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Designing within a Different Culture – The case for designing overseas projects and field studies in a school of architecture

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Abstract

Skills and knowledge required for designing within different cultures should play an important part of the architecture curriculum, due to the increasing number of architectural offices engaging in overseas projects and more and more international students studying in the UK. In order to investigate how architectural students perceive and value their learning experience in an unfamiliar context, this project was designed to explore field studies at Southwest China by a group of architectural students from a university at the north of England. It also exams their design decisions made for the project set in the region visited. The field study and design project provide students with the opportunities to exercise the particular way of thinking that they formed in the university studio-based education. Students from various background may use and integrate their skills and knowledge differently when confronted with an unfamiliar culture.

The study takes the forms of an inquiry that use in-depth unstructured interviews of 3rd year Bachelor Architectural students. It explores the experience of the students who not only work as navigators interpreting the unfamiliar or new situations, but also construct new understandings in unfolding situations which may engender ways of thinking that inform and reflect on action. The study argues that students' experience of learning and developing is not unified. There is the need for an inclusive culture in architectural education that can take into account of the personal, disciplinary and community values in order to facilitate the adjustments required to make the curriculum more relevant and engaging in a global context.

Introduction

To examine an architectural curriculum in a global context, it is important to understand two often blurred concepts: one is global education and the other multicultural education. Davenport argues that although these two share many concerns, global education deals with issues in the international or cross-national arena, whereas multicultural education is based in a domestic intra-national context.¹

More detailed definition about global education is defined by Babich as “the socialization of students into international citizenry, or as a process of acquiring appreciation of human diversity and cultures, and of the complexities of the international system”². Multicultural education attempts to address issues of diversity and the causes of inequality within a particular society. ³

To understand the conceptual distinction between these two curriculum models is critical in architectural education as globalization has a fundamental influence on both architectural theories and practices. Architecture can be considered as the spatial planning and organisation which have connections to the cultural and social studies in different parts of the world. Further research on designing and learning in an unfamiliar place is also required because of the increased mobilizations of architectural practitioners and students who design or study in overseas countries.

King explains global cultures that have been reflected in architectural practice in three ways. First, the global space is represented through the use of spectacular architecture by nations, cities and religions worldwide not only as signifiers of power, but also as representations of identities for nations and corporations. Secondly the invention and selective appropriation, worldwide, of particular ‘signs of modernity’, and finally the

spectacularly tall buildings not only help to create new social worlds, but also contributes to more widely disseminated conception of what 'the world' itself might be. 4

From this perspective, studies about other's architecture not only deal with knowledge, skills, and attitudes about building in unfamiliar places, they also relate closely to the deeper understanding of one's own culture and society. The global education treats one as part of the global village with limited resources and increasing interdependence.⁵ In architecture, this understanding is reflected in the understanding of sustainable design.

In addition to the increasing number of architectural offices that are engaging in the overseas projects, the impact of globalization on architecture is also illustrated by more and more international students studying architecture in the UK. After graduation, those students will go back to their home countries to design and solve local problems. This raises question about the authentic architectural education system in the UK. This is the discourse ground much in multicultural education which primarily explores in two directions. First, they investigate the needs of international students underserved by the educational system.⁶ Secondly, the multicultural education literature equates culture with knowledge constructed and possessed by different groups of people. Further research on the subject also criticized the static conceptions of culture in multicultural education literature because "culture" is itself a culturally constructed concept.⁷

The methodology for designing the overseas trip

This research about the overseas field trip defines its methodology by considering the theories from both global and multicultural education. A socio-anthropological approach considers teaching as a form of social intervention and the use of culturally responsive pedagogy to create a more democratic educational process.⁸ Study in multicultural art education by Garber demonstrates that studying one other culture can lead to greater tolerance of diversity because "the de-centralization of one's own culture as 'right' will have a transferability to learning about other cultures and cultural artefacts."⁹

This project is also developed from the idea that knowledge is shared because it is constantly, dynamically and socially constructed. From this perspective, to propose an in-depth engagement with particular cultural forms the direct personal contact with members of the culture being studied. The trip to China and design projects set in the region visited makes learning about the culture relevant to the students in a given community. It provides an unfamiliar cultural environment where students improvise with what they have as determined by the circumstances of their study.

The study takes the forms of an inquiry that uses in-depth unstructured interviews of 3rd year Bachelor Architectural students studying in a university in the north of England. This group of students from different cultural backgrounds carried out their field study in Yunnan province in Southwest China for more than three weeks. During the field study they worked on the joint design project with Chinese students in a local university. Following the field trip, a design project was set for students from the UK in the region that they visited in China. The study aims to explore various factors that affect students learning, both formal and informal, within certain cultural contexts.

The trip

Yunnan province in China is famous for its 26 ethnic groups and diverse traditional arts, crafts and buildings of each ethnic culture. The local university in Kunming, the capital city of the Yunnan province, has the curriculum to reconstruct the cultural traditions of these ethnic groups, including the arts and crafts in the school curriculum, inviting local masters into the schools, and educating the young in the traditional apprenticeship style. By working with the Chinese students in the local university, students from the UK had the opportunity to experience the different curricular for design.

Participants' accounts suggested that they had little knowledge of the Chinese society, culture, or education before beginning their studies. Upon arrival, they all experienced various degrees of reality shock, when the cultural patterns of the approached group do not have the authority of a tested system of recipes already formulated by the individual in his or her first culture. Kunming itself has developed rapidly as a metropolitan city over the last

30 years. Participant Richard explained his observation in Kunming:

“Nobody seemed to rush anywhere; a lot of people drove extremely fast but people seemed to make the time to do things which were about themselves. They went to parks or dancing or something. On their dinner break they went to the park to meditate or dance and that was a big shock to us. Everything was very social and people spent time together. Other than that it was difficult to really put your finger on what was different because it seemed so similar to what we do and yet so different but I can’t really explain what the difference is.”

One of the many methods to encourage students to learn and engage in the new context was for students from the UK to work closely with those in the local university. Projects were set up by Chinese staff and students for joint team works between students from both universities. Rather than focused on the traditional Chinese culture, forms, material and technologies, the urgent problems raised by the local communities were related to the conflict of rapid urban development and people’s daily life, as follows:

- How modern urban facilities such as the shopping malls and streets which hold large amount of cars, cyclists and buses were used in the local context.
- How could mass housing provide humanity to large urban populations and immigrants?
- How could local identity be established when there are 26 ethnic groups living in the province?
- How could planning principles set up to ease the conflict between existing urban fabric and the huge demands of the mass housing and transport?
- How could differences be mitigated for housing designed for immigrants and those for others in the same residential area?

The rapid transformations in the city were not simply brought about by one force or a single piece of policy but reflected the conflict and tensions of changing power

groups and negotiations over conflicting interests. It is not unusual to find a new building in the style of European modernism sit next to a modern local “traditional” building in Chinese cities (Fig. 1). The emergent built forms, meanings, and uses presented a different kind of ‘modern’ to that which the students assumed before the trip, and those would be interpreted differently by people from different backgrounds.



Fig. 1. Traditional and modern buildings in Kunming

Students experienced the mixture of the new and traditional, and the planned and un-planned and try to understand the unfamiliar based on their knowledge gained in the university. Participant Chris felt that there should had been more planning considerations for old and new in the city. “The unplanned mixture of ‘tradition’ and ‘modern’ affected the design;” he commented:

“Many old buildings and a church with a big spire were hidden behind high rises because they were surrounded by very tall buildings. But I saw the old buildings and I thought ‘this feels like China’ or ‘this feels like the China that I thought I would find’. Like the old medicine shop just on the road from that new McDonalds”.

Students were also overwhelmed by the large scale construction works carried out in the city, and the international styles adopted on contemporary Chinese architecture. To employ traditional signs, symbols, materials or technologies would not solve the problems

mentioned above. To make the situation more difficult, some Western architectural signs and symbols were interpreted and then restated with signs and symbols in the local architectural language in Kunming. Very often those transcribed signs and symbols are used as imported brand images. Contemporary transformation of architecture and the built environment in Kunming had been the re-contextualisation and hybridisation of concepts of modern/traditional, Western/Eastern, Chinese/non-Chinese. Participant Alex said:

“I suppose you just have this image of this traditional kind of place and you don’t realise how it’s changed so rapidly. You don’t see that side of it in the West.”

In the city, the familiar forms are designated with new uses and meanings and strange elements are incorporated into familiar arrangements, such as two gates in Kunming and the new Wuhua County Office Building that resembles the form of the traditional pagoda (Fig. 2 & 3). The two gates were constructed in the 1980s based on the historical recording in the literature of the demolished original gates. Students felt that their new identities should be valued because “all the Chinese students were proud of the spiritual aspects of these two gates signified.” as John found.

Differently from what tourists do in a visiting place, it is important to view the field study and design process for another place as a process of participation in a new environment, where students need to make judgements. As Hager argues about workplace learning that “the



Fig. 2. Traditional gate in Kunming



Fig. 3. Wuhua County Office Building in Kunming

main outcome of learning is the creation of a new set of relations in an environment”.¹⁰ Learning is characterized by and evident from the ability to make judgments.¹¹ In the field trip, the students learnt to do things they could not do previously, in other words, by manage new problems in different culture or society, the way of thinking and designing can be shaped by the learning process in the new place. Sarah said:

“I think personally the attention to detail and to creating the feeling of an internal space is the thing that really came across to me. The spaces that I enjoyed most were very well considered spaces that weren’t necessarily in a beautiful envelope and I think that is something that I am going to try and bring to my architecture: that attention to the feeling of place.”

After the visit in Kunming, the group travelled to a number of villages in order to understand the differences between the rural and urban areas before they finally arrive in Beijing. In different places, the sequence of the opened and closed space through courtyards of houses, temples and palaces has attracted much attention from students. They were looking for different narrative in spaces that they might not have been familiar with before.

Tom talked about his experience going through the courtyards of Golden Temple compound in Kunming:

"I think I've always liked religious buildings and things like that and when we went round the temples. That was one of the things I got from this trip: the idea of the approach to a building and how the surroundings can completely change the mood and that was how I felt about this temple because the whole environment was very calm."

The most impressive thing for Joe, architecturally, was the Forbidden City: "We walked through the Forbidden City... it's not very high but when I was in there I kind of became lost in that world."

For Tony, the National Opera built in 2008 was the inspiration, he claimed: "The amount of modern buildings that were being built and how there was such a divide between the old and the new. ... That (the National Opera in Beijing) was definitely the most impressive building I went to! I walked around it a couple of times trying to work out how to get in!"

Investigating how this modern building affected him in the same way that traditional temples did, he continued:

"It was amazing and it sat so well on the site and, again, that was a very calm place where you could lose yourself. You're surrounded by roads but you don't really realize that and the building is surrounded by water. That was the nicest piece of architecture; it was very impressive."

Talking about the influence of the trip on their design for the project set up in the visited places, Chris analyzed the difference when designing in an unfamiliar place and a familiar place as:

"If you ask me to design something in the UK then I would just design anything and I would justify it because I am from the UK and I would say that's what I want and my opinion is valid here but in China my opinion isn't as valid as the people who are going to be seeing it and using it every day and so it would have to be right.... I wanted to create something that was architecturally interesting but subtle. At the moment it seems that they are trying to build huge iconic things and it doesn't work."

Mary said: "One thing that really struck me about the ancient and beautiful old structures was that some of them were very beautiful on the outside but the best ones, aesthetically, they weren't worried about the

external and they were more worried about the internal space.... But in western architecture there does seem to have buildings like the Gherkin or even the Gaudi buildings – they've got a very strong external shell that really depicts the building but, inside, they don't necessarily translate that same level of detail and consideration. I think one thing that really struck me about the best of traditional architecture that I want to try and take on into my own work is that the place you make inside is more integral than the building as a whole. And seeing a beautiful building and being in a beautiful space isn't necessarily the same thing."

Snodgrass and Coyne have clear analysis about understanding the architecture of others and one's own by exploring how Eastern philosophy understanding about the sense of 'between-space' (*ma*).¹² 'Between-space' (*ma*) refers to the space between two walls. In this way, "design a building can be understood as 'grasping betweenness', which is the inscription of gap-patterns, rather than the manipulation of forms as objects having solid substantiality, an 'essential' reality in themselves".¹³ They argue that:

"It should be emphasised, once more, that *ma* is not primarily of interest for its formalistic and aesthetic applications, nor even for the insights; it might give into what constitutes the distinctive qualities of Japanese architecture and art. Its main relevance lies elsewhere, in the way it stands as an opposite to our own familiar and accepted ways of thinking architecture."¹⁴

Conclusion

The study of students' experience in China has been informed by an anthropological perspective that culture is "dynamic, emergent and interactional".¹⁵ The unfamiliar place students visited doesn't have a unified core of culture that can be discovered and embedded in the design process as students assumed before the trip. Therefore, their design shouldn't aim to employ this authentic "cultural essence", and combine it with modern ideas to produce architecture for the locals. Furthermore, the interview data demonstrates the environmental influence where students experience in the new place. The purpose of overseas field trip was not to set students into an unfamiliar place to learn about that culture. It explores

the experience of the students who engaged in unfolding situations which may engender ways of thinking that inform and reflect on action. The field visited can be understood as a condition of design intervention and resolution by individuals. Students' experience is not unified.

As Snodgrass and Coyne's analysis about the interpreting the architecture of others and one's own self, a inclusive curriculum, whether it is global education or the multicultural education, might provide students with a space between cultures to communicate about shared human concerns. From this perspective, students can develop a new way of thinking and designing and open up to what architecture might be.

Notes

¹ Davenport, M. "Culture and Education: Polishing the Lenses" " in *Studies in Art Education* NAEA Press: Virginia, USA. 2000. p 361-375.

² Babich, C. *Global Education attitude and practices of Iowa home economics teachers*. Unpublished master's dissertation, Iowa State University, Ames. 1986. Cited by Davenport, Melanie. "Culture and Education: Polishing the Lenses" " in *Studies in Art Education* NAEA Press: Virginia, USA. 2000. p 364.

³ Diaz, C., Massialas, B., and Xanthopoulos, J.. *Global Perspectives for Educators*. Allyn and Bacon: Boston. 1999.

⁴ King, A. *Spaces of Global Cultures – Architecture Urbanism Identity*. ROUTLEDGE Press: London and New York. 2005. p 3.

⁵ Brown, S., & Kysilka, M. "In search of multicultural and global education in real classroom" " in *Journal of Curriculum & Supervision*, 9(3). 1994. p 313-317.

⁶ Trahar, S. *Developing Cultural Capability In International Higher Education – A narrative inquiry*. ROUTLEDGE Press: London and New York. 2011.

⁷ Davenport, M. "Culture and Education: Polishing the Lenses" " in *Studies in Art Education* NAEA Press: Virginia, USA. 2000. p 368.

⁸ Wasson, R. & Stuhr, P. & Petrovich-Mwaniki, L. "Teaching art in the multicultural classroom: six position statement" " in *Studies in Art Education* 34(4). NAEA Press: Virginia, USA. 1990. p 90-93.

⁹ Garber, E. "Teaching art in the context of culture: A study in the borderlands" " in *Studies in Art Education* 36(4). NAEA Press: Virginia, USA. 1995. p 218-232. Cited by Davenport, Melanie. "Culture and Education: Polishing the Lenses" " in *Studies in Art Education* NAEA Press: Virginia, USA. 2000. p 364.

¹⁰ Hager, P. "The conceptualization and measurement of learning at work" " in H. Rainbird, A. Fuller & A. Munro *Workplace Learning in Context*. ROUTLEDGE Press: London and New York. 2004. p 246.

¹¹ *ibid*: 248-9.

¹² Snodgrass, A. & Coyne, R. *Interpretation in Architecture – Design as a way of thinking*. ROUTLEDGE Press: London and New York. 2006. p 224.

¹³ *ibid*: 236.

¹⁴ *ibid*: 239.

¹⁵ Gonzalez, N. "Processual approaches to multicultural education" " in *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*. 31(2). 1995. p 234-244.