

Travel as Architecture Pedagogy: Constructing Student Memories

Smilja Bertram

(Associate Professor, The University of Texas at Austin, smilja@mail.utexas.edu)

1 ABSTRACT

The paper explores how travel, through the experience of study abroad programs, affects the spatial imagination and design methods of architecture students. Travel experiences can be a critical factor in shaping a student's design thinking, as memorable imagery of places, spaces, and people is stored and reassembled along with new experiences in subsequent conceptualizations. The paper seeks to answer several questions: How do profound personal observations and experiences influence student design thinking? How is new context observed, assimilated, processed, and finally implemented? By immersion in a different culture, students acquire a level of insight that significantly accelerates experimentation in their future work. The paper will explicate the role and influence of travel, displacement and creativity in study abroad programs by demonstrating actual student work, project assignments and the pedagogy applicable.

2 THE PEDAGOGY OF TRAVEL

“An embodied memory has an essential role as the basis of remembering a space or a place. We transport all the cities and towns that we have visited, all the places that we have recognized, into the incarnate memory of our body. Our domicile becomes integrated with our self-identity; it becomes part of our own body and being.”¹ Juani Palasmaa

This paper explores how travel, through the experience of study abroad programs, affects the spatial imagination and design methods of architecture students. Travel experiences can be a critical factor in shaping a student's design thinking, as memorable imagery of places, spaces, and people is stored and re-assembled along with new experiences in subsequent conceptualizations. The paper seeks to answer several questions: How do profound personal observations and experiences influence student design thinking? How is new context observed, assimilated, processed, and finally implemented?

The idea is to demonstrate that through the lens of travel a student's sense of architecture theory and production can expand personal insights. While studying abroad, students experience displacement, which, in turn, creates new and valuable perceptions. In literature, major innovators are often immigrants where elements of strangeness, distance and alienation contribute to creativity. As expatriate architects living abroad are able to visualize a particular architectural or urban condition more vividly through the juxtaposition of cultures, students experience similar discoveries.

While students are abroad in Italy, their contemporary culture is displaced and they experience the contrast of Europe as a powerful influence. Caren Kaplan notes in *Questions of Travel* that “Euro- American modernisms celebrate singularity, solitude, estrangement, alienation, and aestheticized excision of location in favor of locale—that is, the ‘artist in exile’ is never ‘at home,’ always existentially alone, and shocked by the strain of displacement into significant experimentations and insights.”² Similarly, Robert Venturi has said of his own experience in Rome, “Being an expatriate allowed me to be stimulated and thrilled by the ordinary of my own environment when I came back.”³

It is this travel opportunity that creates such valuable personal and professional growth for the students in their formative years of architectural education.

The paper will explicate the role and influence of travel, displacement and creativity in study abroad programs by demonstrating actual student work, project assignments and the pedagogy applicable. The process of learning and designing in a studio abroad facilitates students in shaping and informing their design thinking.

3 THE GRAND TOUR

The fascination with travel that we encounter in architecture is deeply rooted in an intellectual tradition that links traveling epistemologically to the production of knowledge. The belief in the capacity of travel to provide insight, facilitating an epistemological journey from habit to knowledge, can be found in systems of thought that are fundamentally different from one another – from Islam to the scientific reasoning of the Enlightenment and beyond – and is not confined to any particular cultural constellation or epoch.⁴

The tradition of the Grand Tour of Europe began with wealthy English gentlemen in the 17th and 18th century traveling to the continent in search of enlightenment (and pleasure). Typically, the itinerary of the Grand Tour culminated in Italy. With the advent of modernity and the democratization of travel, a form of Grand Tour to various foreign lands became essential for many young architects. Examples include the young Le Corbusier's journey to the East in the 1910s, Tadao Ando's journey to the West in the 1960s, Frank Lloyd Wright's travels to Japan in 1905, and European architects' travels to the US in the 1920s.

4 THE AMERICAN ACADEMY IN ROME

During America's emergence as an industrial power during the Gilded Age of the 1890s, the neoclassical style of architecture was fashionable, borrowing heavily from the Classic Roman and Renaissance periods. America was considered, by arbiters of taste, to be without its own culture and required a permanent institution abroad for promising young architects to study Classical Art and Architecture. The American Academy in Rome was established for this purpose. The Academy's original mission of promoting Classical styles has changed, but it is very active as the preeminent American research institution abroad. Many of the modern masters in the US have spent time at the Academy, including Louis Kahn, Robert Venturi, and Michael Graves.

The impact of travel and a year's residence at the Academy resonates years later in the design thinking and professional work of Academy Fellows. Louis Kahn, an icon of American architecture, radically modified his design philosophy after visiting Rome and the Mediterranean. At mid-career, Kahn was invigorated by his study of the principles of Roman monumentality, geometry and construction. For Kahn and many others, Italy is where the past and present meet, infusing ancient Roman architecture with modern sensibilities and abstract concepts.

For students studying abroad, a foreign culture and its landscape becomes an experimental ground for new ideas that eventually find their way from the unconscious to be reconstructed within subsequent work. Travel experiences can be a critical factor in shaping a student's design thinking, as memorable imagery of places, spaces, and people is stored mentally, to be re-assembled along with new experiences and recollected in future conceptualizations.

5 THE STUDIO MODEL: MAPPING

The University of Texas at Austin School of Architecture conducts a fall semester design studio in Tuscany from its base in Castiglion Fiorentino. Through this experience, students gain an understanding of Italy's profound influence on the development of Western civilization. Italy is a

unique laboratory with its geography, culture, architecture, landscape, and manifold contributions to civilization and culture. The hill town where the study program resides has layers of Etruscan, Roman, Medieval, Renaissance, and modern influences, providing a fitting background for students to speculate, interpret, and create. The hill town, two hours north of Rome and one hour south of Florence, is both the subject and physical studio for a series of design projects.

What occurs as students travel, observe, record, and speculate? According to James Corner, a process called mapping is at work: “Mapping is creating and building the world, measuring and describing...mapping discovers new worlds within past and present ones...making visible what is usually hidden.”⁵ Thus, students store information about compelling places and spaces in memory to be recollected in the future. According to French philosopher Henri Lefebvre, places and spaces are recorded simultaneously physically, mentally, and socially. As students record what they see and experience, what is imagined and what is hidden, their discoveries become their first design intentions.

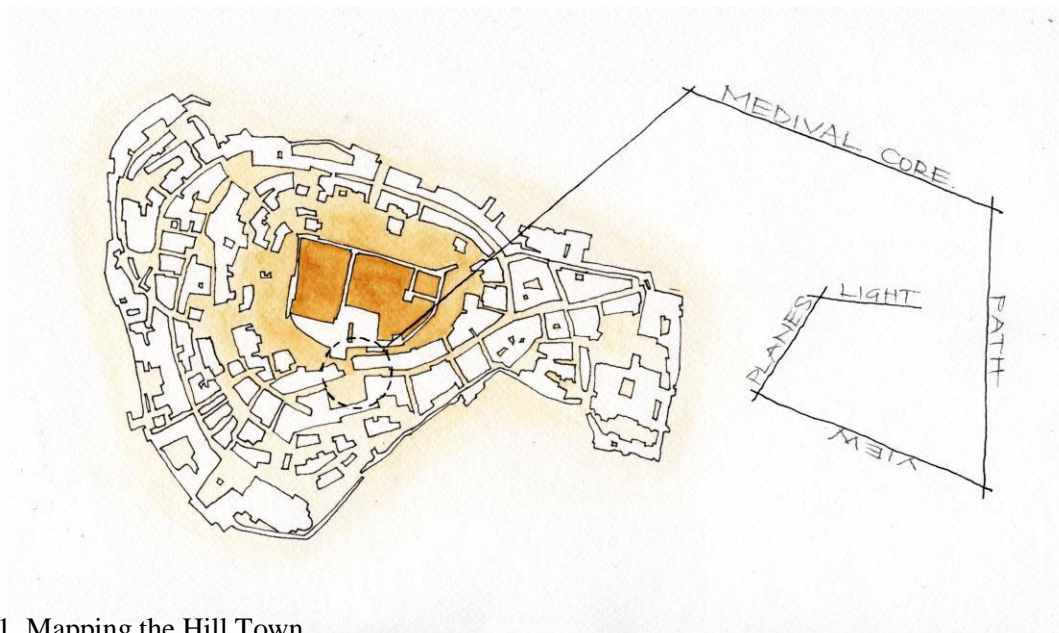


Fig. 1. Mapping the Hill Town

Following is a recent University of Texas School of Architecture project inspired by Michelangelo's revision of the Capitoline Hill in Rome. Students were asked to design a new community center on Castiglion Fiorentino's axis (dating from the Etruscans) that connects to the Medieval town center, where a Renaissance loggia designed by Vassari looks out on the Tuscan landscape. Michelangelo's task in Rome was similar: how, through spare means, could the center of the city be given spatial clarity? Michelangelo, in response to the challenge, designed a remarkable government and civic space, serving as a threshold between the Forum and the new center of the city and fitting perfectly within the sequence of the experience of moving through Rome.

Michelangelo was able to reorient Rome toward the Renaissance city and away from the ancient Rome. In the school project, students must clarify the identity of the center of Castiglion Fiorentino, reconfigure the connection severed by a 1930s building, and connect the Piazza Comunale's Medieval piazza with the Renaissance era Vassari window looking out from the Medieval town. Having mapped other Italian cities and public spaces in their course work, students assigned the project are able to recollect their Italian experiences and develop new design propositions.

Through the process of design, students are asked to envision information in a variety of way: by organizing those multiple readings of information, they can approach the task of generating and translating ideas. This methodology requires students to proceed through a guided framework, abstracting analytical and intuitive observations of changing views, points of observation, and graphic

techniques. In this manner, students are freed from preconceived ideas and conventional representations. Drawings and models are considered as means to explore ideas rather than a final product. As the hand draws, it pushes the mind, which provides new ideas through interpretation of the process of drawing and making. In this way, coordination between hand, eye, mind, and memory becomes the driving force in the design process.

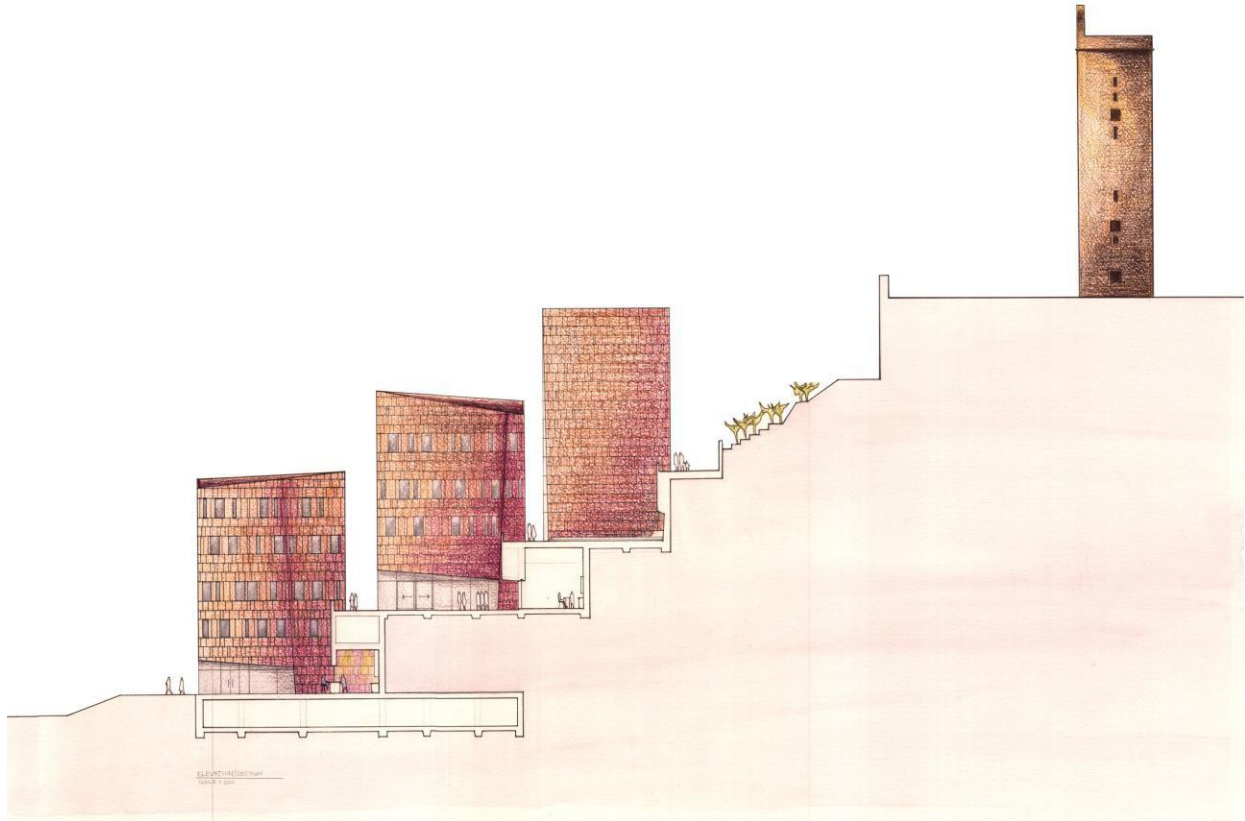


Fig. 2. Section through project

6 CONCLUSION

The significance of travel experiences for students is twofold: discoveries occur while abroad and the learning experience reverberates years later in their design work. These experiences merge the physicality of the present with a conceptualization of the anticipated and imagined. The reservoir of inspiration has been increased dramatically through their Italian travel. The globalization of architecture enhances the intrinsic value of ideas perceived through travel. By immersion in a different culture, students acquire a level of insight that significantly accelerates experimentation in their future work.

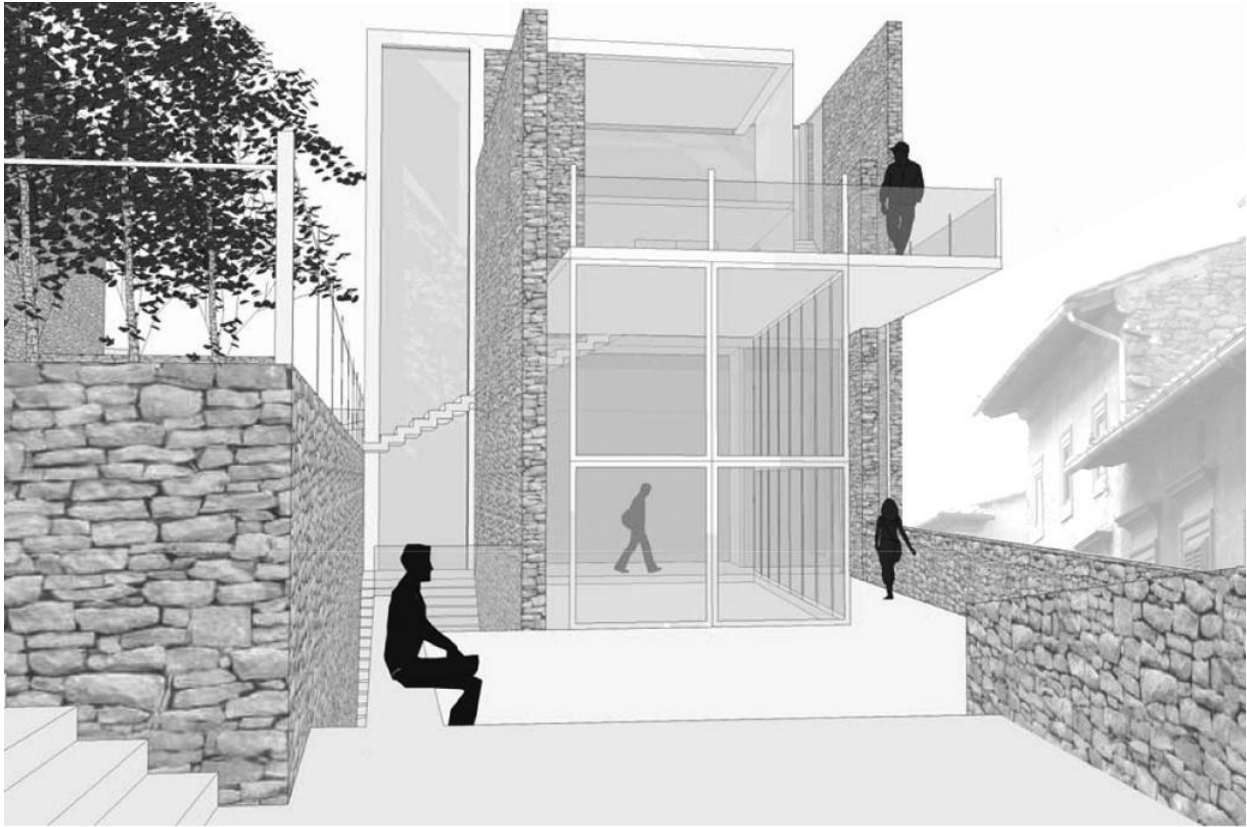


Fig. 3. Piazza Communale

According to Deleuze, contact with new environments provides an experimentation ground for students in which the mind transcribes and transforms experimentations into new constructs.⁶ In his discussions of perception and memory, French philosopher Henri Bergson postulated that memory has no timeline, that the past, present, and future are intermingled. He believed that the unconscious is stored as memory that becomes knowledge, to be recollected in new production. Matter/thoughts move from material (observation) to immaterial reconstruction (subconscious) to material production (building or artifact). The idea that students and architects map information and then recollect it years later in their work is in accord with Bergson's concept of memory, something he referred to as intuition.⁷

"What distinguishes the map from tracing is that it is entirely oriented toward an experimentation in contact with real world. The map...constructs the unconscious."⁸ Gilles Deleuze

Endnotes

1. *Questions of Perception—Phenomenology of Architecture*, special issue of *Architecture and Urbanism*, no. 7 (1994), 8.
2. Caren Kaplan, *Questions of Travel; Postmodern Discourses of Displacement* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 28.
3. Robert Venturi, interview by author (Philadelphia, PA, July, 2005).
4. *Travel, Space, Architecture*, Traganou & Mitrasinovic, eds. (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2009), 5.
5. Denis Cosgrove, *Mappings* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999), 1-2.
6. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by B. Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 12.
7. Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. by N.M Paul & W.S. Palmer (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2004)

8. Deleuze and Guattari, 12.