Learning From Home and Abroad: Transcending Borders

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STRUCTURE OF THE INTERNATIONAL STUDY PROGRAM

This exemplary endeavor, now entering its seventh year, is between the Architecture Program at the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA) and the School of Architecture of the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM). Upper level design students from the two institutions work together for five weeks in a design studio setting. While the exchange locale alternates each year between San Antonio and Mexico City, the projects are consistent in addressing the needs of an inner city neighborhood whose economic development, architectural integrity, urban fabric, and social cohesion is threatened or in decline. Thus the problems the students confront have parallels for both sides of the border.

What sets these activities apart from most others is the truly collaborative work undertaken by students from two countries. Unlike most other programs, the host country is not simply an historically interesting and exotic background, but becomes an understandable cultural reality in which the visiting students function as closely as possible as their host counterparts. Here, being in a design studio and working with local colleagues gives meaning to the context the student is experiencing.

The students are forced into association by the structure of the class which requires them to work in international teams composed of at least one participant from UTSA and one from the UNAM. One of the most interesting aspects of this exchange is the interaction between team members, one which is quite distinct from what would occur if our students simply went abroad in a group as is normally done. Obviously there is something profound that differentiates this program, and that something is the reaction caused by underlying attitudinal differences about architecture which forces each student to confront their own cultural reality in order to understand their new surroundings.

We try to prepare our students, as does the UNAM, for this encounter in a number of ways. The students are exposed to contemporary political and social thought about Mexico through reading assignments from pivotal books, such as THE LABYRINTH OF SOLITUDE by Octavio Paz. These readings are followed by spirited, free ranging discussions about the readings and other topics, led by our faculty who can speak from experience about these issues, having lived, taught, and practiced there. This is rounded out by lectures on aspects of Mexican architecture, from technology to practice. To foment the students' reflection upon their own culture, much of the discussion is couched in comparative terms.

Learning takes place outside of the studio setting as well. When the UNAM is the host, Mexico City serves as a wonderful laboratory. It is both a repository of history and a twentieth century phenomenon. Walking down the streets in the very heart of town reveals layers of settlement - pre-Columbian ruins from the Aztecs, early buildings from the first years of the conquest, colonial structures from the pre-independence period, and post-revolutionary edifices, many with exquisite stone craftsmanship and interior details, lovingly restored and open to the public. As a creation of the modern era, Mexico has lessons to teach as well, although many of them are couched in the context of "what not to do". Regardless of its failures as an urban environment, there are examples of distinguished contemporary architecture to be found. The students take advantage of the excellent museums in the city and other cultural events that are offered. As well they visit the offices of well known practitioners, taking to designers and draftsmen alike. Trips outside of the city are arranged on weekends. These include Taxco, Oaxaca, Puebla, and other locations with a rich architectural heritage and pre-Hispanic sites.

When UTSA serves as the host, similar activities are offered. Here too are found architectural remnants of early Spanish settlement, buildings from the period of the nationhood and statehood of Texas, and more modern structures. The city offers well preserved housing stock from the period of 1850 - 1920, much of which is found in fairly intact neighborhoods. What San Antonio can proffer to students from Mexico are lessons in urban development, especially in the city center and historic neighborhoods (outside of this core lies the same "vast wasteland" found in most post-war

cities throughout the southwest). Trips outside of town include Austin, Dallas/Ft. Worth, and Houston. Here in contrast to the historic visits in Mexico the sites are almost all contemporary.

Whether at home or abroad, these activities allow for informal learning and peer interaction in a less formal setting. This really helps the students put what has been formally taught into a social and cultural context, and real understanding begins to grow. It also allows for the blooming of friendships, and it is always interesting to see how these relationships carry on past the end of the program, with students visiting one another here and in Mexico.

CULTURAL FRAMEWORK

For most of us, operating within a cultural milieu that is so pervasive that it is accepted much of the time without reflection, it is only upon encountering the "other", that is a different way of thinking - "otra esquema mental", as our UNAM colleagues would say - that we reflect not only upon the culture of the country we are visiting but upon our own biases and modes of functioning. Thus this academic exchange forces a coming to terms with the larger issues of architecture in order to promote understanding and allow two quite divergent sets of beliefs to interact successfully.

These students from Mexico and the United States have been shaped by distinct cultural forces that are embodied in different attitudes about the role of architecture in society, in the dissimilar structures of their architectural education, and in the distinct ways that their profession is practiced. These differences are evident in the interaction of the students and faculty within and without the design studio. Thus the experience transcends the limits of an international study program to become an interchange, broadening notions about architecture, becoming a model for these kinds of activities.

An interesting aspect of this exchange is how the student teams function, which is quite distinct from what typically occurs during a normal design studio during the regular academic year. Setting aside language differences and difficulties, which are addressed by pairing bilingual students with students who lack second language abilities, there is a surprising level of friction, what the students refer to as "communication problems". At first glance this is surprising, for it is even difficult at times to tell which student attends which institution. Many of the students from Mexico are fluent in English, have travelled extensively, are sophisticated urban dwellers, come from direct European descent - i.e. are blond with light complexion, that is not the racial stereotype of "Mexican" - watch MTV, and dress, eat, and in some cases act even more "American" than any local. Many of the UTSA students who participate in the exchange are Hispanic, come from the border area of south Texas, and share similar roots with those living in northern Mexico, having only through past history and changing political circumstances been born on the American side of the border.

Obviously there is something going on that is more profound than the superficiality of skin color or musical tastes that differentiates these students, and that something is the culture that underlies and shapes their attitudes about architecture. It is these structural differences that make for the so called "communication problems". By the time the students reach third year these are not attitudes held lightly, witness the outburst one time of one of the Mexican students who was almost incoherent in rage about the falsity of American architecture. The culprit?...brick veneer.

To make this program function effectively we have had to come to grips with the significant cultural forces that shape our students' actions and expectations, and how these differ from the forces that affect their counterparts from Mexico. There are three aspects that merit exploration: first, the students' set of beliefs about the role of architecture in society; second, the structure of their architectural education and how it molds their belief system; third, their expectations about the practice of the profession of architecture and how it shapes them.

SOCIAL ROLE OF ARCHITECTURE

There are considerable differences between the purpose of architecture here and in Mexico, even though both have been shaped by events in Europe, from the industrial revolution through the post-war period. In the U.S., the role of architecture was profoundly altered by those events, particularly the period from 1900 to 1945. Change occurred on two fronts, one technological and the other institutional. The most fundamental of these was the conceptual change brought about by the modern movement, many of whose proponents emigrated to the U.S. after the war. The radical social and socialist ideals of the modern movement in Europe had resulted there in an architecture for the working "masses", embodied in notions of more "universal" space, mass production of quality products, and political idealism. Translated to the US, irony can be found in the evolution of an architecture that was wonderfully suited to the interests of developers, bankers, and speculators, all who saw in this a capitalist, rather than socialist potential. The modern movement which begun as means of addressing social inequities - manifested in the Weissenhof Exhibition of housing in Stuttgart in 1927 - became, in the United States, associated with large business interests, many who were providers of services or products of mass consumption - as embodied in such modern icons as the Seagrams Building, Lever House, G.M. Technology Center, General Life Insurance and the John Hancock Tower. This tendency to associate modern architecture during its heyday of the 1950-60's with consumerism and in turn with "style" is still prevalent today, witness the hype associated with the Trump Towers, or the now accepted idea that "good design sells", or even the use of architecture as an important image in TV, as manifested in "Miami Vice", which at its time was a cutting edge production. Thus architecture in the minds of

our students is inexorably linked to notions of product, of consumption, of style.

Now there are those who argue obversely that, if anything, our students are architecturally illiterate, that is, they have little awareness of the examples just cited. Perhaps this is the distinction between the "formal" integration of culture and the "informal" - found in peer interaction and learning - which describes a wholly different set of experiences from the examples just cited, which at best can be called "low culture" or "low-architecture". These are found in sub-urban development that is bereft of any significant intervention by architects, or consist of "consumer architecture" - which range from the subdivisions our students inhabit to fast food franchises they eat in and from the strip malls and shopping centers they frequent to the auto dealerships they buy from, all which litter the main arteries of the city they drive through.

But even at that level, for the students from Mexico, the informal integration of culture is quite distinct. First and foremost there is not that separation between the vast bulk of the non-architect designed environment and those few instances where architectural intervention has occurred, as unlike the U.S., almost all buildings are created by architects. Secondly, most of the UNAM students are the products of an urban versus a sub-urban, or even rural environment. Thus, while they may go to one of the three major malls that exist in Mexico City, or even eat at McDonald's, these experiences take place within a built environment whose architectural manifestation at least has integrity and consistency. (Here we are obviously ignoring all the social ills that Mexico City is heir to.)

A distinct factor that stands out most in Mexico is that of the social purpose of contemporary architecture. In Mexico there occurred at the turn of the century a social and political upheaval of gigantic proportions, the Revolution of 1910. This evolved into an intellectual and artistic renovation in the 1920's. The Revolution of 1910, which took as many as one life in eight and destroyed much of the economic base of the country, provided an opportunity for a variant of modern architecture called "functionalism". Not only what had been destroyed needed replacement, but even more importantly what had been denied the "have nots" under the dictatorship of the previous Diaz regime all needed development. What followed in the 1930's was a period of rapid and extensive construction. The government, which was heavily centralized, had as its stated goal bringing social justice to all, and the new "functionalist" architecture became the mechanism to solve the needs of housing, education, and health, all which had been neglected since the colonial period. The fundamental ideals of the revolution became institutionalized in what was to become the ruling party, the PRI (still the ruling political party in contemporary Mexico), and formed a part of every day political thought and party rhetoric and a part of the continuous struggle to transform society in to the shape of an ideological image. That modern architecture was a part of that image was clearly understood by everyone. Thus not just the physical manifestations of European modernism, but its social ideals became a fundamental part of the evolution of Mexican culture, with the result that these students see architecture first and foremost as having a social responsibility. This is reinforced by the icons of Mexican modernism beginning with the UNAM itself - a "popular" university, i.e. virtually free and historically with a policy to admit as many students as possible - and the site of the most important collection of modern ideas about architecture and urban design in the country. The seminal buildings of modernism, in contrast to the U.S., were almost all built by the government for social benefit and include: the Huipulco Hospital and Institute of Cardiology by Villagran (1937), O'Gorman's Technical Institute and other school buildings which followed his studio for Diego Rivera - then a leading leftist who befriended Trotsky when he escaped to Mexico - (all from 1929 -35), and the Social Security Building by Carlos Obregon Santacilla (1945). Or we can point out more modern examples such as the SEDUE Building by Gonzalo de Leon and the library at the UNAM by Juan O'Gorman among others.

ARCHITECTURAL EDUCATION

If we accept the notion that American students basically come to the university with ideas that associate architecture with product - that is consumption and style - and profit - as a tool for development, and that Mexican students enter the university with very different ideals that embrace architecture as having a loftier social purpose, then how does the academic institution reshape or reinforce those preconceptions? Are these cultural attitudes transformed, transcended, or simply accepted?

Within the U.S. there are considerable differences between architecture schools at the undergraduate level, not the least of which is the difference between four plus two plans and professional five degrees. Perhaps what they all share in common, besides the oversight of the NAAB, is their relationship to the modern movement. While the social content of European modernism did not have much impact here, the teachers of the Bauhaus did. This is due to a large part to the influence of Gropius and Breuer at Harvard and to a lesser degree to Mies at ITT and Moholy-Nagy at the Institute of Design. It has been said that during the 1960's over half the department heads and deans of architecture schools in America had studied under those from the Bauhaus.

In Mexico, the traditional five year degree of architecture has become transformed lately, in part because of the influence of American educational patterns. Now, as embodied in the latest changes to the UNAM degree plan made last year, the study of architecture has become much more focussed and narrow, even more so than here at home, in part because students receive a more thorough education in high school and take few general education or core curriculum classes in college.

To understand the general differences in educational philosophy is as easy as looking at the statement of goals of

the most important architecture school in Mexico, the UNAM. It begins with a one page manifesto about the socio-economic context of the profession.

> "Among the characteristics which stand out most in the economic and social development of the country, one finds the lack of equality between distinct groups, sectors, and social classes that make up the country's population. The socio-cultural aspects of the country form a cultural mosaic of regions integrated by ethnic and linguistic minorities which at the same time form part of a national culture. In economic terms, at one extreme are found the poorest groups, rural and urban, with high rates of illiteracy and poor nutrition, substandard housing, with little hope of social mobility, and in most cases without basic services. At the other extreme the few who hold the greatest part of the nation's riches, with the highest economic capacity to acquire material goods and services, not only here but abroad, with levels of consumption that exceed even those of highly developed countries."

It then goes on for two more full pages to address the needs of the country which an architect should confront, the characteristics of the profession, and the justification for the creation of more architecture graduates. Can you image your own catalogue beginning with a diatribe about the social ills of the state, the illiteracy rate, class inequities, etc?

What those graduates have learned in five years of schooling at each institution bears comment. Again, by looking at the course work of the typical American five year curriculum and that of the UNAM we find the following:

- Material which students at both institutions take for equal hours and credits (quite similar) - Graphic Communications, Theory and Society, Math and Science, Environmental Systems, and Professional Practice.
- Material where American students take considerably more hours/credits: Design Studio (20% more), Electives (2 times more), and General Education Requirements (4 times more).
- Materials where students from the UNAM take considerably more hours/credits: History of Architecture (2 times more), Construction Technology (3 times more), Site/ Urban Design (2.5 times more), Social Service (none at American institutions), Practicum (varies between being an elective to being required here versus required at the UNAM - this is the same as Social Service).

What stands out in Mexico is the reduced number of studio hours and the increased hours in history, urban design, and especially in construction technology. This underscores the continued importance of modernism in Mexico, manifested by the limited debate about style that takes place in academia there. Thus students learn to design within the confines of an accepted set of canons. As Legarreta wrote in the ferment of the post-revolutionary period, "First we will make houses for the people. Aesthetes and rhetoricians (hopefully they will all perish) can have their debates later."

PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

What architects do and how they go about practicing molds the perceptions of students as they proceed through their academic preparation and approach graduation. The distinction between these aspects in the two countries explains much about the differences in attitude of our students.

We are more aware about our own situation, that the architect is first and foremost a generalist with specialized knowledge who coordinates the efforts of a broad array of consultants, representing in some instances the interests of the client and in others the project per se. We are all aware of the intern system and the legal requirements of licensing. The impact of litigation and the cyclical nature of the construction economy have created a new age of uncertainty of which we are most acutely conscious.

What is less known is that for Mexican architects the path to professional recognition is much shorter. Completing academic requirements and finishing the thesis and social service results in being granted the degree of "Licenciatura en Arquitectura", the equivalent of our licensing. This is a minimum of a five year process. The lack of required post graduation internship prior to licensing in Mexico is replaced to a minor degree by the 480 hours of practicum required for graduation, and in part by the move toward greater specialization during the educational process, one which has created a loss of liberal arts courses to make room for that emphasis. Especially important is that most architects would starve if they tried to live off their design fees. Rather, the architect is the master builder, who profits from being the general contractor, therefore the educational emphasis is more on structural calculations than conceptual ideas. It would be unfair to say that the difference between north and south is that of designers versus builders, yet because of the dominance of functionalist architecture in Mexico there is less mania about novelty and innovation. With much less stylistic debate in Mexico, given that modernism is not only aesthetically but politically correct, the limits of design permissibility are more defined. Thus the architect can work intuitively, spending more time on the tectonics of architecture, a requirement as there are few standardized products or materials.

CONCLUSION

What can be seen is the wide gulf in cultural structures that separate these students who live less than a two hour airplane ride way from each other. Even though our city shares some historic connection and roots with Mexico, the foreignness of it is a stark reality. The cultural immersion that takes place during this international study program requires the students to reflect on their own society and the role of architecture there so that they can interact effectively with their foreign partner.

Perhaps we can extrapolate from our experiences to a larger scale, that of the professional reciprocity agreement being developed between representatives of the Tri-National Committee and the North American Free Trade Agreement

(Canada, the U.S., and Mexico) that will be implemented by 1996. This academic exchange has value beyond what our students individually learn. From the perspective of Mexico, always sensitive to the overwhelming character of American culture, these lessons have ominous overtones. For Mexican schools of architecture the potential invasion of Yanqui architecture has caused them to really ponder what distinguishes their culture and how to reinforce those aspects within an academic structure. To quote from the introduction to the UNAM architecture school catalogue, "What is important is to advance an independent, national development which rescues our roots, our traditions, that enriches our cultural identity, that now more than ever needs protection." The experiences we have had with our international studies program underscores just how critical this issue is for our country and academic institutions as well, but, because we feel secure in our insularity, this much needed introspection has not occurred.

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