, study abroad has the capacity to transform itself into a dynamic, collaborative laboratory for cross-cultural exchange, speculative research, lectures and workshops, productive civic engagement, and "global cooperative intelligence." As biographer Jay Martin pointed out:

As the summer of 1926 drew to a close, John Dewey found himself at the end of his short stint as a guest lecturer at the National University in Mexico City where he had been invited to speak on advanced educational problems. Fascinated by the stories he heard from Mexican teachers who came to his lectures, Dewey learned of pockets of creative education that were springing up across a number of newly founded schools. Consequently, Dewey caught a glimpse of the progressive potential of a communicatively networked system of schools that integrated, through experimental method, the practices and traditions of local culture with the aesthetic and scientific resources of global cooperative intelligence.⁶

Tomorrow's design leaders are those who will be able to better understand and navigate an increasingly globalized world. Travel, immersive study, collaboration and research abroad will continue to serve as valuable experiences for students of architecture. When fully integrated, such opportunities build students' knowledge, understanding, confidence and agility to productively participate in the context of the strange and unfamiliar, where in the end the experience as a whole becomes greater than the sum of its incremental parts.

ENDNOTES

1. Marshall McLuhan, excerpt from "Classroom Without Walls," *Explorations in Communication* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960).
2. The CENTROeuro summer study abroad program was led by Professor Emily Makas.
3. The SWISSenigma summer study abroad program was led by Professor Thomas Forget.
4. The ROMAmor summer study abroad program was led by Professors Jeff Balmer and Chris Beorkrem (School of Architecture) and Jim Frakes and Aspen Hochhalter (Department of Art and Art History).
5. SoA's "International Education Plan for a Global Curriculum" was spearheaded by Professors Emily Makas, Jeffrey Balmer, Chris Beorkrem, Charles Davis, and Jose Gamez.
6. Jay Martin, *The Education of John Dewey* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).