

Reasons for Being, Abroad: A Reassessment of Foreign Studies in Architecture and Urban Design

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SEEING

A central tenet of traditional architectural education has been the “grand tour”, where students visit classic examples of art and architecture, great cities and piazzas. For generations, students have filled sketchbooks and assembled slide collections, to build a foundation of understanding of architectural and urban precedent. The intention was to become a better designer by being in the presence of monumental architecture, a sort of absorption principle. Equally important was the acquisition of a layer of international sophistication in order to more smoothly move in the social circles of clients. Indeed, architects were often taken abroad by clients, or sent in their place to gather items that would endow their homes and businesses with a European finesse. The tour actually became mandated in some of the more progressive schools, but often without context, thus becoming a form of architectural journal on the move, an abstract game similar to transpotting.

A recent, and interesting commentary on the influence of a well known grand tour site on the work of 20th century architects is provided in *Hadrian's Villa and its Legacy*. While there, Le Corbusier made extensive recordings and analyses of what he saw, focusing on the physical, phenomenological, and typological characteristics of the site:

“Repeatedly he drew plans, sections, and perspective views of major Villa features...using his pencil to explore the design principles embedded in their ruined masonry. His later formulation of a rich architectural language based on standard elements appropriate for reinforced concrete construction may be traced in part to his studies of Hadrian's villa... (He) made several sketches of the Scenic Triclinium that reveal his fascination with the illumination of its axial extension... In one he captures the dramatic contrast between the light streaming down on the terminal apse and the dark shadows of the vaulted corridor in the foreground. On the facing page he drew an analytical diagram of this vertical light shaft, to which he returned forty years later in designing the pilgrimage church of Notre-Dame-du-haut at Ronchamp...”(1)

The authors discuss the impact of seeing Villa Adriana on the work of several other 20th century architects, including Frank Lloyd Wright, Louis Kahn, Charles Moore, Colin Rowe, Fred Koetter, and Edmund Bacon. In fact, this description does support faith in the absorption of ideas, which, taken in through the eye, can be stored in an internal repository of ideas, later (in some cases much later) to be brought forth for translation and application in one's work, sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously.

Belief in this process for the synthesis of ideas, i.e., experiencing good architecture leads to the production of good form, is the basis to countless other, still recent books for architects. In Moore and Lyndon's *Chambers for a Memory Palace*, the authors' stated purpose is to “to inscribe some suggestions for building that will make the actual world of buildings and landscapes capable of carrying ideas for those who live among them...”(2)

Chambers for a Memory Palace takes the form of letters between the authors in which they “recollect examples of buildings and landscapes that incorporate the elements and actions we've named...” Also included are simple, yet evocative sketches from their travels to the places described. They caution the reader that their observations are “not recipes for design”, but are rather intended to be points of inspiration from which a design can be derived or enhanced. There follows an eloquent catalogue of beautiful typologies, ranging from “Stairs that Climb and Pause” to “Roofs that Encompass”, “Water that Pools and Connects”. Sites referenced range from Akbar's tomb in Agra, India, to S. Martin de Canigou, France, to Ryoanji, Kyoto, Japan.

The concluding chapter is entitled “Images that Motivate” – and this is aim of the work – to share with the readers the deep and extensive collection of images the authors have *seen* in their extensive architectural jaunts around the world, and which they have attempted to incorporate into their own work.

The authors of this article each have run study abroad programs for American schools of architecture, one based in Britain and the other in Italy. Educated by Modernists, our architectural role models were Aalto, Barrigan, and Saarinen (and also Charles Moore), who, we were taught, studied abroad, and then returned home to the task of synthesizing their foreign and domestic imagery into architectonic

poetry. Our programs have run for many years with the intention of perpetuating this tradition. At the same time that architectural education is going through a period of adjustment in response to the changing nature of practice, we are re-evaluating our foreign study programs in an effort to reaffirm their efficacy, from many points of view.

Perhaps the most significant change in the profession over the last twenty-five years has been the opening of the profession to women and minorities. The tradition of the grand tour grew out of a time when nearly all architecture students were white males of privilege who were training to become designers. While some forces in the world may still hold this image of Architect, those of us who teach know it no longer has validity.

A second area of change in architectural education is been the growing tendency towards both diversification and specialization – currently at Texas A&M only a third of our graduates go into traditional architectural practice. And a third change is in the technology with which our students navigate their world, that has changed the ways they receive information, record it, store it, and use it.

Yet most study abroad programs, ours included, have clung to their basis in the old school. Thus we have arrived at a point where we are formulating a new set of questions, and attempting to find the answers. Among the questions are:

- In a global world, it still efficacious to live and study abroad?
- When students today look at buildings and cities, what do they see? What do they absorb?
- Will their travel experience make them better at what they do?
- Do they “get” theory from what they see? Do they need theory?
- Do they meet or observe the people in the buildings?
- Do they see context? What do they learn of the culture?
- Are they doing design research, or just “shopping” for “neat ideas”?
- Are we taking them to see too much?
- Are we over-emphasizing the importance of “seeing”?

READING

Fully aware of the tradition of the Grand Tour, but advocating something quite different, JB Jackson wrote in 1958,

“If I were the Ford Foundation I would give lavish fellowships to students of city planning on the following conditions: that for a year they would... spend the time... deep in the heart of some chaotic, unredeemed, ancient city. Preferably Istanbul...” (3)

In this piece, Jackson began a dialogue that was to continue through much of his writing — urging designers to become more engaged with the places they visited, and in a way which had nothing to do with ticking off lists of the great sites of western art and architecture. Jackson urged visitors to Istanbul

“... to watch its regular breathing... For all its sordidness, Istanbul is a city where urban life has created its own forms, and not the other way around...” (4)

In this way, he introduced a different purpose to “studying abroad”. Jackson condemned travel on the surface of a culture, instead advocating deep engagement and a temporary loss of identity to more fully comprehend the evolution of form out of culture. He is saying that physical form is not necessarily transmutable or even comprehensible between cultures, but the *process* by which a culture produces its urban and architectural and landscape form might be. Understanding that such a process exists, and having confidence in its ability to produce unique forms (i.e., solutions for living) will allow for the design and development of more meaningful and appropriate buildings, cities, and landscapes.

In a later article, he states that the purpose of designers studying abroad should not be to unthinkingly transplant ideas of historic architecture into their own work, but to “listen to [the] heartbeat [of cities]”. (5) In doing so,

“...you begin to understand that a city exists only by grace of the life which pulsates in its streets and squares, that art can only adorn something which the spirit has already created.” (6)

Much has been written about training architects to “see more” (7) – but even in its most esoteric form, this is an act of consuming – what Frederick Franck describes in *The Zen of Seeing* as “the 10,000 things around me”. Seeing is not a form of communication, it does not require comprehension and it does not engage an “other”. In fact, exercises in seeing often recommend the de-objectifying of objects beyond the point of recognition, primarily to be able to draw them better.

Jackson is taking designers in the opposite direction – he wants us to transcend the act of merely seeing, and enter the realm of “reading”. Only through an understanding of the motives, values, and rituals that shape a culture’s cities and buildings, can one really understand the meaning of its architecture. Jackson began constructing bridges between architecture and anthropology – and began to define a far more meaningful basis for architecture students studying abroad.

KNOWING

Alice Reich, in an article entitled “Anthropology as Oxymoron” (8), describes cultural anthropology in terms that have an uncanny applicability to architects. She defines cultural anthropology as:

“the quintessential liberal arts discipline because it is about meaningful human life, not as a set of answers, but as a series of engaged conversations... among people of a different time and place... to be human... is to be simultaneously... the recipient of millions of years of culture and to be active as a creator of culture.” (9)

When she states, “Our task as learners is to know the tellers as well as the told”, she is paraphrasing Jackson. Both are urging us to go beyond the acts of looking and taking, and understand the making. Reich’s article is produced in a small handbook for students of field ethnography, but in our search for a fresh approach to study abroad, this turns out to be a most important guide.

At the center of Reich’s teaching is her fascination with the search for “what it means to be human”. This very closely parallels Jackson’s search for what it means to be urban. She considers

“the crucial awareness of ourselves and of all humans as culture makers as well as culture bearers is the strongest message [an anthropological education] has to offer... Humans are both the creatures and the creators of culture; we participate in both knowing and constructing our world”.

Transposing Reich's concepts of anthropology to architecture, one is confronted by the essential link between the *privilege of making*, and the *responsibility of knowing*. It is a matter of understanding the appropriateness of source. Reich doesn't shy away from the fact that ethnographic studies require a certain amount of courage.

"We can use analogy with our own culture and our own lives as a bridge to understanding what at first appears incomprehensible, but once we have crossed that bridge, we must be willing to burn it and look into the unbridgeable chasm that is the mystery between us."

In architectural education we train our students to comprehend the "phenomenology" of a place — to see the unseen such as texture, light and shadow. We encourage students to listen — but not in the way Reich is describing. At some point, every architecture student hears a professor say, "What does this building (or room, or site) want to be?" We tell our students that places will speak to them if they will listen — but we mostly are speaking of *physical* phenomena. This has validity in some abstract architectural design, but not necessarily in urban design. Jackson believes it is the human dimension that gives shape to form. Anthropology trains its students to listen carefully to subtle messages in the environment — Reich refers to this as looking for the things left unsaid, "the words not spoken", but the sources of this nonverbal communication are human, it cannot come from objects in space.

CROSSING BORDERS

From the perspective of living abroad, the America of our students seems like a vast gated community, a place of privilege, security, predictability, and homogeneity. As any country would be, home is a place defined by social and spatial boundaries, it is safe and predictable. With the ability to observe these groups of students so closely, we can see how tightly some hold onto their sense of self and place while others willingly open themselves up to the culture amongst which they travel. All come with the understanding that they are supposed to travel to sites and "see things", and this will somehow make them better architects. But how well will their study abroad experiences prepare them to *read* what they are seeing, and then to *know*? And for architecture students going into other professions, what meaning will this comprehension have in their professional lives?

I currently teach in a study abroad program for a large college of architecture, based in Italy. Each semester we host sixty undergraduates, one third coming from landscape architecture, and the remaining from architecture. The majority of our students come from small towns in Texas or from the suburbs of Houston, Dallas or Austin. The Texas A&M campus is perhaps unusual in that it operates somewhat like an extension of the student's home. Many have grown up in A&M families. Most return home on weekends. Thus for many of the students, this is not only their first experience living abroad, but it may be their first time truly living away from home. (9)

Within a few weeks of arrival, the students begin to settle into one of three groups: the Adventurers, the Assimilators, and the Homebound. The Adventurers distinguish themselves by having an attitude that this is one of the few big experiences of their lives, and they are bound to make the most of it. They travel to far flung places at the weekends — flying to Paris, London, Barcelona, Copenhagen, Cairo; take weekend skiing trips to the Alps. They stay in youth hostels, sleep on trains, lose their passports, seek out internet cafes, forget what countries they are in. Their sketchbooks are full of postcards, ticket stubs, and anecdotal road stories. They are frequently tired and hungover during the class, somewhat road weary, and can be disappointingly disengaged from the work of the studio.

The Homebound tend to be students who were encouraged to come on the trip by parents, but display little desire to experience more than the program offers on the weekly field visits. They stay in

and watch CNN on weekends, and perhaps venture out into the streets of Castiglione F. looking for food, but limit their search to American delicacies or their equivalent. Their sketchbooks are sparse and non-disclosing. Their studio work tends to show their lack of enthusiasm and interest in the life outside the convent.

The Assimilators are those who truly relish the experience of living in a foreign place, particularly one so rich in sensual pleasures. In a short time, they manage to learn enough Italian to strike up friendships with local shopkeepers and youths. They travel to far corners of the country, tasting their way from Puglia to the Veneto. They go on pilgrimages to historic sites designed around themes — amphitheatres, ruins, basilicae, modern architects, etc. They get to know their way around Rome, Milan, and Venice. They attend vendamias, pick olives, visit local homes. Their sketchbooks contain rich drawings, leaves and grasses, watercolors done with wine and espresso, Italian words to remember. Their enthusiasm for inhabiting this place is evident in their work.

Of course there are shades of gray between these three groups — in fact it is evident that some students are influenced in their choice of activities by their peers — if left to their own devices they might fall into a different group. At heart, they are all American college students, seizing every opportunity to eat hamburgers in a Hard Rock Café. But there are clear distinctions in the degrees of enthusiasm they hold for becoming engaged in the culture that surrounds them.

I used to be impressed by students who found their own way to sites of architectural significance. As I grapple with ways of leading a more effective program, I now look for evidence of the ways cultural engagement becomes manifest in their travels and work. I have come to see the struggle to comprehend the sources of design (to gain access to the tellers as well as the told), as a true measure of the struggle to become a better architect. Do the Assimilators become more fluid in their design? Or were they better designers to begin with and that is what made them better at assimilating? Most importantly, can more of the students be motivated to join this group? Is there a place for ethnography in an architectural education?

MAPPING

Coincidental to JB Jackson's periodical on Turkey, Kevin Lynch wrote *The Image of the City*. (10) The first sentence of its preface states, "This book is about the look of cities. . . ." He goes on to clarify later that it is particularly concerned with one visual quality: ". . . the legibility of the cityscape. By this we mean the ease with which its parts can be recognized and organized into a coherent pattern." (11) The fundamental significance of this small book cannot be underestimated, particularly in its definition of city form — it gave us the very words we use to analyze and discuss urban design. For this reason, we still use this text forty years after its creation, and in fact it was the required text for this year's study abroad students in urban design.

One of the students' first assignments, based upon the readings from the text, was to prepare a mental map of Venice. The purpose of Lynch's mapping exercises was to create "subjective pictures of the city" in order to understand the "generalized impressions that real urban form makes on an observer." (12) We used the exercise to teach our students how to move about a city in a sensitized way, and then to record their images. Now are we realizing how strongly this emphasizes the "told" and pays little heed to the "teller". We are still training students to look and take; to be shallow consumers of the cityscapes they move through.

One of the exercises in Kutsche's *Manual for Doing Cultural Anthropology* is called "Map of a Block". Here the central purpose is to gain an understanding of the connections between time and place, and between "socio-cultural behavior and physical environment." The proscribed procedure is to find a city block with some interest to it, and then,

“Without interviewing the people you encounter (*Italics original*), describe that block building by building, lot by lot. . . . Draw a map of the block. . . . Detail, detail, detail, but explain why the details you choose are worth noting. Visit the block at different times of the day, to see how use differs. . . . describe without judging. . . . go to the trouble of asking yourself what it is that makes the house inviting. . . then, having done so, it is. . . legitimate to say, ‘on the basis of the foregoing description, I infer that the occupants must be. . . .’ You will [be] acquiring the skill of avoiding judgment. . . you will be practicing cultural relativism. . . . [The intent of this exercise\] is to make the point that human events happen in particular places, weathers, times. . . . [this] is a sub-discipline of anthropology called cultural ecology – human interaction with the environment. . . .” (13)

Here the shift in emphasis is subtle, but substantial. These students are being asked to look (“This exercise is to sharpen your eyes. . .”). But they are being trained to try to see the city through the eyes of its creators and users, as opposed as through their own cultural filter and biased memories. In Kutche’s book, this exercise is followed up by three others, entitled “Private Language”, “Body Language”, and “Ritual”, each designed to sharpen other behavioral observation skills, tuning them into the *tellers*, enabling them to know the *told*.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

A recent presentation at an ACSA Southwest Region conference was concerned with contrasting value systems in the use of environmental color. It focused on a case study comparing two cities located within a few hundred miles of each other, one in Mexico, the other in Southern California. The study posed the question, why are the colors so intense in Mexico and so muted in the United States, and then offered the answer that it was because Mexico was a Catholic country and the United States has a culture rooted in Protestantism. “Catholic”, in addition to its religious meaning, can also mean universal, cosmopolitan, worldly, and widely accepted.

It is a privilege to facilitate the exposure of American students to a more *catholic* environment, — particular ancient and historic cities, with a rich accumulation of high quality public places, where they can begin to see the chronology of architectural ideas that give meaning to and are the basis to global design heritage. Where they can live amongst a culture that values beauty above utility. And increasingly where they can see and experience the future — illustrated by high speed trains and Calatrava-esque light rail stations and pedestrian bridges. But the question we must continue to ask as we evaluate the effectiveness of our programs, is what, in the end do they bring into their practice of design; what have they understood of the places they’ve experienced?

There are aspects peculiar to teaching in study abroad programs which make it more difficult than traditional classroom teaching. Everyone in this position has moments of doubting their effectiveness. We comfort ourselves and our colleagues with the belief that “they are learning from what they are seeing as much as from what we are teaching.” Reich states that “the people anthropologists study are their

teachers.” If in our professions buildings and cities teach, do buildings and cities still teach what our students need to know? And do our students have the necessary skills to learn? As academics teaching abroad, how often do we meet to exchange ideas, techniques, findings? The culture of the architect increasingly should come from culture itself, an opening up of the mind to new possibilities based upon old relationships. Understanding becomes one of local relationships and complexity, but positioned within a wider understanding of a world context. Study abroad is not an implicit good, but is one that should be handled with care, requires clear goals, focus, and a range of forums for dialogue, insight, and feedback.

NOTES

¹W. MacDonald & J. Pinto, *Hadrians Villa and its Legacy* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1995).

²C. Moore & D. Lyndon, *Chambers for a Memory Palace* (Cambridge: MIT, 1997).

³J.B. Jackson, “Southeast to Turkey” (*Landscape*, Spring 1958) 17 – 22.

⁴Ibid.

⁵J.B. Jackson. “Limited Access” (*Landscape*, Autumn 1964) 19 – 20.

⁶Ibid

⁷See for example, *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain; The Zen of Seeing; Visual Notes*.

⁸Alice Reich, from a paper delivered at Colorado College in 1993, published in *Field Ethnography: A Manual for Doing Cultural Anthropology*.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰For one student this year, the flight to Italy was his first flight ever. Another was surprised to learn that “everyone in the Rome airport was speaking Italian”.

¹¹K. Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge, MA: 1960).

¹²Ibid, p. 2-3.

¹³Reich, p. 14

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