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# ARCHITECTURE ABROAD: PROGRAM DESIGN AND CULTURAL IMMERSION

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## **DESIGN ABROAD: CURRENT MODALITIES**

Travel has historically been an important component of architectural training. It is commonly accepted *a priori* that studying abroad is essential and beneficial for architecture students and that it has an overall critical impact on their educational and professional development.

Research has certainly demonstrated that there are many advantages to foreign architectural study. Architecture is experienced in a more direct, personal manner, and vivid impressions and memories of a structure help to generate a better understanding of the intent and implications of a design. Experiencing architecture *in situ* allows students to form a bank of images and impressions of architecture and urban conditions that may be drawn upon in later design work. Studies also show that students who have studied abroad are motivated to continue on at graduate level, to become better designers and to reflect upon aspects of education and the profession that they may not have considered had they stayed in their home school.<sup>1</sup>

However, there is one other area where study abroad is particularly relevant for the design student. It facilitates the development of intercultural skills, which are of great importance for the practice of design in a globalized context. Together with a better understanding of culture, place and identity, study abroad can create an awareness of dissimilar viewpoints and increase cross-cultural competence. Thus, intercultural education can prepare the minds of young people to accept diverse behaviours and values, including alternative aesthetic sensitivities. It can also lead students to acquire the skills needed to interact more effectively with people different from themselves, a proficiency of great advantage in the professional world.<sup>2</sup> And it can shape more competitive contemporary designers by leading to “a more complex view on one’s cultural identity, a re-evaluation of one’s own professional identity as a designer, thereby promoting a more personal and meaningful approach to design”.<sup>3</sup>

These certainties have led schools of architecture to increasingly engage in study abroad. The vast majority of international archi-

tecture programs run by US schools are short-term (less than eight weeks) and faculty-led, although semester programs also exist. All of these generally follow the classic “island program” model, where students participate as a closed group or alongside other American students at a study center, run by an American college or university sponsor. Sometimes students even live together, and it is not uncommon to find resident home-campus faculty instructing them.

The curriculum of the different iterations of such faculty-led island programs is conveniently made to match and complement the demanding requirements of the home school, that often leaves students little leeway and precludes them from leaving campus for a semester, unless they prolong their undergraduate education an additional semester. Only in recent years have some American architecture schools begun to allow their students to go abroad outside of their own programs, sometimes stipulating specific semesters for doing so.

From a pedagogical stance, all these programs logically engage with an intensive use of such highly effective teaching methods as “place-based learning”. Historical and contemporary buildings and urban spaces explained on site serve as the point of departure to teach relevant concepts. Research on the subject confirms what was already known intuitively: that the immediacy of three dimensional on-site field study enriches two dimensional materials and tools such as written theory, scaled drawing and photographic images.<sup>4</sup>

However, the development of intercultural skills is not effective in short-term and island program contexts. Most of the time, intercultural issues are not part of their intended goals. A study shows that even though faculty directors are generally extremely passionate about their role as intercultural facilitators, they may have limited cross cultural development themselves and don’t have the adequate training to support their students’ intercultural development process.<sup>5</sup>

What really precludes meaningful intercultural experiences from happening in short-term and island-programs is program design itself. Due to program length and components, contact with lo-

cal resources is generally limited. Cities and their buildings are often used like museums. There is not much room or opportunity for serious site engagement with the contemporary issues of local architecture and public space. With classes taking place along with other American students and taught by American faculty, interaction with local students or the professional community is minimal or non-existent. At best students have contact with local professors or invited guest lecturers. During free time, contact tends to be limited too, perhaps due to the lack of language skills or because of the “American bubble” that students are naturally immersed in.

#### **OUT OF THE BUBBLE: INCREASING CONTACT WITH THE HOST CULTURE**

Intercultural learning can be facilitated through program design. In general, the more immersive the program, the more intercultural development the students will experience. By its design, our program could be at Engle & Engle’s level 4 (Cross-Cultural Encounter Program) with some students on level 5 (Cross-Cultural Immersion Program).<sup>6</sup>

We have built relationships with the host culture, and have created what the Forum on Education Abroad terms a “Hybrid” or “Mixed” program, where a Study Center and Integrated University Study with local partnering institutions are combined. Other program components conducive to cross-cultural experiences are the program length (16 weeks); student housing options (with most students living with host families); intensive semester long language courses for academic credit, that are reinforced outside the classroom by an informal language interchange Conversation Partner program; arranged meetings and activities with local peers (Guardian Angel program); and volunteering and internship opportunities. All these elements are crucial in a city like Barcelona, where there is a large population of American students and English-speaking expatriates, and students have a natural tendency to stay in the “American bubble”.

Our students complete anonymous evaluations and surveys where qualitative and quantitative answers to varied questions provide feedback. There seems to be a direct correlation between students’ own perception of their increase in intercultural competence and the amount of contact they had with the host culture. Those living in residence halls (as opposed to home stay families) generally indicate lower levels of appreciation and comfort when exposed to the host culture. On the other hand, living with a host family is systematically rated as the factor with the highest positive impact, followed by taking direct enrolment classes with Spanish students and the Guardian Angel Peer Program.

#### **PEDAGOGIC STRUCTURES FOR ARCHITECTURE STUDY ABROAD: NOWHERE BETTER THAN ABROAD**

Emphasis on intercultural development leads to a specific type of program design. It also explains particular attention to a set of teaching and learning practices.

Experiential Learning, critical for cross-cultural learning, is one of these practices. Engaging in activities with the host culture doesn’t necessarily increase intercultural competence in and of itself. For this reason, provisions are made so that program participants derive meaningful learning of their experiences. The conceptual framework for Experiential Learning is Kolb’s learning cycle model. The cycle begins with a concrete experience (i.e. immersion in the experience of being abroad). It is followed by observation and reflection: stepping back from the experience and taking note of differences, comparing and contrasting the familiar with experiences that are new. This is followed by the conceptualization stage, where students interpret events which are assimilated into the formation of abstract concepts and generalizations, from which implications for action are deduced. The final step involves testing the new theory or principle in new situations. Here the student has an opportunity to alter behaviors or thinking and apply these changes to a new set of circumstances.<sup>7</sup>

Experiential Learning is not only valuable for increasing intercultural competence. Margarita M. Hill situates this pedagogical tool at the center of her framework for normative guidance on meaningful cross-cultural exchange as specifically applied to design professions. In foreign contexts, the subject matter –in this case, architecture– becomes more relevant as a consequence of immersion in a new cultural and social setting. Receptiveness and observation skills are stimulated, as are deductive and inductive learning.<sup>8</sup>

All students reflect and analyze through group meetings with an intercultural facilitator, which helps them transition from experience to integrated meaning and subsequent understanding. Additionally, those students undertaking Internships, take part in a more structured learning experience. Interns are typically placed in small local architectural firms, facilitating interaction with local co-workers and collaboration on the firm’s projects. Course work accompanies the placement. In weekly meetings with the intercultural facilitator, students reflect upon and analyze the intercultural experience at the workplace. They also hold regular meetings with an Internship Coordinator to discuss skill and knowledge-related issues as applied to the internship project they are developing. Qualitative feedback from these students shows deep analysis of the both home and host cultures and value systems, and they typically address in a complex, reflective way, issues directly related with professional skills such as work habits, time commitments, and time management in the different cultures. It also reflects an enhanced involvement in the projects they have worked on, and a perception that they have learnt and internalized concepts and ideas particularly relevant to their field. They often mention this experience as the most valuable of all those they have had while abroad.

“Self and Reflective Learning” is often a consequence of Experiential Learning, and another of the structures central to meaningful cross-cultural exchange, according to Hill. Interaction with another culture often helps develop an awareness of ingrained values, ideas and attitudes within oneself and in others. Knowledge is gained both in reference to the unfamiliar culture but also in a new awareness of their own cultural identity, as people and as designers. A more personal and meaningful approach to design is prompted.<sup>9</sup>

Bernasconi et al have identified other concerns and themes crucial to current pedagogy of design that are particularly well suited to immersive study abroad contexts. Our students' evaluations, like theirs, indicate that "Learning with Others", is one of these. Learning in general has been studied as happening in relation to social and cultural contexts. Thus, an increased diversity of participants will lead to substantial learning benefits.<sup>10</sup> The immersive nature of our program is conducive to this, with direct enrolment classes, where students of different nationalities work collaboratively on joint projects. Students' evaluations of these courses generally include positive remarks about the learning experience, both from an intercultural and from a disciplinary point of view. On another level, the fact that students in the program come from diverse American schools leads to a "different peer group" even in classes that are just designed for American students. This new group is perceived by students as having a positive impact on their learning experience because it has opened their eyes to varied ways to approach architectural design and interpretation and it has made them look at architecture "from outside of an American framework".

Creativity is another aspect of architectural education that can be promoted particularly well in cross-cultural contexts, especially "with programs that offer diversity and complexity, and encourage the formation of multiple views and representations of a same entity".<sup>11</sup> The same conditions that make "Learning with Others" effective lead to students being exposed to multiple views of the same entity. In addition to the diversity provided by a different peer group, students are exposed to regular contact with local instructors, local architecture students that they interact with in their leisure time, and students specializing in other design areas, that also form part of the program. While not all students perceive that studying abroad has had a significant impact on their creativity, those who do, recognize all the factors mentioned above as crucial.

### **CROSS-CULTURAL APPROACHES IN THE CLASSROOM: "TEACHING WITH CULTURE IN MIND" AND "COSMOPOLITANISM"**

The goal of promoting cross-cultural development has led us to work on integrating cultural issues in content courses, including the Architecture Studio.

Cultural aspects are not always fully integrated in the pedagogy of design even though some scholars have made a strong case for the need to teach them to design students. "When designing for another culture, some have examined the architectural, urban design and planning forms as well as the art of that culture. This approach does not, however, seek to understand the reasons why a culture has chosen a particular element, form or art and therefore can be superficial and lead to erroneous understanding and design", Sanjour Mazumdar says.<sup>12</sup>

Within architectural theory, the link between cultural identity and architectural space is most often dealt with through the analysis of form, rather than entering into issues of processes of identification.

Yet, culture is not constituted by a system of objects alone but by discourses that imbue objects and form with meaning. Cultural identity might be thought of as a complex field of operations that engages with but is not defined solely by objects such as architecture. Artifacts such as urban places and architecture that are bestowed with cultural values might be thought of as dynamic fields that are continually renewed and reactivated by social praxis to establish new value.<sup>13</sup>

Because of the heightened awareness that takes place while abroad, teaching with culture in mind leads to a broader understanding of the circumstances and processes of architectural design, and is enhanced by place-based learning. An increased understanding and appreciation of the contributions of many different players takes place too, leading to greater intercultural competence. Subsequently, a key point of our program is to explore, through course work, how local designs, have been perceived, critiqued, negotiated, used and appropriated by the local community. To use the French urban sociologist Henri Lefebvre's terminology, we approach architectural and urban space as produced at three levels, as "perceived space", "conceived space" and as "lived space".<sup>14</sup> In an open-ended question to students about the most important tools for becoming a better designer, provided by study abroad, a significant percentage spontaneously mention a new sensitivity for the impact of culture on urban and architectural design and the interrelationship between these factors.

Cosmopolitanism is a conceptual framework that has been particularly agile in the Architecture Studio, bringing the examination of reflexive responses to issues of local/global culture to the forefront.<sup>15</sup> This concept, as informed by various sociologists including Ulrich Beck, Scott Lash and John Urry, does not preclude addressing the singularity of the regional values as outlined by Kenneth Frampton in his seminal essay "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six points for an architecture of resistance" (1983). Often taken as a mission statement in relation to architectural study abroad, in his text Frampton called for mediating the effects of internationalism and universal techniques, against the erosion of regional culture by placing an emphasis on local topography, context, climate, light, and tectonic form.<sup>16</sup> Although still relevant, within the contemporary context this intellectual framework may be insufficient to account for the internalization of processes of globalization by both subjects and objects.

The concept of Cosmopolitanism addresses complex modernisation processes. Local culture and traditions are not frozen. They are dynamic and shifting in relation to globalized forces. Cosmopolitanism serves as an epistemological framework acting upon students as subjects, as well as local architecture and urbanism as the object their study. As John Urry has shown, "Such a cosmopolitanism presupposes extensive patterns of mobility, a stance of openness to others, a willingness to take risks and an ability to reflect upon and judge aesthetically between different natures, places and societies, both now and in the past".<sup>17</sup> Such a

definition might explain not only the open engagement of American students with their new place of study, but also accounts for the way that local architecture and urbanistic practices have changed, as aspects of world architectural culture have been incorporated, translated and transformed within local venues.

With this framework in mind, the Architecture Studio addresses complex local urban and architectural issues in a multi-scalar way. Students are exposed to national projects and figures that are not well known abroad, as well as historic and on-going community issues and debates. Actual sites and program briefs act as the point of departure for the studio, but this is not done uncritically. The studio takes the position that local architecture traditions, techniques and culture are not static, but continually evolving.

Through coursework, the program addresses gradations of cultural differentiation and searches for a definition of regional architecture today, at a moment when internationally mobile architects now occupy the same intellectual space, in global sites, mass media, schools, forums and competitions. Issues of urban history and politics, density, center and periphery, public space, transportation networks and public housing are still aspects of local culture that are markedly different from their US counterparts and that are explored in different courses. At the same time, elements of the local now approach a generic urbanism and building with the replication of globalized sites with regional inflections or iterations.

Field visits, tutorials and discussions with professionals involved in local projects offer students an opportunity to form their own critical analysis of the sometimes conflicting values of the global and the local. The specific choice of community scaled projects within the design studio, permits the exploration of use and other themes that are continually being discussed and negotiated publicly within the city itself. Such complexities and tonalities are not lost on students, as cosmopolitan subjects. Rather they prove to be deeply enriching sources of defamiliarization and comparison.

As we endeavoured to write this essay, we were struck by the immense amount of literature about intercultural and cross cultural competences in general writing about study abroad, but also by just how little of this current thinking has been applied to architecture study in foreign contexts. Could it be that since the a priori idea that foreign travel for architecture students is intrinsically beneficial, that the need to reflect on contemporary problematics and potentialities has somehow not been taken into account? In any case we are grateful for the chance to reflect ourselves about what can at its best be a life changing experience for students.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Lyle D. Culver, *The Influence of Study and Travel Abroad on the Personal and Professional Development of Students in Architecture Design Programs* (Ed.D. diss., Florida International University, 2011): 207-217. Accessed April 2, 2012. <http://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/etd/360>, 117-188

- 2 Margarita M. Hill, "Teaching with Culture in Mind: Cross-Cultural Learning in Landscape Architecture Education", *Landscape Journal* 24-2 (2005): 118-119.
- 3 C. Bernasconi; H.R. Mendoza; J. Yoo; N.M. MacDonald, "Integrating Cross-Cultural and Interdisciplinary Education in the Design Fields: the Interdisciplinary Design Education Assessment Project", *Negotiating Landscapes* (2007): 175-176. Accessed April 2, 2012. <http://www.thecela.org/pdfs/cela-2007-ceedings.pdf>.
- 4 David D. Spooner, "The Power of Place: Teaching Spatial Design Theory Abroad", *Negotiating Landscapes* (2007): 189-190. Accessed March 29, 2012. <http://www.thecela.org/pdfs/cela-2007-abstracts.pdf>.
- 5 Matthew L. Goode, "The Role of Faculty Study Abroad Directors: A Case Study", *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad* XV (2007-2008): 169-170.
- 6 This is a classification of study abroad programs based on the degree to which thoughtful interaction with the host culture happens, within a 5-level scale (Lilli Engle, John Engle. "Study Abroad Levels: Toward a Classification of Program Types". *Frontiers. The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad* IX (2003): 10-13).
- 7 Lynne Montrose, "International Study and Experiential Learning: The Academic Context". *Frontiers. The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad* VIII (2002): 5- 6.
- 8 Hill, "Teaching with Culture", 121; Bernasconi et al, "Integrating Cross-Cultural" 178.
- 9 Hill, "Teaching with Culture", 121.
- 10 Bernasconi et al, "Integrating Cross-Cultural", 178.
- 11 Bernasconi et al, "Integrating Cross-Cultural", 177-179.
- 12 Sanjoy Mazumdar, "What's Culture Got to Do with Design Pedagogy?" *Archnet-IJAR International Journal of Architectural Research* 3-1 (2009): 263-274. Accessed April 1, 2012. [https://archnet.org/gws/IJAR/9862/files\\_9361/3.1.20%20-h.t.yldz.%20a.%20m.%20salama,%20and%20p.%20kellett-pp263-274.pdf](https://archnet.org/gws/IJAR/9862/files_9361/3.1.20%20-h.t.yldz.%20a.%20m.%20salama,%20and%20p.%20kellett-pp263-274.pdf).
- 13 For a further discussion of the idea of cultural identity and architectural space see: Leach, Neil. "Belonging: Towards a Theory of Identification with Space". in *Habitus: A Sense of Place*, ed. Jean Hillie and Emma Rooksby (England: Ashgate, 2005) 297-314.
- 14 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (1974; Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).
- 15 Lash, Scott and Urry John., *Economies of Signs and Space* (London: Sage, 1994).
- 16 Kenneth Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance," in ed. Hal Foster, *Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1983). Frampton quoted the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur's questioning on how to become modern while returning to sources. This is a seminal text for the discussion of Catalan architectural production from the 1980's.
- 17 John Urry, *Consuming Places* (London: Routledge, 1995), 145. Urry was specifically discussing "aesthetic cosmopolitanism."