

Contextualizing Study Abroad: Teaching Cultural Empathy through Architectural Ethnography

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How can study abroad programs for architects teach cultural empathy? My experience of leading recent study trips in Asia and Europe have shown that there are alternatives to the traditional European travel tours focused on forms of architecture, or post-disaster reconstruction projects, to examine cultural dimensions of architecture. Drawing from on-site observation of buildings in use raises cultural, social questions that are critical to understanding the forces that shape architecture. For example, students may wonder about the street-facing kitchens in houses of Tokyo, or the wood lattices that conceal a Kyoto machiya (rowhouse) storefronts instead of showcasing the products inside the shop. These inquiries in turn inform why contemporary Japanese architecture might take on forms different from the western counterparts. Reflecting upon John Dewey's thoughts on connections between imagination and empathy, and experience and learning, this paper argues that architectural ethnography could cultivate students' awareness in intercultural understanding.

WHAT CAN ARCHITECTURE STUDENTS LEARN FROM STUDY ABROAD PROGRAMS?

When asked why they want to participate in the 2-week Japan study abroad program, design students often answer that they had been fascinated by Japan since childhood when they saw Japanese anime films such as *My Neighbor Totoro* (1998) and *Spirited Away* (2001) by Hayao Miyazaki. They imagined themselves exploring the spaces that the Japanese characters inhabited; these were young Japanese people that they could relate to, despite the foreign appearances of temples with torii gates, tatami rooms, or houses where shoes are not allowed inside. Many students yearn to experience these spaces in person, now from the lens of a budding architect.

Positive impacts of study abroad programs on students have been extensively researched. Both short- and long-term study abroad experienced have shown to enhanced abilities to interact with a diverse range of people interculturally, to empathize with those who hold values and perspectives different from their own, as well as other benefits such as and self-discovery and higher self-esteem.^{1 2 3} While students of architecture benefit from these effects equally as those in other disciplines,



Figure 1. Scene in a tatami room from *My Neighbor Totoro* by Studio Ghibli.

architects have traditionally traveled abroad to expand the knowledge of buildings firsthand, often visiting buildings that they had studied in class through books, videos, and photographs. Formal qualities of architecture such as scale, play of light, weathering of materials, or proportions of architectural elements, can be grasped by experiencing the building on site, using multiple senses. How could a study abroad learning for architecture students be enriched further by combining the development of empathy with formal and cultural knowledge gained through direct observation of buildings? This paper explores how ethnographic drawings of built environments could cultivate students' empathic abilities and awareness in intercultural understanding.

EMPATHY AND LEARNING BY "UNDERGOING"

Empathy is defined as "The ability to understand and share the feelings of another."⁴ The notion of empathy derives from 19th century German idealism, suggesting an active attempt by one individual to get "inside" the other through a deliberate intellectual effort.⁵ Empathy, is rooted in *Einfühlung* ("in-feeling," or "feeling into"), a German term coined by the philosopher Robert Vischer in 1873. Students' social learning, including development of empathy, can be facilitated by student-centered pedagogical approaches.

John Dewey, in his book *Democracy and Education* (1916), discusses that learning involves encounters with otherness and dissimilarity in which one experiences a moment of resistance, which causes one to question habitual responses and ways of thinking. Furthermore, Dewey distinguishes the differences between moments of doing and undergoing. To demonstrate his concept of learning, he uses the example of a child sticking his finger into a flame: To stick a finger into a flame is an act of doing. The act of undergoing is the feeling of pain—or the learning—that results from an act of doing. Once the child associates the act with pain, he begins to learn through his interaction with the world that he should not touch the flame if he does not want feel the pain again.⁶

Many universities today encourage or require students to partake in "experiential learning,"⁷ which often include study abroad programs, hands-on learning from industry partners, and service learning in partnership with community organizations. In these experiences, the act of "undergoing" is critical if they are to learn beyond what can be taught in traditional classrooms. Simply going on a study abroad program will not result in intercultural learning; the students must undergo the process of recognizing differences between what they observe during the travel and the familiar ways of doing things back home. This encounter, as Dewey writes, is often uncomfortable or even painful. Students benefit from "experiential learning" activities only upon reflecting on what defied their initial expectations and recognizing the possibilities for alternatives. In response to the popularity of "real-life" experiential learning in higher education, some educators argue that some

difficult ideas and subject matters cannot simply be learned "experientially" in the "real-world" and require traditional academic reading, writing and discussions.⁸ In a best case, a study abroad experience would enable students to undergo the possibly uncomfortable realization that their preconceptions may be inaccurate, then make a cognitive link to an idea that they read about and discussed in a classroom.

Andrea English, a scholar on philosophy of education, writes that Dewey's concept of imagination "illuminates the idea that the work of imagination as 'taking in' is an act of empathically learning from others. It involves taking in the perspectives, feelings and interests of others."⁹ Simply having more information on a person does not make one empathize with the person. Empathy (although it would have been referred to as sympathy in Dewey's time, as English notes) involves "imaginatively" putting ourselves "in the situation of others."¹⁰ Andrea English differentiates imaginary from imagination in the following way. She writes, while the realm of imaginary is an escape from experience, the realm of imagination "opens up an explicit 'taking in' of the world we have undergone, a world that is new, that is different from what we have experienced before, such that we experience discontinuity and resistance."¹¹ Study abroad programs need to facilitate not passive but active learning. In a variety of academic disciplines and settings, instructors have facilitated development of empathic intelligence from active learning.

TEACHING EMPATHY THROUGH LANGUAGE, LITERATURE, AND ARTS

Language learning can deepen cultural empathy by facilitating understanding in nuances in ways of thinking; an ability to discern cultural nuances requires a high degree of language proficiency.¹² Richard J. Wood, former president of Earlham College where 70 percent of graduates study off-campus,¹³ writes that an effective alternative to language proficiency is a careful reading of literature in translation, under the guidance of a bilingual/cultural teacher who can help understand subtle cultural differences.¹⁴

Martha Nussbaum, Professor of Philosophy at University of Chicago, asserts that literature teaches students how to engage with others.¹⁵ She remarks in her book *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* that lawyers have much to learn from literature. Using examples from Dickens's *Hard Times*, E. M. Forster's *Maurice*, and Richard Wright's *Native Son*, she argues that literature offers glimpses into interior experiences of others, and challenges the readers to see the world from others' points of view.¹⁶

Other scholars have studied how literature and visual arts enable students to empathize with those outside of their own culture. Belinda Louie, professor of education at University of Washington Tacoma, studied students' empathic responses to a novella set during the Chinese revolution after they were given

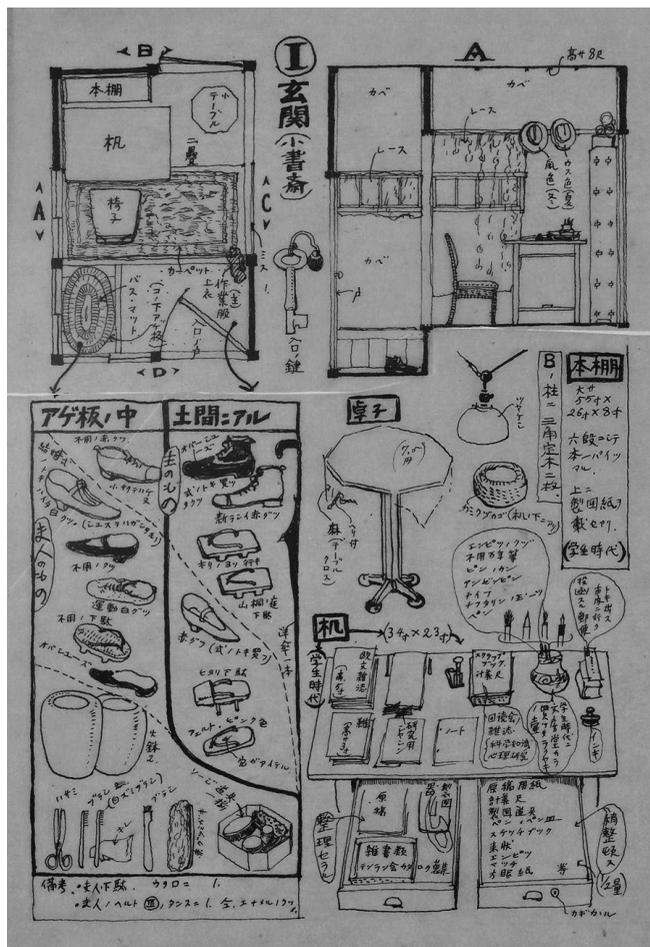


Figure 2. Study by Kon Wajiro, “Household of a newly-married couple, Entrance and home office,” *Modernologia*, 1925.

cultural, political, and historical context. The students’ journal entries showed clear evidences of empathy with the characters. Louie comments, “Although we could not force empathy upon the students, we provided contextual information, literature, and discussion opportunities to help students assume the literary characters’ positions, which reflected the characters’ sociopolitical background, their cultural norms, and their social values. Students questioned profusely as they adjusted themselves to see the world through the characters’ lenses.”¹⁷

Carol Jeffers, a professor of art education, writes that the discovery of mirror neurons by neuroscientists in the 1990s—and the subsequent research and publications—now provide empirical evidence that observing art work fires empathic (“mirror”) neurons in the brain.¹⁸ When a person sees someone else grasp an object, the same cells fire in the brains of both people. In other words, when an action is executed by one person and observed by another, the same mirror neurons in the ventral premotor cortex, which prepares the body’s muscles for movements, are activated in both brains. Through the mirroring mechanism, one’s brain experiences an action taken by

another. Group emotions shared among sports spectators is an example of an affect resulting from mirrored neurons.¹⁹ Vittorio Gallese, a professor of psychobiology and one of the discoverers of mirror neurons, describes this as embodied simulation. Jeffers writes that art classrooms are full of embodied simulations where one is watching other students of all ages and ethnicities sculpt, paint, and draw. She writes about her student who copied Cezanne’s painting *Still Life with Apples*. In doing so, the student wrote that she felt “a special connection to Cezanne—the apples and bottles, his brushwork and knowledge—and had imagined her hand reaching into the painting to grasp one of his apples and all that it signified.”²⁰ If empathy can be cultivated through deep reading of literature or study of paintings, then how could drawings of built environment be a vehicle for empathy learning for architecture students? As the guidance of a bilingual/cultural teacher can aid in interpretation of cultural nuances in literature, an architecture instructor with bicultural knowledge can aid students discern cultural dimensions of modern and contemporary architecture abroad.

ETHNOGRAPHY BY KON WAJIRO IN EARLY MODERN JAPAN

Ethnography is defined as “The scientific description of peoples and cultures with their customs, habits, and mutual differences.”²¹ In the field of anthropology, ethnography could be understood according to anthropologist Simon Coleman and Bob Simpson as “the recording and analysis of a culture or society, usually based on participant-observation”²² and “a research method central to knowing the world from the standpoint of its social relations.”²³ Ethnography is a qualitative research method that involves hands-on, in-situ learning.

The work of Japanese architect, ethnographer, and professor Kon Wajiro (1888–1973) is an example in which an architect contributed their visual observation and representation skills to ethnographic research. In the early 1900s, during Japan’s rapid transition from feudal system to modern life based on western models, sociologists and anthropologists developed methods to study people’s social and cultural conditions, particularly those of middle-class urban areas. Kon developed a visual research method called *Modernologia* between 1925 and 1926. *Modernologia* was an approach and methodology for studying modern life. Working with social scientists, Kon documented transformations in life and the city following the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923.

Whereas Kunio Yanagita, a Japanese scholar of ethnography and folklores, used written language to document his observations of local customs and folklores of remote regions in Japan, Kon made meticulous sketches to capture details of daily lives (Figure 2), from the textures and colors of habitats and garments, to people’s postures.²⁴ Kon’s pupils—Motoko Hani and Takako Kobayashi, both of whom would play important roles in women’s emancipation in Japan—continued to develop

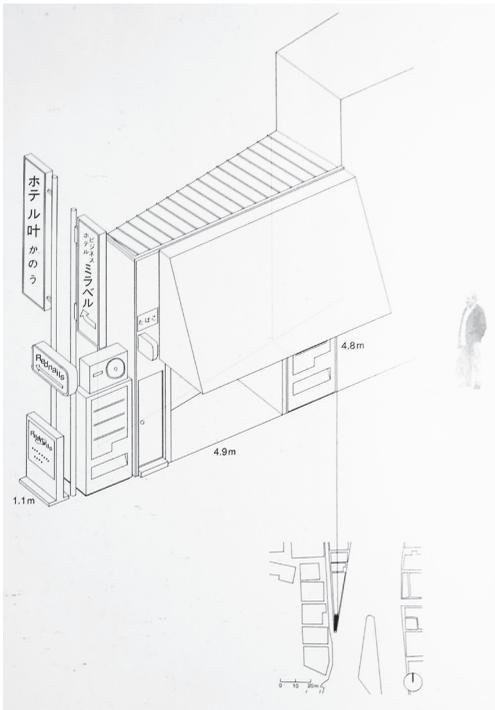


Figure 3: A costume shop squeezed in at the trip of a triangle shaped-lot in Tokyo. From *Pet Architecture Guidebook* (2002) by Atelier Bow Wow. Artifacts such as illuminated store signs, awning, and vending machine intimate the daily life encounters of occupants and passersby.

similar methods between 1925 to 1938.²⁵ Kon Wajiro writes, “While the study of the ruins and remains of ancient times has found a clear scientific method and evolved into the discipline of archaeology, the study of the things of today remains unscientific; it is in response to this situation that we have sought to establish here the methodology it deserves.”²⁶ For architects who design environments for the present and the future, this search for a methodology can be instructive, and can be applied to our understanding of contemporary environments.

ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDIES BY ATELIER BOW WOW

Kon’s work influenced the work of the contemporary Japanese architecture firm Atelier Bow Wow, whose partner Momoyo Kaijima co-curated the exhibit *Architectural Ethnography* at the 2018 Venice Biennale Japan Pavilion (Figure 4). Kaijima and her partner Yoshiharu Tsukamoto published their ethnographic studies of Tokyo urban conditions in their books *Made in Tokyo* (2001) and *Pet Architecture Guide Book* (2002). The books explore ways of observing and drawing architecture and urban spaces from the perspective of those who use them, rather than the designers and planners. The drawings capture urban artifacts such as vending machines, recycling bins, merchandise display racks, and traffic lights that suggest a sense of daily use and cultural rituals that may feel unfamiliar to the non-Japanese; their drawings often starkly contrast photographs that are taken for architectural monographs which precisely remove these artifacts from the picture frame.

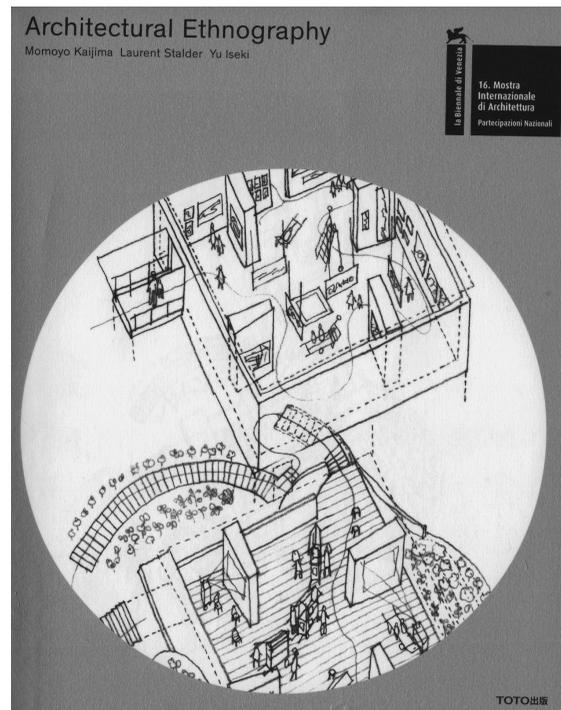


Figure 4: Cover of catalog *Architectural Ethnography* for the 2018 Venice Biennale Japan Pavilion, edited by Momoyo Kaijima, Laurent Stadler, and Yu Iseki.

For Kaijima and Tsukamoto, drawings serve as a means to share information at various stages of development in architecture with different people, ranging from contractors to the eventual occupants of a building. They write, “working continuously across scales ranging from 1:1 to 1:1000, the architect moves fluidly between different dimensions, between part and whole, between the empirical and the abstract. And it is this quality of autonomy that is overlaid on ethnography to make Architectural Ethnography.”²⁷ Kaijima notes she has seen a proliferation of urban research through these types of drawings, and speculates this is a reaction to rapid urbanization, advances in technology, natural disasters, and war. Making ethnographic drawings, which involves observing interactions between a building and their occupants, is a way not only to record the existing conditions but a means to “reconnect pieces of our disconnected world.”²⁸

ARCHITECTURE STUDY ABROAD AS OPPORTUNITIES TO TEACH CULTURAL EMPATHY

Through a student-centered activity of drawing from observations—under faculty guidance but not based upon a master-student model—students learn to ask questions that link culture-specific rituals or spatial relationships to architectural form. Non-Eurocentric destinations are particularly potent for architectural ethnography studies, coupled with an agenda that contrasts the traditional grand tour of canonical buildings, which have generally focused on form. Western cultural contexts are often assumed to be understood because

they are more familiar to Americans. Students who travel to countries that are less familiar are more likely to not simply experience being in a foreign place but, to use Dewey's word, to undergo an uncomfortable situation that defies the expected norms.

Additionally, study abroad is a way for international (non-US) students to be equally or more acquainted with the

destination culture as the American students. In contrast to the generally Eurocentric education in the US that can marginalize prior knowledge of international students, study abroad equalizes opportunities for all participants to contribute; outside of an environment that favors American ways, knowledge from their native country can shorten and deepen their access to another architecture culture and diversify architects' voices.

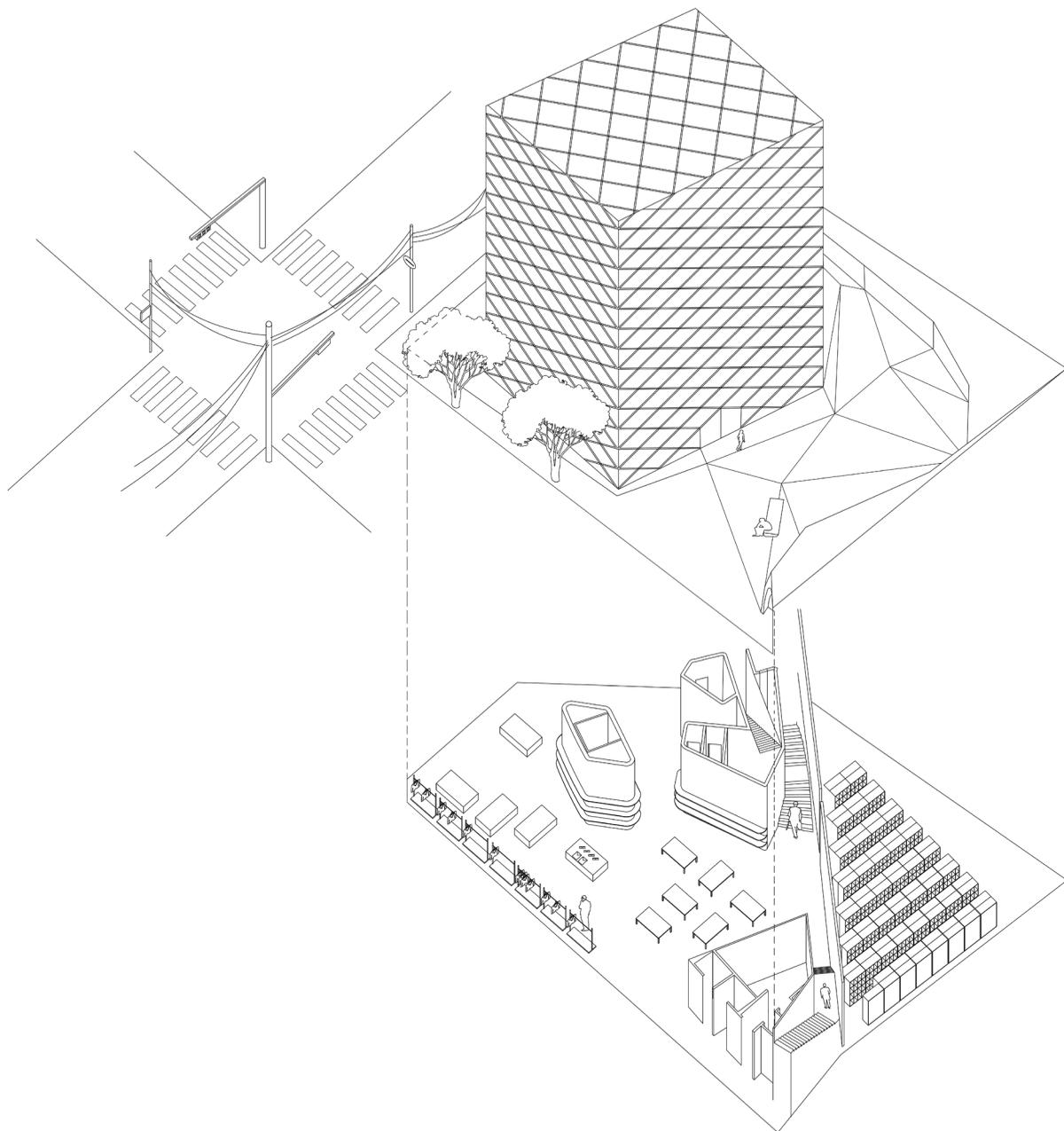


Figure 5. Prada Aoyama store by Herzog & de Meuron. Drawing by Virginia Tech architecture student Yifang Deng (2016).

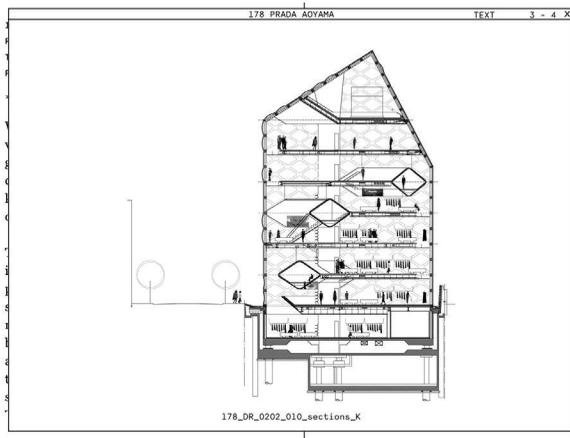


Figure 6. Section of Prada Aoyama store as shown on Herzog & de Meuron's website <https://www.herzogdemeuron.com>.

Beginning in 2016, I organized a two-week study abroad programs for Virginia Tech School of Architecture + Design. In the first year offered, I took seventeen students, consisting of three graduate and 14 undergraduate students. There was one student each from Landscape Architecture, Interior Design, and Industrial Design, and the remaining 14 were Architecture majors. The course, titled "Streets, Buildings, and Gardens: Japanese Culture in Constructed Artifacts," offered three elective credits. For two weeks, under the guidance of a Tokyo-born, US-educated native speaker, the group travelled through Tokyo, Osaka, Kyoto, and the art islands of Naoshima and Teshima. In the semester preceding the trip, the students participated in seven pre-departure sessions in which they discussed assigned essays and works by Kisho Kurokawa, Fumihiko Maki, Atelier Bow Wow, Yukio Mishima, among others. They were also introduced to practical information including Japanese phrases, cuisine, transportation, and etiquettes; and viewed and discussed films by Kenji Mizoguchi and Akira Kurosawa. While in Japan, the students visited places that range widely in time periods and program types. Walking tours in Tokyo region were primarily modern and contemporary, and included a visit to Fumihiko Maki's office. In Kyoto, we visited mainly traditional temples, shrines and gardens, plus works by Tadao Ando, a native of another Kansai region city, Osaka.

At selected places, the students were given an extended period of time (half an hour to two hours) to sketch from direct observations. Prior to the trip, the students were told that each would be making 30-inch x 30-inch axon drawing of one building of their choice, with a particular attention to how it meets the street. One student drew the Prada store by Herzog & de Meuron. His drawing includes the street light poles and crosswalk patterns at the street intersection. Incorporating these urban contexts helps to situate the building on its site; it stands on a corner lot, in a tree-lined neighborhood with relatively narrow streets. He also depicts the stairway passage



Figure 7. Photograph of Leica storefront in a renovated machiya of Gion District of Kyoto.

that connects the street-level plaza to the basement retail space. Shelving and racks for the displayed garments convey a sense of quotidian activities. The building is shown through the lens of an occupant, as if the viewer is participating in the lives of a retail clerk or a browsing shopper. As the student had imaginatively placed himself in the position of a user, drawing enables someone viewing the drawing to also empathize with the occupants.

In the traditional commercial and entertainment district of Gion in Kyoto, another student drew from observation a cutaway axon of a machiya (Figure 7), a traditional rowhouse with a deep, narrow floor plan with small courtyards. The drawing (Figure 8) focused on the vertical layers of fence, bamboo shades, noren (a Japanese fabric divider commonly suspended at doorways), and sliding screens, particularly where the building interfaces the public street. The drawing also includes a small viewing garden courtyard. The human scale artifacts captured in the drawing bring the viewer closer to the lives of those who occupy the building; in other words, to empathize with them even though the spatial qualities may be less familiar than those in their home country. In her writing, Jessica Wirth, the student who drew the storefront, reflects on the links she discovered between traditional and contemporary Japanese spaces:

I found that some more contemporary works such as Kengo Kuma's Sunny Hills shop (Figure 9), and Yoshio Taniguchi's Gallery of Horyuji Treasures (Figure 10) resonated with the idea of layering and transparency. Both create separation from the surrounding environment by using layers of wood or steel lattices, mimicking those of traditional machiya. Taniguchi also utilized the layering of space itself, creating transitions in the environment from the garden to the interior of the gallery.

Her observations call to mind Fumihiko Maki's description of *oku*, or the concept of depth in Japanese architecture:



Figure 8. Cutaway axon Leica store in a renovated machiya (rowhouse) in Gion District of Kyoto. Drawing by Virginia Tech architecture student Jessica Wirth (2019).

In Japanese....architecture, public character is expressed through the use and design of territory - in the sensitivity to borders, both marked and unmarked; in the multiple layering of space by means of...screen; and in spatial arrangements structured not by the idea of a center but by the idea of depth (*oku*).²⁹

Even though the students were not explicitly asked to make such cognitive links between their observations and the

readings they had done, an example such as this prompted me to reconsider the projects assigned to the students in this study abroad program.

LEARNING FROM THE STUDENTS' DRAWINGS

The axon drawing assignment I gave to the both 2016 and 2019 groups were not explicitly linked to their written papers. The informal observations made by students after drawing the axons suggest how I ask them to link their drawings



Figure 9. Entrance at Sunny Hills shop by Kengo Kuma in Tokyo. A visitor to the shop pass through layers of wood lattices before entering through the glass doors, then move through additional layers of wood and paper screens once inside. Photograph: Author.



Figure 10. Gallery of Horyuji Treasures (1999) by Yoshio Taniguchi, Tokyo. Photograph: Author

to their readings. How were their drawings instrumental in understanding the theoretical writings on Japanese spaces and urbanism by such architects as Fumihiko Maki, Kisho Kurokawa, Kengo Kuma, Arata Isozaki, and Atelier Bow Wow? There are additional questions to ask regarding the process of drawing like an ethnographer. What kinds of formal and cultural questions arose as they sketched from in-situ observation? Did the process of drawing enable them to better take in the perspectives and experiences of others, despite the cultural unfamiliarity, and if so, how? Experiential learning for architecture students intertwines cultivation of empathy for people of another culture, while simultaneously developing their abilities in observation, representation, and critical thinking. It may even deepen their connection to Totoro.

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