Learning at the Crossroads

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We are in Istanbul in a design studio at Yeditepe University's campus. The students have already spent two weeks in Anatolia and are settled in the university's dormitory along with other Turkish students. Following the introduction of the project, the design groups have been established and the students have undertaken detailed site analysis. However, all three design groups are now frustrated with their inability to understand each other. Eventually they discover that there is only one way to communicate: through design. This cacophony becomes transformed into a silent studio where the students start to sketch, cut pieces of paper or mold clay and fashion models to express themselves. They now know that the traditional tools of designing can sometimes be the best tools. This was one of the many productive and pedagogically meaningful outcomes of my Study Abroad program in Turkey last summer. I offer my experience directing a month-long workshop/ studio in Turkey as a starting point for discussing the elements of a design program abroad.

Figure 1. Student group designing together, Yeditepe University, Istanbul (Photo by Gavin Sharp)

Richard Lessels coined the term "Grand Tour" in 1670 to describe "the rite of passage" for European élite to travel though Europe for several months sampling the most spectacular artworks and architectural sites. The intention was not only appreciating the marvelous arts and architecture through drawings and journals but also to recreate them at home. In the twentieth century, what had started as mostly an endeavor of leisure for the affluent was transformed into a crucial part of design education. This activity of traveling from one's own native environment and experiencing a foreign landscape, whether it is built or unbuilt, became a necessity especially for architecture students and young architects. Josef Hoffmann, Theo van Doesburg, Le Corbusier and later Louis Khan, Louis Skidmore, Philip Johnson and Michael Graves are only some of the renowned architects and designers who embarked on a Grand Tour.

Figure 2. Student group designing together, Yeditepe University, Istanbul (Photo by Sarah Johnson)

The most recent incarnation of this practice among aspiring architects is the modern Study Abroad program. These international programs take many forms in the curriculum: from year or semester-long study in a foreign university to summer workshops/studios. Although the language of instruction is usually English in order to maximize accessibility, many study abroad programs have a foreign language component of some kind. As expected, study abroad programs vary greatly in terms of the rigor and quality of the education they offer. Some of these programs are highly commercialized: advertised as a good resume builder and "a critical asset for prospective employees" on top of earning academic credit, practical experience, language skills, and the experience of a lifetime.[1] Since more and more universities are requiring their students to have a study abroad experience, it is incumbent on university faculty to vet these programs carefully so our students can make the most of them. Study abroad programs have many advantages for the design student. In particular, the following learning outcomes can be achieved better in such a context:

1. Gaining spatial consciousness through autopsy of a foreign landscape

2. Improving one's visual repertoire by direct analysis of great works of architecture

3. Increasing awareness of cultural differences by immersion

4. Increasing self-awareness by learning about the other

The Turkey workshop experience is structured to raise questions about issues of history and tradition, identity and culture, architecture and social and physical context, and the effects of Westernization and globalization on spatial environment. Students are encouraged to diversify their ways of thinking through sharing and living with members of another culture. The intellectual exchange and wide exposure to the education and practice of design in Turkey help to prepare students for a world where design practice must respond to cross-cultural needs.

One of the unique pedagogical approaches of this study abroad program is to have the Turkish and American students work together as design groups. The multi-cultural design groups do not always yield the most impressive end products. However, most learning happens as the students struggle to communicate. Very often, in a studio-based learning environment the excessive obsession with the end product may compromise learning from the design process. Through my pedagogical approach I shift students' attention towards the design process. This is also reflected in grading which lowers the anxiety levels of the students. Not surprisingly, the design groups which invest in the design process end up with the most inspiring design solutions. I see my role as a facilitator of learning. My influence fades as the students get more competent about the culture, city and its architectural and social history. Because the students are the deciding factor in the design process which entails iteration and group discussion they become more than receivers of knowledge. They exchange it. Yet another distinctive pedagogy is in the determination of the program and the site. The project site is selected in "problematic" neighborhoods where students attempt to resolve social and cultural issues in the architectural context.

The workshop/studio in Turkey has three components as methods of exploration and learning:

1) ANALYSIS
reading, observation, and discussion,

2) DOCUMENTATION
sketching, photography and travel journal and

3) SYNTHESIS
designing: a studio charrette with local design students

The students have to attend four orientation sessions where we review our itinerary, talk about architecture, culture, and language before our departure. An important part of this orientation is to speak with alumni of the program from the previous season. For the first two weeks we travel in Anatolia visiting architectural sites, cities, villages, sketching, sampling the cuisine and meeting local people to get a better sense of the heterogeneous range and paradoxical character of Turkish culture. The last two weeks is spent mostly in the studio partnering with another university in Istanbul.

The students work with Turkish students in design groups. Each group is given a site in the city where they conduct detailed site analysis. In summer of 2008 I selected Tarlabaşı, in Istanbul, a problematic neighborhood currently gaining notoriety because of a recent revitalization project. Both the commissioned contractor and an architectural historian who identified the proposals as gentrification gave

Figure 3. Student group designing together, Yeditepe University, Istanbul (Photo by Murat Çetin)

Figure 4. Istanbul Getty Images by AFP/Getty Images

presentations to the students. The contracting firm hired some of the best-known architects to redesign nine blocks. Located in south of Pera where property values still remain high -although its glorious days are over- Tarlabaşı is notorious with its slums with unsafe and dirty streets, where even the police would be hesitant to enter. Architects made a decision on the fate of the buildings based on their historical value and physical circumstances. They introduced an inner courtyard scheme that changed the orientation of buildings towards

Figure 5. Tarlabaşı (Photo by Gürcan Öztürk)

a shared center. Originally each building had only a single façade that opened onto a public space, the street. The designers' proposal also recommended the resident density be reduced more than fifty percent. The proposed projects communicated a very refined and precise modern architectural language. As expected the presentations brought many questions: What was going to happen to the residents once the projects started, who was going to stay? Who was going to leave and why? Will it be possible to sustain this "mixed" neighbor-hood? Who were the new homeowners?

One of the most important goals of this study abroad program is to raise spatial consciousness, an essential characteristic of a good designer. Without spatial consciousness no designer can grasp the experiential results of design decisions. Spatial perception is about being able to read spaces as designers. It is to observe the consequences of walking

through a doorway opening onto a ten-foot solid stonewall versus a partially empty drywall erected with 2x4s. It is to see and feel the relationship between light and space, and to appreciate what is concealed and what is revealed. Consciousness in design is also about materiality, color, and texture. It is to know a wall is not just a wall. Although it is possible to gain spatial consciousness at home or in a classroom, Turkey provides a number of special circumstances. Few places can boast of a greater variety of geographical and architectural spaces. Because of the central role this region played from the very beginnings of civilization through many powerful empires--Assyrians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Turks, and many more—the variety of built environments is simply astonishing. Not only home to many exquisite monuments, such as the Hagia Sophia, but to monuments that, like the Hagia Sophia, have undergone many transformations and adaptations. When students have spent time under that marvelous dome observing and digesting what they see, their perspective on architecture and design is altered forever.

One would not always need a monument to get the same results; what changes them can also be a simple beautiful stone garden wall built without any mortar in a small village. It does not always have to be an inspiring moment either. Sometimes it is massive blocks of concrete apartment buildings that have no respect for the skyline of a city that makes them wonder why. In other words, study abroad assists design students by awakening their senses. It is essential that students be guided by questions that will require them to look at architecture in a certain way. Exploring ruins in situ makes it possible to imagine building techniques. For example at the Red Basilica in Bergama (also known as the Red Hall) indentations in the brick wall indicate the use of wooden members to support a roof. It is possible to compare the experience of being inside a building and outside, the rhetoric of the exterior to the disposition of space inside. Construction techniques and materials typically have an organic relationship to the landscape, which can best be observed at the site. Observing how changes in the landscape affect the architecture is easy while moving around a place with the diversity of Turkey. Autopsy also offers an opportunity to appreciate the difference between a photograph and the actual space, or between other methods of representation (plan, sections, and perspectives) and the real space, and to grasp how deceptive these representational methods may be. A photograph will be a representation of what and how the photographer wants us to see. A section or plan will be a miniaturized two-dimensional drawing of a grand composition. A perspective can only tell part of the story. As much as they are still necessary and fulfill a function, they lie to us.

Immersion into an unfamiliar environment brings about greater self-consciousness. For the time they are abroad, students operate like ethnographers by collecting "their primary data by becoming immersed in the culture they are investigating (e.g. through observing and participating in a group's activities)."[2] A full appreciation of the social and cultural differences is crucial to a good designer, and a guided experience of a place as diverse as Turkey can achieve this goal. Participant feedback regularly emphasizes this aspect of their experience in Turkey. It is especially important to encourage our students to go to unfamiliar places that are outside their comfort zone in order to challenge their presup-positions. Epiphanies about presuppositions are the moments when the most learning occurs: whether it is when a student enters Hagia Sophia and experiences for him/herself the proportional and spatial qualities of space, or when he/she is invited to have some tea or coffee by a random stranger while walking in the streets of a small village. It is humbling moments like these that students learn much about themselves and the world.

The pace of the program should allow experiencing the city, the landscape, the neighborhood, and the building to the fullest. Students should be allowed enough time to do all of this. Study abroad programs should be more than taking some classes abroad and seeing some artifacts while you are there. The program should allow for opportunities to connect with local people and other design students. The last two weeks of the Turkey program emphasize this aspect by creating a productive environment and working with local design students. Some of these students speak some English, most do not. Because of the language gap students have to rely on sketching and iterative model making. A travel program requires students to pack lightly, so students learn to work without depending on technological crutches, like computers. Each design group is allowed to have only one computer

and eventually the students learn that the pencil is the best tool for expressing their ideas. Although there are many misunderstandings along the way, the effort required to work together on a project inevitably bears fruit. For success, Study Abroad programs should have modest agendas: posing questions rather than finding definite answers, making a start of a two-way relationship rather than becoming best friends over a short amount of time.

A destination that has the following properties will be most beneficial for the students:

1. A diverse selection of architectures based on periods and culture

2. Variety in built and unbuilt landscape

3. A mixture of urban and rural architectural and cultural context

4. A strong living professional tradition of design and architecture with a presence in academia

5. An opportunity for immersion in a non-western cultural context

Study abroad programs will be increasingly relevant as we continue to teach architecture and design as we do. We look at historical precedents. We accept that architecture cannot come out of nothing but only out of what precedes it. We tell our students to be innovative, but also try to teach them about the value of process and iteration. We value multi-culturalism. We attempt to teach architectures unlike our own, non-Western, "Islamic", etc. People tend to see and remember that is least familiar in their own environment. That's probably why, although we see about seven Greek and Roman cities, but only three mosques, my students keep saying that they have seen a lot of mosques! For this reason study abroad programs beyond Western Europe have the potential to be more beneficial for American students. The value of critical regionalism can be comprehended best when one experiences other architectures in their own context.

In addition to standard course evaluation forms I use informal discussions before during and after the trip as an assessment tool. I inquire about their expectations before the trip and the actual experience once the trip is over. The traveling group later designs an exhibition to present their experiences to the public using their sketches, design work and photographs. This process of designing an exhibition is a key way of assessing the program. The most influential sites and memories inevitably surface during our discussions about the exhibition. We also talk about what they sketched and why. Students are asked not necessarily to select the most beautiful sketches or photographs but also to use the exhibition as an opportunity to see more clearly what they accomplished and what they may have missed. The exhibition is composed as a culmination of each personal encounter. Interestingly people and landscape images and sketches are generally the first things that students want to exhibit as opposed to images of architectures. Since architects and designers tend to be visual people, the exhibition also offers an opportunity and a forum for recruiting new students to our programs.

With that said, the reason that we want to travel should not be to collect photographs of ourselves in front of a space or building. Yet one of the first things that we do when we get there is to take a picture or two. Something happened to me this year: I forgot my camera at home and was automatically stripped of the responsibility of documenting every site we visited. I have to admit when I first realized I forgot my camera, I felt as if I had no instruments to experience places to the fullest. However, this year's study abroad program turned out to be one of the best travel experiences of my life. Rather than looking for the best spot to take a picture so that I could transform the wonderfully three-dimensional architectural wonders into a two-dimensional object on a flat screen, or a piece of paper, I simply experienced them. I do not have pictures to look at; I do however really remember the spaces, the heat, the smells, the sounds, and the tactile properties as I walked on the landscape. It was a sensory experience because I did not have any photos to rely on. Telling the students not to take their cameras with them at all may be a little too extreme, but in the future I am planning to have them see at least some of the sites without a camera. The experiential difference between the site visits with or without the camera should be interesting to observe. We experience spaces by seeing, smelling, and touching (at least our feet touch the ground), and that is why the camera steals something from our real experience.

It represents a perfect moment frozen in time; but architecture should be dynamic and few things can help bring that dynamism to the forefront like a well-structured study abroad program.

ENDNOTES

1. www.studyabroaddirectory.com

2. Jane Jackson,"Ethnographic Pedagogy and Evaluation in Short-Term Study Abroad" in Michael Byram, Anwei Feng, eds. *Living and Studying Abroad* (Clevedon [England]; Buffalo, NY: Multilingual Matters Ltd., 2006), 134.