

Stepping Outside the Comfortable Confines of the West: Provoking Narratives on 'Other' Urbanities

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INTRODUCTION

In Spiro Kostof's two classic meta-histories on the urban artifact, he emphatically argues that urban form is read correctly only to the extent of our critical familiarity with the precise conditions that served as its generators.¹ On similar lines, Clifford Geertz – the so-called *purveyor of small things* – in his prolific writings deliberately chose not to formulate grand, overarching theories, instead seeking to find meaning in the thick descriptions prevalent across culture, time and space.² If Geertz's definition of culture as "the stories we tell about ourselves" in fact resonates true with academics and intellectuals that comprise urban morphologists around the world, to what extent have we actually written the stories that patiently await recording and writing? How often have we stepped outside the comfortable confines of our geographical settings to objectively view the urban settings of cultures that are far removed in intent and content? How critically have we viewed non-Western cities through pedagogy that negates clichéd bipolar opposites, and instead employs methodology emanating from thick descriptions?

Precisely why architectural and urban historians have feared to tread the arena of the non-Western world may be explained through a combination of complex factors. For one, the prevalent academic discourse to write and teach architectural and urban history in the Western world has never been concerned with more than a few select cultures, except at a superficial level. Even today in most architecture schools situated within the United States and Europe, few (if any) options exist for students to examine the non-West via specialized

architectural and/or urban electives offered on a regular basis. The stock Architectural History Survey course predictably skims across Islamic, Hindu, Arab, and other exotics through the course of a single session, leaving the design student seemingly perplexed. While the so-called non-Western world is already many steps removed from comfort zone of most students, their instructors' perceived 'unfamiliarity' with the subject matter is no further encouragement. Rudofsky's claim about chroniclers presenting us with a full-dress pageant of formal architecture, conveniently skipping several centuries and cultures, in his brilliantly provocative *Architecture Without Architects*, still rings true today.³ Researchers have also pointed to the paucity of 'appropriate' and critically-conceived textbooks as instrumental to this prevailing scenario. It seems more likely, however, that this is not so much a predicament owing to the unavailability of textbooks and source materials, as it is reflective of how this knowledge of the non-West is effectively un-connected to an ongoing discourse on design. In bland terms indeed, most design discourses in architecture schools today – both at the building and urban scales – simply do not engage thought-provoking scenarios beyond the shores of America!

Similarly, invigorating research on non-Western urbanism – cities, urban fabrics and legislative processes – has not fared any better. Few urban design studies in architecture schools encourage broad debates on the intrinsic nature of urbanity in Asia, the Middle East or the new, if entirely characterless cities of China. For all practical purposes, Mumbai, New Delhi and Kolkata are perceived as urban disasters, while Dubai 'understood' as an anomaly, and Chong-

ing alongside the Three Gorges Dam as indicative of the actions of an aggressive state. Besides schools of design, if public forums are at all indicative of critical research brewing or not brewing within the ivory tower, three recently concluded scholarly, annual and bi-annual conference series present yet another worrisome scenario. These settings, wherein diverse debate is expected to ferment, including the International Seminar on Urban Form (ISUF), the European Association of Urban Historians (EAUH), and the Society of Architectural Historians (SAH), engaged only a precious handful of presenters impassioned by their preoccupations in dealing with the 'exotic' non-Western world. Still more significantly, it is worth noting that in all these three cases, "*half the world and more*" in Geertz's vein escaped the very act of story-writing, so much so that there were not even enough papers in this category to form a panel differentiated by thematic content or geographical region. In contrast, papers and contributions from Eurocentric and Western categories abounded.

Obviously, the task of an urban historian, morphologist and researcher is by no means simple. Unraveling the complexity of cities calls for a unique, multidisciplinary approach and draws upon a range of social, economic, political, intellectual and architectural sources. In exploring these different materials, the researcher must carefully consider the motives of the various actors who manipulated urban form often to their own ends and faithfully record the palimpsest of urban change. Most importantly, they must approach the act of urban historiography and analysis not as a canon of precedents or a chronicle of progress, but as a complex and continuing enterprise. In the several decades preceding the twenty-first century, this necessary objectivity – so required for the study of cities in the non-Western world, given the unusual and frequently obscure nature of the sources and evidence required for their comprehensive understanding – locked horns with bipolar opposites proposed in the works of Max Weber (1968), Eric Hobsbawm (1975, 1987) and Karl Wittfogel (1957).⁴ The non-Western urban environment, more typically the Oriental or 'Islamic city', also found formulaic (and often heroic) elaboration as the negation of the West. In Zeynep Çelik's words, most of the world now lapsed into homogeneity, signifying binary opposites, and defining by negation.⁵

In today's era of profound intellectual change, and a rapidly globalizing world, where the Orient and

Occident seem to collapse on each other as never before in the course of history, it is imperative for upcoming urbanists – including designers and morphologists, to pick up the strands of objective inquiry. Besides creating frameworks of investigation from within the cultural discourse and thereby addressing particular conditions embedded in time and space, there is desperate need to write more stories about worlds that are in themselves relentlessly changing into largely generic theme parks – ill-considered mixtures of influences from here, there and everywhere. A corrective is urgently required to demonstrate how the history, architecture and urbanity of the non-Western world prominently figured within the *longue durée* of world history, creating a vision of Marshall Berman's intertwined modernities.⁶ Must we adamantly wait for intellectual endeavors and stories to come forth from within the geographical regions we today designate as non-Western? Must we continue to sit on the fence waiting for this topical debate to finally begin?

Buildings-Landscapes-Cultures (BLC) *status quo* at SARUP-UWM

This nature of discussion on the unwritten stories of the non-West, and in particular compelling issues in global urbanity, lie at the center of a new doctoral research concentration involving active collaboration and resource sharing between the faculties of the School of Architecture & Urban Planning, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and the Art History Department, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

In the first year since its formal inception in 2008, Buildings-Landscapes-Cultures (hence BLC) faculty have pushed students into thinking about buildings and space as inherently connected to social, political and economic networks that contain these constructs. Research thinking and design learning are emphasized within the BLC, as dual areas that reinforce and inform each other – in other words, the historian must develop the ability to read the physical attributes of the city and '*map*' it out, while the designer must come to term with '*seeing*' an artifact. On these lines, and given the interests of some of the current BLC faculty, the Asian (read 'Global') city has figured prominently as a tool to learn from, with and about.

In fact, the physical structure and complexity of the quintessential Asian city has often presented an incomprehensible *tabula rasa* to the student

researcher and designer. For one, its plethora of urban conditions seemingly defy 'normative' logic, especially traditional descriptions of so-called rational space making. At a second level, new forms of accelerated urbanization in such developing global contexts, frequently embody radical innovation and profound change, producing an unprecedented urban place where architecture is no longer high art, and is often produced beyond the singular control of the designer. Architecture and building interventions are then, merely the means to an end, positioning their designers as inconsequential components manipulated by a larger framework of politics and economics. Therefore, as cities modernize beyond professional control, no longer is the architect, urbanist or landscape architect able to sufficiently describe, let alone influence, large areas of the urban realm as even in the recent past. How must the designer then begin to engage with the urban artifact of the Asian world? It may be argued that this double crisis of disciplinary paralysis with respect to the Asian city warrants the urgent need to study the complexity of the urban artifact on its own terms, through its multiplicity of evolving agents and actors, relationships and consequences of relentless urbanization. Most importantly, and to the dismay of the old-fashioned scholarship, no longer is architecture and city-building about conceiving 'beautiful' and 'complete' buildings – rather it is about 'opportunistic assembly' or '*bricolage*' in the manner described by Levi Strauss.

This myriad of issues have framed provocative student design and research investigations initiated within the INDIA Urban Design Studio Series held at the School of Architecture, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee USA in Spring 2008 and 2009, problematizing how conflict, contestation, adjustment and reconciliation between the past and present are embodied in the making of architecture and urban form in the Indian city. In sharp contrast to the 'static' notions of architectural and urban artifacts presented in the History Survey, these design studios suggest that designers shall have to prepare for a future wherein the Asian city will challenge our prevalent notions of space with non-space, the specific with the ordinary and transient, memory with opportunity, and permanence with impermanence. Not all shall be as exotic as the beautiful Taj Mahal – for long the bench mark on how far the non-Western Survey would extend. Instead, students now consider how the Taj is but situated in close proximity to the intensely crowded city of Agra.

Within this prevailing scenario, the first of UWM's exciting India Studio Series in 2008 examined the traditional marketplace at Madhavpura (Delhi Darwaza), located on the northern fringe of the traditional organic-accretive city of Ahmedabad in Western India. Established four centuries ago, and tenaciously surviving in the midst of urban legislation that cares precious little for history, memory or the elements of place making, this marketplace struggles to come to terms with the need for new infrastructure, and the subsequent loss of 'familiar' space. Yet the merchant guild and its *mahajan* (guild leader) see a future where they can reinvent themselves as successfully as in the past. How aggressively would their aspirations then transform the urban space contained within the traditional commercial block? How radically would new storage blocks and trade infrastructure cut into residential urban fabric that has accommodated Madhavpura's activities for centuries, and served as residences for the extended families of its many merchants? How casually shall traditions of the past be removed to make way for the future? Such was the nature of questions the students confronted in the process of thinking about Madhavpura's transformation.

While an intensely historical context, Madhavpura's view into the future was never contemplated as a slavish imitation of the past. Instead, pre-existing building typologies were systematically 'excavated' for elements that would facilitate invention, recombination and enhancement. At a second level, the kind of urban space contained within the 'ring' of commercial establishments at Madhavpura was capitalized as a 'commodity' which led to students devising diverse uses for it across their time-lines. Even more so, the twin acts of demolition, building and re-building were envisaged as deliberate stages of growth and 'un-growth' wherein 'historical change' was enacted as an 'urban spectacle'. When students realized how this had been similarly choreographed at the St. Peter's Piazza under Bernini, Ahmedabad seemed to suddenly fall into place within the framework of David Christian's 'Big-History.'

Following upon the successes of the Ahmedabad Studio, Spring 2009's INDIA CHANDIGARH Urban Design Studio included a focused study on the city of Chandigarh, located in north India. As one among the few 'designed from scratch' cities of the Indian Subcontinent, it held special significance as being the work of the iconic architect Le Corbusier

(completed 1952 – 68), who endowed it with several important works of architecture.

Today Chandigarh presents a unique *tabula rasa* based on one man's vision, fed by the growing aspirations of a newly-forged Indian democracy and political control, which simultaneously critique and admire the original plan of the city. Fifty years after its inception and eventual inclusion among UNESCO's World Heritage List of Cultural Icons, Chandigarh therefore remains a provocative enigma in its successes and failures. How does it connect to the past, present and future? How "Indian" is its embedded Indian-ness? What shall the city become in the decades to follow? These were among the plethora of complex questions that the enrolled students encountered as they developed a series of interconnected design interventions in the heart of Chandigarh's bustling urban core.



Figure 1: Ahmedabad Madhavpura Market

Conceived as an urban design studio, students first produced a common document that examined the city and detailed out its need for change. Individual design projects then engaged the urban fabric both within and without the site - one chunk at a time, or as critical appendages that extended the meaning of activity and place. The task at hand was to propose a public, commercial center for the city of Chandigarh positioned strategically within the precincts of the Sector 17 market. This center was in

the vicinity of/along the footprint of Corbusier's yet unrealized PTT building. Owned and built wholly by the Union Territory of Chandigarh and leased out selectively to commercial enterprises and retailers, this commercial center served to invigorate the City Center, exponentially expand its current commercial and retail space needs, and creating a nexus for diverse activities that found expression in the heart of the city.



Figure 2: Ahmedabad Street Facade

Most importantly, this commercial center was avowedly public and urban in its many manifestations - it provided unlimited accessibility and guided freedom to the public in terms of activities and the scales of usage (specifically within its 'public-designated' areas). The city center also enthusiastically embraced the scenarios of change, based on how commercial and public spaces would potentially transform in the decades to come - therefore entertaining design possibilities that recognized this continuous process of change (a prospect also examined in Ahmedabad). Given the high commercial value ascribed to property in all of Chandigarh, and especially this part of the city, the City Center explored the specific possibility of vertically expanding upon the prevailing urban guidelines. Much to the surprise of the local Design School, who have viewed Corbusier and Chandigarh with kids gloves; this studio recognized that Corbusier's original pro-

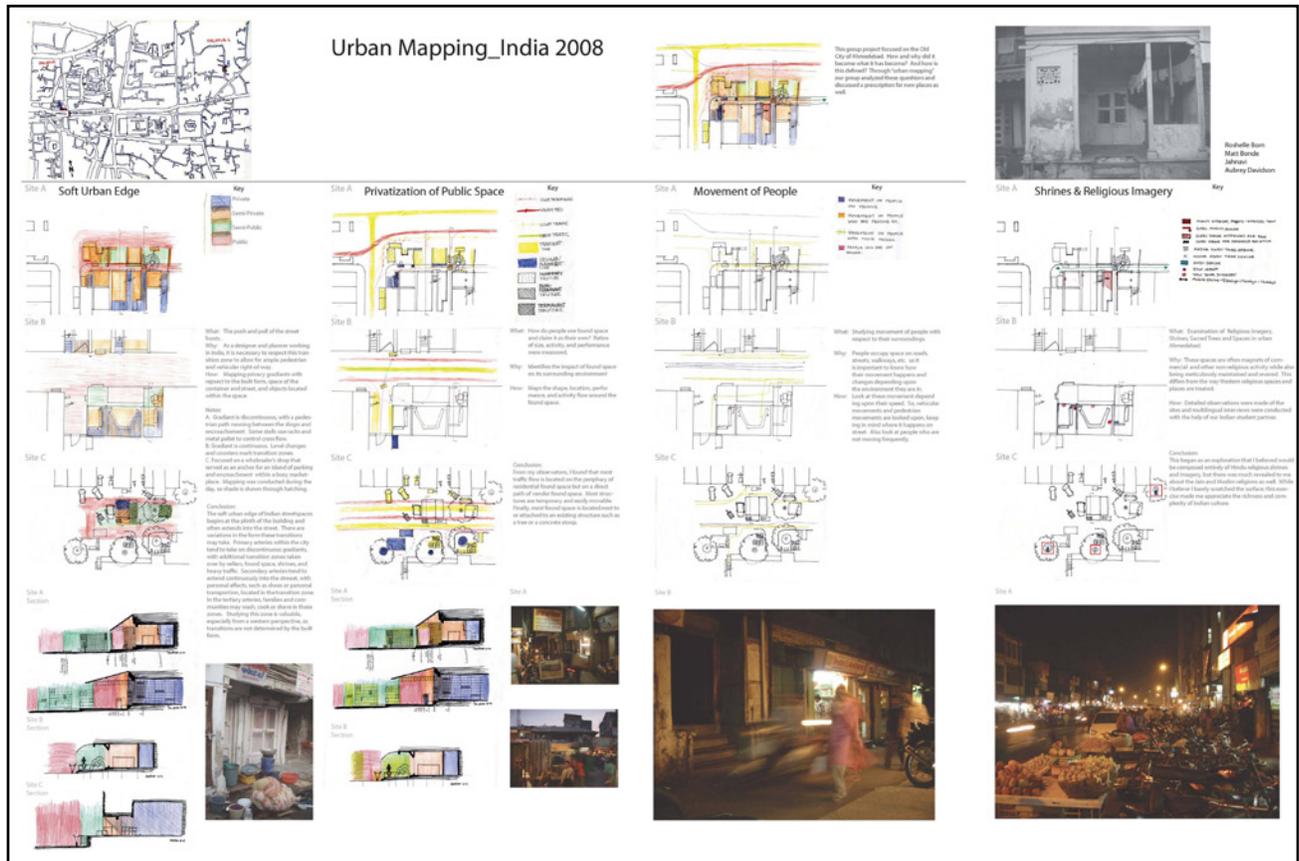


Figure 3: India Urban Mapping 2008 – The Study of the Street

posal for an eleven-storey PTT building was a suitable starting point for the design proposal, especially given the fact that all of the buildings of Sector 17 are based on a consistent urban design code. This project, in its unique set of requirements, was therefore viewed as demonstrative to the urban future of the city of Chandigarh, and how its making could thereby critique the urban legislations.

Sector 17 was a unique urban space within the city of Chandigarh, conceptually linking to the Capitol Complex and the adjoining sectors. It was also the sector positioned closest to Corbusier’s magical Leisure Valley – a ‘river’ of green stretching north-east to south-west through the urban fabric. This valley was located to the relative west of Sector 17, and accessed via a street crossing. Would the proposed City Center’s possible proximity to the north-western edge of Sector 17 and its pronounced proximity to the Leisure Valley give it an opportunity for special character? Would its commanding position with-

in the plaza of Sector 17 be communicated by its volumetric monumentality or alternatively, through the interconnectedness of its diverse parts? How would the complex public-private interactions work within the intervention ‘envelopes and cores’? Finally, how would the language of the Commercial Center critique the surrounding works Corbusier, Drew, Fry and Jeanneret, yet respectfully state variation and change? Finally, how would the nature of the plaza itself change, in how it deliberately entered within and without the interventions?

Learning

In effect, SARUP’s Ahmedabad and Chandigarh India Studios in 2008 and 2009 provided two kinds of critical lessons for participating students. At the first level of urban mapping, examining the Asian city was an opportunity to come to terms with the limitations of normative approaches to urban layouts, in effect opportunities to devise other ways

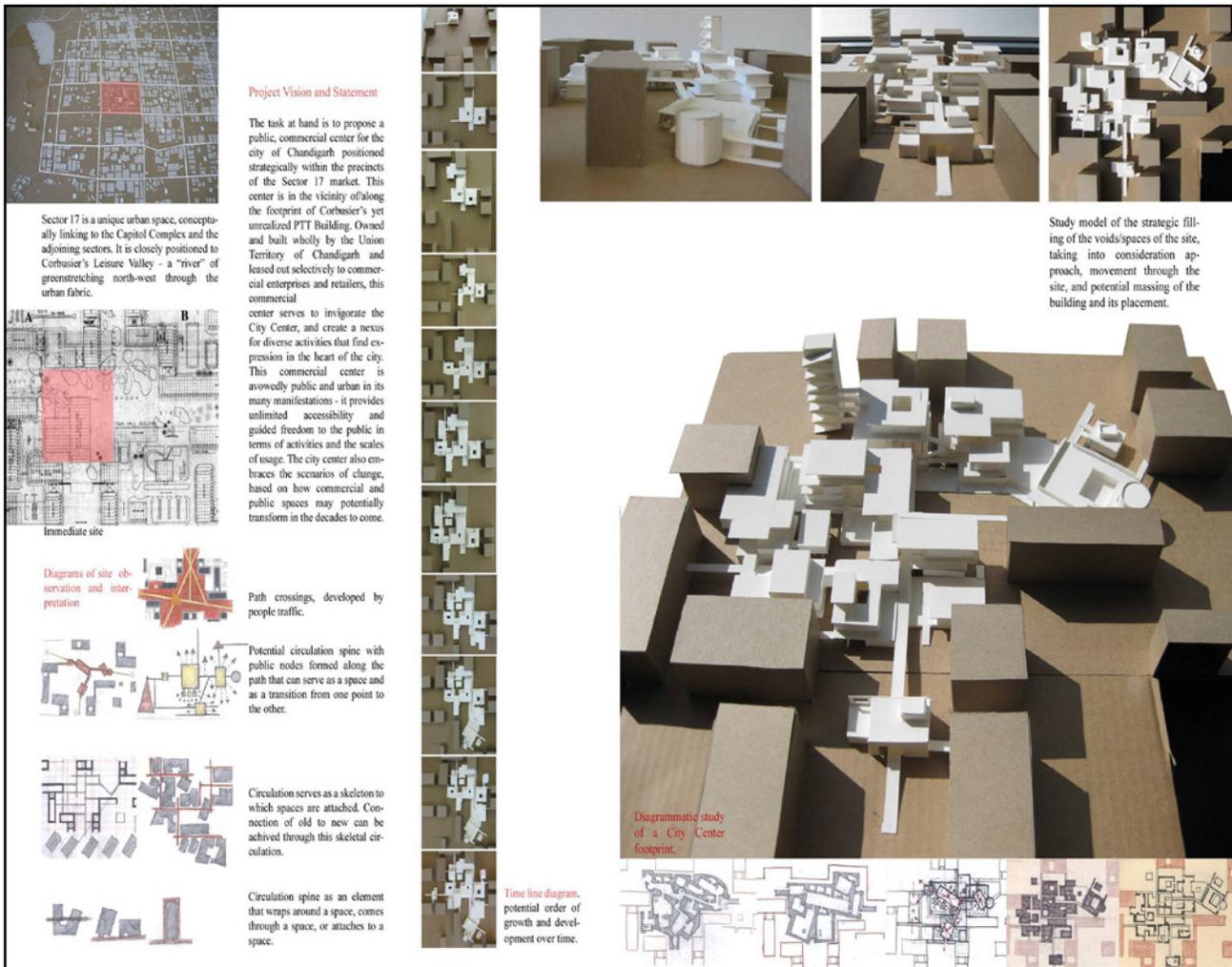


Figure 4: Design Proposal for 'Commercial Center' in Sector 17, Chandigarh

of looking at the urban fabric. It was highlighted that physical 'measure' gave way to Lynchian imageability, interpreted and fathomed through multiple cross sections that revealed activity patterns, experience and the sense of place.

At the second level of design language, this understanding leveraged itself into thinking of public place-making in the Indian context, as an environment literally created through building fronts (versus buildings) - called 'soft edges' - elements adaptable through the vicissitudes of time, transforming in each epoch - often modifying the intrinsic nature of the building core embedded within these edges. This was most critical to understanding the rigor yet indeterminism of urban typologies

that have prevailed through history, lending readily to radical change. Also insightful was the realization that the Asian city is an iterative process creating a palimpsest, fertilized by piece-meal additions. Large scale or mammoth projects would therefore disrupt this process, artificially modifying the traditional typologies and structures. Finally, those successful built interventions within the Asian city were not monuments extraordinary, rather frameworks for later development.

Through the successful *avatars* of these two design courses over the past semesters, the students within the BLC Research Concentration - researching cities and enacting scenarios of change, observed that the pedagogical value of both was

greatly enhanced by a preliminary study/component that introduces students to self-discovered *ways of looking* at the non-Western world, and thereafter uniquely *mapping* this 'new and unfamiliar' world using discourse and methodologies particular to the discipline of architecture.

Earlier this 2008 & 2009, we attempted to make a modest foray in this direction, employing an INDIA Winterim Project (as a preliminary visit to India by each student enrolled in the studio) to introduce students who would later continue into each of the two mentioned courses. While working closely with local Indian students in four architecture schools in India, each participating student was encouraged to maintain a set of logbooks, which initially served as a canvas of observations, and later developed into a complex, very personal system that encoded their many observations. Most importantly, these logbooks were *not* seen as albums or collections of images, rather as opportunities for self-dialogue and interrogation. In summary, these did not seek to provide easy answers to negotiate cultural differences, instead addressed difficult questions. (See Figure)

This nature of 'micro' intervention within the structure of the Asian city as described complements looking at global architectural production via a second BLC course entitled "*Signature Buildings in Geo-Political Context*" – also offered to incoming BLC students from both campuses.

Taking off from where a typical history survey ends, this course sets the 'big-picture' of architectural production. Versus the design studio, it posits that the history of world architecture should be viewed as the evolving product of catalytic interactions across and within cultural boundaries. Buildings conceived through time and space, especially those that guide the elements of memory, have seldom evolved from within the confines of a single culture. It is therefore critical to look at building and design traditions from both within and without, especially in terms of how architects and designers synthesize diverse, cross-cultural influences. In its detailed, 'thick-descriptions' of selected buildings conceived across time and space in every continent and culture, from the ancient world until present-day, this course evolves a comprehensive model that effectively transcends traditional categorizations of chronology, politics and style, producing a

synthetic, interdisciplinary understanding of history within the rubric of an overarching architecture history survey. In its labeling of special buildings across time as 'signature buildings' it focuses on how these structures are seemingly endowed with pregnant symbolism and meaning, often including the superlatives of scale, form and function, and setting the tone for important developments in each epoch. Likewise, their architects are often ascribed special status within the specifics of cultural contexts that vary greatly in their socio-cultural, economic and political content.

Within the purview of this course, Zoser's architect of legendary fame – Imhotep – is examined alongside Marcus Agrippa's Pantheon, Sinan's Sulaymaniye, Jefferson's University of Virginia, Mies' Farnworth House, Gehry's Bilbao and several more. Presentations demonstrate provocative episodes within the *longue duree* of world history – the grand framework where the theater of architectural history plays itself out. Meanwhile, the knowledge of the Western and non-Western worlds that is imparted to the students, makes the retrieval and re-combinations of 'connecting stories' particularly rewarding. Legends of Alexander's expeditions and his meteoric rise to fame, for example, serve to connect the momentous events of antiquity, while the foundation of Byzantine Constantinople or Chingiz Khan's Mongol onslaughts serve yet another. In 'filling the spaces between the pebbles' we are also concerned with how the meanings of terms such as monument, designer, urban and the suburban constantly change with geographical and cultural shifts.

Stepping 'outside' the confines of the West has been a valuable learning experience for students within the BLC research concentration at UWM. The studios are popular, the India Winterim is over-subscribed, and enrollments in the 'Signature Buildings Course' have doubled since its introduction two years ago.

ENDNOTES

1. S. Kostof. *The City Shaped: Urban Patterns and Meanings throughout History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991) & *The City Assembled: The Elements of Urban Form through History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992).
2. C. Geertz. *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973). p. 14.
3. B. Rudofsky. *Architecture Without Architects:*

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(Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1964).

4. See E. Hobsbawm. The Age of Capital, 1848-1875 (New York: Scribner, 1975); E. Hobsbawm. The Age of Empire, 1875-1914 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987); M. Weber. The City (New York: Free Press, 1968) and K. Wittfogel. Oriental despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power (New Haven: Yale University Press, New Haven, 1975).

5. Z. Çelik. "New Approaches to the Non-Western City", in the Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, 58, pp. 74-81, 1999.

6. M. Berman. All that is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981).