

Discovering Place

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Introduction

This paper explores the dynamic social learning experience of an extended field study visit to an unfamiliar cultural context, and subsequent dialogue and guided reflection within the design studio. It builds upon an earlier paper by the author in the University of Huddersfield publication entitled 'Being There'.¹

The BA (Hons) Architecture (International) course at the University of Huddersfield offers an opportunity for final year students to spend an extended period of time experiencing an unfamiliar cultural context. The course has been running for 21 years during which time visits have been organised to cities in: India, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Malaysia, Malta, Vietnam and China.

Each trip has its own specific issues and characteristics in relation to general organisation and the emergence of local needs and opportunities for choice of projects and processes of interaction with local agencies and communities. The work undertaken by the students during the visit is essential preparation for design activity in the studio upon return to the UK. However, there are other less tangible, less measurable benefits that students gain from the whole experience of being there. In the first instance, perhaps the most interesting challenge for students lies in the transition from a UK/western mind-set to the point where they genuinely begin to get 'under the skin' of the place.

This can manifest itself as fairly powerful and clear 'culture shock', for example on arrival in India or China, the overwhelming sense of being somewhere else, somewhere unfamiliar can be immediately apparent and deeply affecting from the very start.

Peter Kellett writes "In our daily life we draw heavily on our experiential interpretations of the places we inhabit through our work and domestic lives. Such understandings draw directly from the senses and our bodily engagement in space. In contrast, our analyses and interpretations of the places and sites of others often rely on a different range of skills in which 'objectivity' is privileged over personal responses. Such approaches usually rely on short visits in which hard 'factual' and visual data is collected quickly."²

And whilst the field study visits cannot replicate a long period of ethnographic experience of a place, where researcher becomes participant in the life of a particular community, as well as observer, the power of spending a period of time in a place; of falling asleep and waking up day after day in another culture provides an experiential platform that cannot be replicated by mere academic means. Students (and tutors) are not able to switch off from the experience. The senses are constantly bombarded with new and different sounds and smells, 'unusual' behaviour and unfamiliar, sometimes inscrutable, events.

The peculiarities of a place are clearly apparent in the formal or ritualistic events, but there are stresses and joys to be discovered in more commonplace events of day to day life. On a study visit to Northern China in 2004, the group took a 27 hour train journey from Shenyang to Shanghai, bedding down in triple bunk sleeper compartments and watching the agricultural and industrial scenery of The People's Republic slide by. The sense of the sheer vastness of the country and the seemingly complete human occupation of the landscape for example was remarkable and not easily communicated without actually being there.

The students' experiences can be of a very personal nature too, such as when invited back to the family homes of local students to eat and to be cordially welcomed. The hospitality of the locals is not an abstract idea, but a very real and tangible experience.

What is really very apparent about the trips is the strengthening of the 'esprit de corps' amongst students and staff. The shared experiences are cohesive; from difficult and adventurous travel, such as 'scary' overnight coach journeys in Vietnam, or mini bus excursions to distant temples in India; to the 5am site visit to a busy park in a district of Shenyang (which included finding people engaged in tai chi, playing Mah Jong, doing vigorous physical exercise, sword fighting, line dancing, hairdressing and dentistry!) or the breathtaking arrival at the monolithic carved facade of the Treasury in the heart of Petra in Jordan; the shared experiences are an endless sources of conversation and reflection.

And therein perhaps lays the true value of participation on such a visit. Our methods for teaching and learning always involve conversation. The development of design skills and ideas runs in parallel and relies upon talking about the work; talking about ideas, possibilities, realities, atmospheres, materials, life and inhabitation. The common experience of an international visit creates an enormous shared wealth of reference for reflection, abstraction and proposition.

The conversations of course, begin before the visit, but become deeply intense during the trip. Students and tutors are partners 24 hours a day. There are no 'normal' timetable rules here. Interesting conversations (over a meal or a drink) or often actual tuition (over the drawing board or computer) can carry on late into the night and can last for days. The experience is important during the visit, but has a really powerful on-going legacy afterwards. The relationship between students and staff can shift fundamentally. The sense that tutors are sharing the discovery of a developing design can be enormously empowering.

The actual projects emerge from a discovery of the nature of the place. They are not predetermined. Tutors and students will share the exploration of the cultural, climatic, social and physical influences of the locations chosen for study. Projects are developed from a real understanding of the place. Students begin to think about and talk about design by exploring first principles, climatically, socially, spatially, materially etc.

In truth, the visits are fairly short (at around only 4 or 5 weeks) and may seem too short for students to pay sufficient regard to the full cultural and environmental context of their study locations.

On the whole, however, the participants try very hard to 'get it right'. They are often engaged in an illuminating struggle to find a balance between their western-influenced architectural design thinking (particularly in terms of architectural language and construction technology) and a genuine desire to produce schemes that are environmentally and culturally responsive. Although, the emphasis has shifted a little in recent years such that students do explore the narrative of place and try to determine the durability of place and social interaction in the face of development and change.

Yunnan Province, China 2012

There have also been changes over the years in the way in which we engage with the field study visits. Primarily these are driven by changes in technology and the parallel phenomenon of a rapidly globalising economy. When the first trip took place to India in 1992 we did not have internet, email, mobile phones, laptops, GPS devices, Google Earth or advanced CAD packages etc.

Of course, there are advantages and disadvantages. It certainly seems more difficult now to shake off the cultural bubble that is inevitably brought by a travelling group when they first arrive. On the other hand the ability to maintain easy contact with local students and tutors whilst on the visit and afterwards can be enormously useful.

In the 20 years since 1992, destinations have been varied both in scale of settlement and extent of development, which has also led to differences in the processes by which students begin to assimilate the nature of the place.

In November 2012 the final year students undertook a tour of Yunnan Province in South West China. The trip was organised in conjunction with the architecture department of Yunnan Arts University in Kunming, with which Huddersfield University has had a close working relationship for a number of years.

Yunnan is a fascinating place. There are 56 different ethnic nationalities in China, with 26 of these being resident in Yunnan. Each ethnic minority group has its own language, rituals, clothing, architecture and so on.

Part 1 – The trip

This year the format of the trip was very different to previous years. Rather than staying for a few weeks in a single town or city and carrying out detailed urban and cultural analyses of various districts, Staff and students travelled around the region on a 10 day coach journey, staying in hotels and hostels en route and visiting some of the most remote mountainous regions of Southern Yunnan.



Fig. 1. Students, academic staff and Yi villagers, Mou Shang

Twenty five architecture students from Huddersfield joined up with around 30 Chinese architecture students and their tutors to work together on the study tour, which encompassed some larger ancient Chinese towns, such as Jian Shui and Shi Ping, as well as smaller settlements such as Qin Kou village, home to the Hani ethnic group high above the stunning rice paddy landscapes, and Mou Shang village, where the Yi minority group live in small farming communities (Fig 1).

The Yi peoples are known for their colourful ethnic costumes and the famous Dragon dance,

which they performed especially for the arrival of the Chinese and UK students to the village.

The project locations were to be in the villages of Qin Kou and Mou Shang, both of which are undergoing fairly rapid change and are experiencing a great deal of cultural pressure both from outside and from within. And in each location the responses are different.



Fig. 2. Hani villagers in Qin Kou working on new thatched roofing

Over the last ten years the Chinese government has supported development of the buildings in Qin Kou, to the extent that much of the local mud and thatch vernacular architecture has been replaced with concrete flat roofed buildings (far superior to the older dwellings and certainly more desirable to the locals, but really not of any significant architectural or historic qualities).

But the local government wants to develop tourism in the region and have recently pumped money into retro fitting mock thatch roofs to the new dwellings to make them seem more ethnic. When the group arrived the whole village was engaged in construction activity (Fig 2) and there was something of a sense of resigned resentment by the locals, who (besides wanting better housing) would simply like to be left to get on with attending to the rice paddy fields.

In Mou Shang the villagers were similarly exercised by the need to improve the quality of their homes and many had moved into dwellings a few hundred metres away in a new village. However, here they were far more concerned about the loss of identity through the loss of their very specific local architecture and the pressure, particularly on younger people to leave the region in search of work and the consequent loss of cultural identity through the loss of traditional techniques of construction, ways of making clothing, or musical instruments, and activities such as dance, and various rituals and so on.

The villagers of Mou Shang welcomed ideas to help them develop an industry of tourism that might help protect and preserve their cultural

identity. Students stayed both in a nearby guest house and in the village with separate families and, over 3 or 4 days, got to understand many of the fears and hopes of the Yi people in this region. Upon return to the UK the students from Huddersfield are now developing design ideas for Qin Kou and Mou Shang that will focus on the difficulties of maintaining an ethnic identity in a rapidly developing globalising economy.

The opportunity to travel through remote parts of China with architectural staff and students from that country was really very special. It was a once in a lifetime experience for our students, who will no doubt have many special memories of the tour that they will carry with them, not only into the studio and their final design projects, but for the rest of their lives.

During the trip students were interviewed in a relatively informal way to try to capture a sense of their ongoing experience:

"It's something we've never done before. It's a little bit scary, but it's been a very good experience"

"I've learnt a lot about the Chinese people and the Chinese culture. I've put myself in their shoes and afterwards will be able to design for them"

"What I have found most interesting on this trip has been the Chinese culture and sense of community and how family and community can affect architecture and places in a really good way"

"Although it has been difficult in many ways to work with the Chinese students because of language and communication, I've found that we all share one idea and it's the idea of designing and exploring design through different eyes and different views, which I've found really interesting".

Part 2 – Upon return

Students engage in design activity back in the UK. Initially they've worked together in groups to finalise their group study reports, which explored all of the places visited in some breadth, but focused on Qin Kou and Mou Shan in greater depth, including the analysis of specific sites identified for a range of possible building types. Conversations, begun in China and continued in the UK, have helped develop the project briefs for a variety of proposals.

The working patterns for the group include tutorials in groups alongside students who were on the trip, as well as other students who did not visit China and carried out a parallel UK study.

Some of the tutors taking tutorial groups have not visited China and, to understand the locations, rely on the good communications skills of the students, both individually and as a group to help to develop projects appropriately.

Projects are beginning to emerge as the final gathering and collating and prioritising of information happens and first ideas start to become tangible objects for discussion, debate and reflection within the body of the cohort.

To explore the nature of the experience and to consider the discursive context within which tutorials and design development take place students were asked to join semi-structured interviews to explore their thoughts and reflections at an interim stage. Five students were interviewed, chosen at random by asking for volunteers.

All of the students were expressive of the value of the experience to them as individuals and all observed the special circumstances to which one submits when undertaking such a trip, spending such a long time in each other's company and getting to know each other so much more than they ever had before.

Many of the students had got to know others on the trip really for the first time, even though they had been in the same year group for over 2 years, the enforced closeness meant that there were also social activities in which they shared and plenty of opportunity for casual conversations and for observation of each other within unfamiliar contexts.

Some students expressed some surprise at the way in which certain colleagues were less able to deal with various cultural experiences, which, through knowing them in the UK, one might have expected them to handle differently.

By far the most important aspects that students identified though were to do with:

- a) Working with the Chinese students, and
- b) Having a common understanding of the place/culture

Working with the Chinese students happened in 2 ways. In the first instance, in Kunming city the students were asked to work in groups (3 from the UK, 3 Chinese) to develop ideas (in a very open ended way) for a new responsive intervention in the city. They had 24 hours, 1 which time they had to explore the city, agree on an idea and create a presentation to communicate the idea to their peers and the tutors from both countries (Fig 3).



Fig. 3. UK students and Chinese students preparing a presentation

Whilst the project was set to help students to settle in to the place, and was designed to allow for interaction in a number of ways, the real impact of the task was far greater from the point of view of students than perhaps staff had anticipated. The UK students were taken by their Chinese hosts to parts of the city that they might otherwise have not discovered (certainly not in such a short period of time), or that they might never have visited (as tourists, for example). The process of communication (mainly via translation apps on mobile phones) was extraordinarily intense, and the first opportunity to begin to see how people in other cultures may think was both rewarding and at times bewildering.

After the initial design project everyone then embarked on a 10 day tour of the province. UK students were on one coach and Chinese students on another and each had separate agendas for their work. Although, each group carried out detailed observations in Qin Kou and Mou Shang, during which time there was great opportunity for collaboration and conversation. The value of this, from the students' point of view, was the opportunity to begin to try to look at the world through the eyes of others. To put themselves in 'their shoes'

Contact with the Chinese students has been maintained informally via email since returning to the UK.

Having a common understanding of a place and the culture has been empowering on return to the UK as students are able to discuss places in relation to experiences and events and to continue to broaden their understanding of those places through interaction with others. Students also reported the usefulness of having others in tutorials who really understood the places and how this helped to explain and reinforce design ideas and positions.

As one might expect students took dozens of videos and several hundreds of photographs each, of places and people and, formally and

informally, of study sites and of social events. The common understanding of a shared experience is also invaluable in reflecting upon and discussing these with others back in the UK.

For the interviews back in the UK students were asked to consider the shared experience - the process of becoming familiar with a very different culture, and to consider their individual experiences - the personal learning journey:

"When we were working with the Chinese students, they had their own way of designing and we had our own way and it opens your mind to thinking, is this way right or is it this way."

"My favourite part of the trip was learning from the Chinese Students. You could experience a lot more when you were with them."

"They saw architecture differently and we saw it another way, but we all sort of agree on one definition, but from different perspectives"

"Initially there was a wall between us and with the differences of thought processes we all felt it might be too great, but there is a common ground, through sketching, or getting an idea across, any which way. You can work with anyone if you can establish one route to get your ideas through"

"We always used to draw and communicate visually. That was very special".

"Even coming back to the UK, I look at things in a different way, like you're seeing it through different eyes."

"When you get to know people, when you experience their culture, their food and seeing how they behave you realise that it's just another version of the same thing"

"When you're coping with that unfamiliar culture, it's interesting to see, when someone who is normally quite boisterous, but you take them completely outside their comfort zone – and they don't cope"

"You learn a lot about yourself and how you cope with things"

"You get to know people better in a completely different situation. When you're in very close proximity with someone for a month you get to know him better than you thought"

"The dynamics change and you take on different roles, you might take a leadership role where you wouldn't normally"

"It's always better to experience something unique with someone else"

"It's a completely different take on travelling

You understand how people live, how they interact with the environment, what they need, what they want".

"Being taken out of your comfort zone is an eye opener

You need to consider everything you need to look at the whole picture"

"I am more sympathetic to another context. I note differences. The spirit's different"

"We've got a bond now. We talk about the experience and share the experience, it's a common bond."

"The learning experience you have is quite intense when you're in a social situation with others for a prolonged period, all being in the same boat."

Themes that have emerged then include:

- The nature of becoming familiar with a very different culture.

This seems to happen gradually and at different rates for different individuals. Some students become absorbed in the experience far more quickly than others, willing to try new experiences and to have a go. Others are more reticent and reserved and took much longer to relax into being there. All agreed on the enormous and helpful boost given to this process by engaging with local architecture students.

- Discovering places individually and as a group/ Working together within an unfamiliar location.

The study visits are quite intense and involve a lot of work both as an individual and in groups. It is very different to being a tourist, and students have a very critical and focussed attitude to the work of becoming familiar with the place. There is value in the shared experience both on the level of having someone else to talk to about it and to reflect upon it, but also in the simultaneous discovery of the place and the observation of other people discovering the place, sometimes in very different ways.

- The value of the shared experience when later working alongside each other in the studio

The value here seems not only to be about reaffirmation of one's experiences or understanding of one's ideas, but also about the continuing process of looking at (or looking back at) and learning about a place through someone else's eyes.

- Social cohesion and social learning.
Spending an extended period of time with others and getting to know them better, whilst simultaneously getting to know a place seems to be a reinforcing aspect of the visit. The sense of all being in the 'same boat' or all on a shared journey makes the interactions between students, both formal and social more collegiate. Students are more readily inclined to share their thoughts and share their projects with each other.

- The personal learning journey.
Students learn an awful lot about themselves on such a journey. Every day there are new discoveries and new circumstances and the way in which one reacts to these can be a powerful source of reflection and growth.

- The importance of informal dialogue during the visit
It's almost impossible on a visit of this kind to separate the formal (or work related) dialogue from the informal. But the developing sense that tutors on the visit are sociable people, and that they are discovering this place for the first time and have no additional expertise about the place means that conversations happen that might never happen back in the UK. This new relationship amongst students and between students and tutors changes the dynamics of interaction upon return to the UK, such that tuition can be seen as a continuing part of the shared journey. The dialogue tends to be far more reflective on the experience in a way that validates decisions in the students' minds in a very real way. The students attitude to, and ownership of their own work and personal development matures.

In conclusion

At the time of writing the research is ongoing and will continue at least until the end of the current design project for this particular group of students. There are opportunities for a more longitudinal study, both with this group as they progress beyond the degree and with others at a lower level coming through to join a field study visit of this kind.

Additional research in action may be valuable, as lessons learnt from this particular visit are considered as part of the design of future trips, in particular the value in working with local students and ways in which students' reflective processes can be engaged before, during and after the visit through a more focused pedagogy.

There are also lessons to be learned in relation to the structure of design projects (generally)

anchored around specific events/activities which allow for shared experience, and the processes by which students interact and reflect upon the project and on the behaviour of themselves and others in the context of the project.

There are opportunities to identify and utilise a variety of formal and informal techniques of dialogue and guided reflection that draw upon the resonance of the shared event, which exists as a kind of memory context from which the design work emerges.

Notes

¹ Gao, Yun (2010) *Being There - Reflections on 20 years of the International course at the Huddersfield Department of Architecture*. University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield, UK. ISBN 9781682180864

² Kellett, Peter (2011) *Living in the field: ethnographic experience of place*. Arq: Architectural Research Quarterly, 15(4), pp. 341-346.