Global Immunology: A Potential Cure for Being Twenty

While the ease with which global communication is currently possible, it could be argued that architectural travel programs are an unnecessarily expensive anachronism, particularly for cash-strapped departments like ours at Hampton University. Yet in the six years during which we have operated a program called "Urban Rooms", it has proven to be not in any way dispensable to our degree program, but, rather, a key to remarkable growth.

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This paper has been prepared for a forum on current trends in global education, none of which are encapsulated in the program herein described—unless we inspire a new one. We might call ourselves a synthesis of community design and travel. Or we just might say that we learn to listen to the stories of others and care about their inferences. In the process our students seem, year after year, to come into their own as emerging design professionals. And herein lies our tale, set forth in a discursive style perhaps somewhat foreign to this venue but, it is to be hoped, of interest and value.

The program has two overarching principles, both of which go back to Alberti's observation that a house is like a city and a city like a house: First, that there is something fundamental to understanding how buildings can conspire to create a legible system of corridors (streets) and rooms (urban spaces). And second, that the function of this system is civic life, and that to understand how to design well for it, one must actively engage in conversation with its citizens and leaders.

Site specificity and personal contact with community leaders are crucial to the program and to the growth of our students. An unexpected surprise, perhaps inadvertent, is that age specificity has paired with the program in a symbiosis the results of which for us have been extraordinary. This latter hypothesis will be explored later in the article.

We run an earnest, if underfunded, five-and-a-half-year Master of Architecture degree program at an historically Black University (HBCU). When the program was initiated, faculty elected to make a travel program a required part of the curriculum, between the third and fourth years of studio work, and to focus it on issues urban, a stated part of the department's mission.

"Urban Rooms" provides a model of interest and applicability for any school, but it is freely admitted that in our case it is improbable that it could have been generated internally due to the time and financial resources its set up required. As

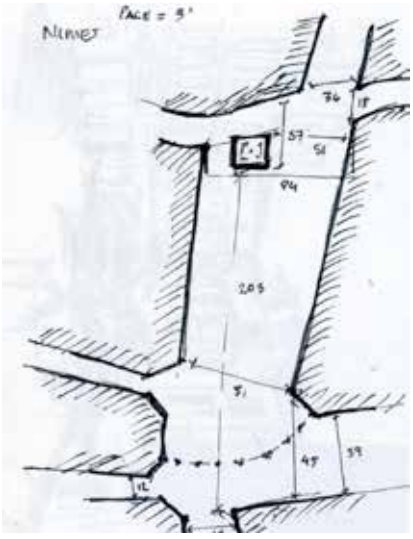

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Figure 1: Place d'Horloge. Nimes 2012 Virgil Deanes.

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Figure 2: 2009 Pienza proposal to create a study and tourist center away from the historic center, lower portion of image, making a northern edge to Pienza's growth and reducing automobile traffic passing through it. Students proposed a similarly dense area atop a parking deck (as the site sloped away from the historic town), and generated a pattern book specifying street sections and building masses to which their own building design work conformed.

with many durable pieces of theater, our program includes a *deus ex machina*, a benefactor who literally came down from the sky. In 2007, my now-colleague Dr. Shannon Chance, who was leading a group of students that year from Tunisia to Italy, spotted Ray Gindroz, FAIA, and his wife, Marilyn, in the Rome airport. She reintroduced herself to them and sparked their interest in our travel program. Rarely has a chance encounter done so much for so many.

Mr. Gindroz is a founder of Urban Design Associates and a pioneer of a participatory planning process that has been of great use in projects around the world. He is also a doer of good deeds. He and his wife established a foundation to fund travel for architecture and music students at Carnegie Mellon. They decided to extend their support to our program, and have generously, reduced the costs to our students. Thus we came to have both an experienced guide and an underwriter. *Deus ex Machina* indeed.

In 2008 and 2009 the program was held in Parma, Pienza, and Rome. In Pienza, students began an intensive program of observational sketching and documentation, and also enjoyed long evening discussions with Fausto Fornicchi, an architect dedicated to detecting the evolution of Pienza from its Roman origins, the head of the police force, the Vice Mayor of Pienza, and a titled estate holder and then-aspiring council person whose interests lie in preserving the agricultural landscape and in bridging the divide between the rural population of the Val d'Orcia and the townspeople of Pienza. All these conversations and interviews were made possible using our *deus ex machina* as a universal translation device, as no one else on the program was fluent in Italian.The interviews' focus was understanding how each felt about the strengths of their town and its challenges.

In Rome, we had met with leaders of a Rome travel study program from a more prominent university. As it happens students in that program had undertaken the same project our students were to complete on their return—a plan for intervention on the north side of Pienza where growth is following a suburban rather than urban pattern. The other university's students, with an even more famous advisor, had proposed interventions of significant scale. Our students, who had spent a week talking with Pientini, knew that certain houses erased in the proposals belonged to their new acquaintance and were scandalized. During their design studio session they proposed a quite sound scheme which preserved all existing properties. While not as beautifully watercolored as their counterparts' proposal, they proved themselves capable of ingenuity and empathy. Further they had somehow moved from an interest in crafting design with an eye toward memorializing their own ingenuity to a new place of collaboration and sense of responsibility. We have seen similar results in each subsequent year.

The following year we migrated to France. This was a consequence of something relatively straightforward: Fluency is crucial and the author speaks no Italian, while her French is tolerably adequate for negotiations with irate hoteliers and bail bondsmen.

We decided to work in the south of France, and to begin to foster connections through resources available to us. The author's hometown, Norfolk, Virginia, adjacent to our campus, has a Sister City Program which pairs it with another port city in France, Toulon. Connections through the Sister Cities program gave us a base of acquaintance and we began to work a tentative travel program. Developing relationships with citizens and design and political professionals to provide the sort of deeper understanding realized in Pienza was the challenge before us.

It was here that we reached a point where our benefactor again became crucial. Mr. Gindroz flew to France twice that winter, previewed our work and lodging sites, and used our collective connections to begin initiating relationships with the people in city government, redevelopment, and the arts. These relationships have proved extraordinarily useful to the program, and have strengthened with each summer's visit.

In Toulon, we are received and made welcome by our friends at France-Etats Unis, the reciprocal organization to Norfolk's Sister Cities program. We meet the high school students who have won an opportunity to spend part of the summer with families in our area of the US, and we try to be sure we reconnect with these students during the summer studio as guest critics. We are also received by the Mayor's Cultural Attache, who has been kind in making available various members of her planning staff. We tour the city with artist Remy Kefriden, who is passionate about his city's architectural history and skeptical about its future, And we meet with Christophe Clemencet, the head of the redevelopment of the Var region, who has quietly been doing extraordinary things to whole blocks of Toulon. He speaks with us about issues of attracting market segments back to town, of reworking whole blocks into marketable mixed income housing while preserving all extant street facades, about interventions to improve cross-town pedestrian connectivity, and he helps us select a site and develop a program for it.

Several years' programs have included a day trip to the town of Uzes, where until recently, Leon Krier lived. Thanks, again, to a pre-existing friendship with Mr. Gindroz, we were able to tour his house, spend lunch with a fabric-designer client for whom he had designed a house on the outskirts of town, and spend the day in the company of an architect to whom Mr. Krier had introduced us, Ariel Balmassier.

Each year we have returned to an urban design studio and worked on a proposal for a site in Toulon. Each year the schemes have had merit, the students have been engaged in lively debate about remembered conversations, perceptions, and drawings and, in most ways, seem to be differently engaged than prior to the trip. They work together and they work for the city in which they have made new friends. They have grown in ways no home-bound virtual world could have effected.

Preparation is important. Third year intermediate design studio projects are in the sister city of Toulon, Norfolk; each project has an urban context and outside reviews by zoning administrators, civic leaders, community review boards, and developers.. We give a course on French culture, history, architecture, and race relations; on survival French, and insure familiarity with the history and forms of the cities they will visit. Urban Theory currently involves the application of various theories to portions of Norfolk, using the same analytic techniques being applied to French cities in the travel preparation course. It is delightful to report that our benefactor Mr. Gindroz has moved to our area and is now co-teaching with the author two of the three courses.

Could the program work without a *deus ex machina*? It is unlikely ours would have bloomed. However it seems an entirely useful model in that each of us know friends around the world. The basis of our success was cultivating these relationships and continuing to nurture them. This seems replicable.

Could the program work well in English-speaking countries? Certainly, and is probably a good deal easier to orchestrate for those of us who are not multi-lingual. However, it has not passed unnoticed that the inability to ask directions or

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Figure 3: *Place Victor Hugo,* Toulon, 2010. Michael Ellingson.

Figure 4: Proposal, *Place de l'Equerre*, Toulon 2012.

Figure 5: Proposal, Place d'Armes, Toulon, 2013. Rendering: Chase Kea.

interpret signs throws students back on learning exactly what has been asked - to pick up the architectonic signals and to learn an appreciation of the guidance they give and the mastery they allow of a specific place.

Could the program work well outside Europe? It could, although one must be careful to be sure—by on-site experience if at all possible—that the fabric and quality of the urban spaces cohere adequately well to provide the experience of architecture conspiring to create those rooms in which civic life is transacted—an experience sadly so rare in the United States that our children of the suburbs quite simply cannot imagine it.

Is observational drawing and documentation crucial? We believe it is. Like many programs that have had observational drawing relegated to an elective class, we find that the power to observe that comes from the alchemy of the eye-hand-memory co-ordination is a part of the design repertoire that is too dear a loss. Similarly, the issue of scale, which beginning design in the digital world seems to make difficult to make concrete, is cured in part by successive documentation of known places that are then compared. We begin by pacing, learning each student's pace width, and move on to confirmation with digital measuring devices. And, as a final work product, we add to what has become quite an arsenal of digital models, which the students are able to compare and to use to help them understand the qualities of these complex spaces.

Is the community engagement crucial? Absolutely. While challenging to orchestrate , it is the key to the program's success.

And herein lies the promised hypothesis, for what happens year after year to these students is that they, quite literally, grow up. The author believes we have, inadvertently, timed the perfect program to the perfect stage in their development into adults.

If one dusts off the durable theories of human development proposed by Eric Erikson in the 1950s, one finds that in those programs that begin professional training with freshman, one is overseeing the transition from adolescence to young adulthood.[1] And so early on in our programs, we get an approach to design perhaps best articulated by another durable philosopher of the 1950s, Dr. Seuss, whose Cat in the Hat famously said, "Look at me. Look at me. Look at me NOW!" The author believes that enjoying the work of our profession necessarily rests upon enjoying collaboration with peers, clients, and context. Much of our work lies in imparting the Cat's next couplet, "It's fun to have fun/ but you have to know how." Moving from the necessary work of the adolescent - defining one's separateness and individual identiy- to that of the young adult - working on things that will outlast one and working with others - is a necessary but crucial step in development of each person and of each aspiring architect.[2]

The medical analogy of my title is perhaps inapt. Rather than a cure for adolescence, the author is coming to conclude that our program's emersion in listening to others and applying skills to the problems those others have articulated, is perfectly timed to serve as midwife to emerging adults. Indeed even our many non-tracitional students, longer of tooth and broader of travel experience, show a similar deepening of compassion, conviction, confidence in their potential to contribute, and apparent satisfaction. The students to whom the author says goodbye at the end of summer urban design studio bear little more than physical resemblance to the twenty-year olds met the prior September. They have found focus , a means by which to draw pleasure from collaboration, and a way of imagining their futures as contributing professionals.

ENDNOTES

1. "*The growing and developing youths, faced with this physiological revolution within them, and with the tangible adult tasks ahead of them are now primarily concerned with what they appear to be in the eyes of others as compared with what they feel they are, and with the question of how to connect the roles and skills cultivated earlier with the occupation prototypes of the day. In their search for a new sense of continuity and sameness, adolescents have to refight many of the battles of earlier years, even though to do so they must artificially appoint perfectly well-meaning people to play the roles of adversaries, and they are ever ready to install lasting idols and ideals as guardians of final identity."* Erikson, Erik H. Childhood and Society. WW. Norton (New York): 1950, 1963; 161.

2. "...The young adult, emerging from the search for and insistence on identity, is eager and willing to fuse his identity with that of others. He is ready for intimacy, that is, the capacity to commit himself to concrete affiliations and commitments, even though they may call for significant sacrifice and compromises. Body and ego must now be masters of the organ modes and of the nuclear conflicts, in order to be able to face the fear of ego loss in situations which call for self-abandon: in the solidarity of close affiliations, in orgasms and sexual unions, in close friendships and in physical combat, in experiences of inspiration by teachers and of intuition from the recesses of the self. The avoidance of such experiences because of a fear of ego loss may lead to a deep sense of isolation and consequent self-absorption.3. 09_Endnote Text: Text box should be flush all the way to the edge of the page, left or right depending on what page your paper ends on. Ibid.,. 263-4.