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DEVELOPING A SENSITIVITY TO LOCALE AND 'HUMAN EXPERIENCE'

Most of the architects featured in this issue, who are known for their sensitivity to place, studied abroad and continue to practise and teach internationally. **Jayne Merkel** explores how a broadening of personal experience through travel has helped hone their affinity to the particular and the local over the standard and the global.

Architects' concern with the local comes at a time when both architectural practice and architectural education are truly international. Some architecture schools in the UK and US draw half their students and numerous faculty from other countries. Studios travel to every continent. Columbia University even has permanent 'Studio X' facilities – outposts with galleries and meeting rooms – in New York, Beijing, Moscow, Mumbai, Rio and Amman.

Architects working today are the heirs of the era when time and distance started to collapse. Most started out in one time frame and matured in another. Their life experience is both local and global. A surprising number of those discussed here also have experience with a kind of craft that most Modernists would have thought passé.

Travelling to see the world for inspiration goes back at least to the Grand Tour tradition of the Renaissance. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, training at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris became the goal, though its teachings were at one remove – inspired by ancient Greece, Rome and the Italian Renaissance. The highest honour an architect (or artist) could earn at the school was the Prix de Rome, which offered the chance to study classical monuments at first hand. And the influence of the school only flowed one way. Students from America, Britain and other places brought its imagery and methodology home, and American schools passed it on to students unable to study in France. Some, however, won American Rome Prizes to visit the fountainhead of inspiration.

After the First World War, however, a new ideal emerged: modernity itself, rather than ancient civilisation, provided inspiration. And no one locale was pre-eminent. Avant-garde architects from numerous countries started working in the same white-walled, flat-roofed, stripped-down 'International Style' more suitable for sunny Mediterranean than rainy northern climates. The most influential school, the Bauhaus in Germany, drew students and faculty from abroad. When it was closed by the Nazis, its leaders came to the US, assuming influential teaching positions – Walter Gropius at Harvard in



Jonathan Kirschenfeld presenting at a crit at the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies (IAUS) in New York headed by Peter Eisenman in the late 1970s. In the top image, Eisenman is at the front (centre) and architectural theorist Joan Ockman on the far right. In the image below, Kirschenfeld (fourth from left) can be seen relaxing post-crit.



The international relocation of architects in the 1970s ... made it possible for Kirschenfeld to encounter ideas in New York that had been developing on three continents.

1937 and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe at the Illinois Institute of Technology in 1938. The Second World War brought citizens of the world together as never before, but afterwards the Cold War kept Russians in Russia, and the Cultural Revolution kept the Chinese in China. Earlier, Chinese architects had often studied abroad, initially in Japan, and then in the US, mostly in Beaux-Arts programmes. Between 1918 and 1941, 25 Chinese architects graduated from the most popular programme, at University of Pennsylvania.¹

In the 1950s, it was the Japanese and the British who came to the US to study, while Americans often went to the UK. After most returned home, *A+U* magazine kept a dialogue going between architects from countries that had been enemies during the Second World War. But the primary exchange of experience, ideas and information took place between British and American architects, as Murray Fraser has so intriguingly shown in *Architecture and the 'Special Relationship'*.² Norman Foster and Richard Rogers attended Yale in 1961–2. Colin Rowe studied under American Henry-Russell Hitchcock at Yale in the early 1950s and returned to the UK to teach at Cambridge where he tutored American Peter Eisenman. Rowe then went off to Cornell and Eisenman returned to the US where he directed the independent Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies (IAUS) in New York between 1967 and 84. The IAUS was a place where architects from numerous countries lectured, exchanged ideas and taught American students from various colleges who spent a year there in residence.

In the late 1970s, the Architectural Association (AA) in London became another seedbed of international discussion under Canadian-born Alvin Boyarsky, who had studied at the AA and taught at Cornell earlier. The AA unit system encouraged diverse approaches and attracted architects with very different backgrounds. Rem Koolhaas, Elia Zenghelis, Bernard Tschumi, Zaha Hadid, Ron Herron, Cedric Price, Daniel Libeskind and a host of others from various countries studied or taught there. Although a few architects worked abroad during the 1980s, global practice was rare, but global debate was in

full swing. Air travel was becoming less expensive, service more frequent, and international telephone calls cheaper, even before the Internet made communication ubiquitous and instantaneous in the 1990s. By the time it arrived, some architects who had experience abroad were returning to their roots.

A regard for rootedness – whether working locally or internationally – is a shared feature of all the architects included in this edition of Δ , whose work demonstrates a sensitivity to place. The routes they have taken to this approach, though, could not be more varied, taking in a wide range of formative experiences at home and abroad, whether benefiting from a foreign architectural education when returning home, or conversely, as in Jonathan Kirschenfeld's case, being exposed to potent influences from abroad near home. The international relocation of architects in the 1970s, as discussed above, made it possible for Kirschenfeld to encounter ideas in New York that had been developing on three continents.

Kirschenfeld grew up on suburban Long Island and spent three years at liberal arts Oberlin College in Ohio – flirting with various disciplines – when he decided to spend his senior year at the IAUS in New York City. There he studied with Peter Eisenman and Tod Williams from the US; Anthony Vidler and Kenneth Frampton from the UK; Mario Gandelsonas and Diana Agrest from Argentina; and met 'Aldo Rossi, who came to New York for the first time that year (1976). He was critical to my ultimate decision to become an architect,' Kirschenfeld explained. He went on to graduate school in architecture at Princeton, 'where most of my teachers at IAUS were frequent jurors. ... My interest in urban form certainly had a lot to do with that education, but my attraction to a socially engaged architecture also came from my progressive upbringing (lefty parents, marches on Washington, Commie summer camp). I guess this was in some ways a return to the social service streak in the family (my father and brother are doctors, mother and sister are social workers) and perhaps was my way to reintegrate with the family after "straying"'.³

‘Straying’ is not a prerequisite to becoming an architect. Sean Godsell’s father was an architect, and he studied in Melbourne, where he was born, at Xavier College and at RMIT graduate school. He may be the only architect who has done a stint as a professional footballer (1980–1 for St Kilda in the Victorian Football League), so it would be easy to attribute the rugged yet refined quality of his work to that experience, but the time he spent travelling in Europe and Japan (1985) and living in London working for Sir Denys Lasdun (1986–8) apparently made a greater impact. The experience of seeing homeless people in Notting Hill excluded from even the basic shelter of the tube station at night in the 1980s also stayed with him. It went on to inform a series of inclusive infrastructure projects – Park Bench House (2002) and Bus Shelter House (2003–4) – that combine street or park furniture with shelter for the homeless.⁴

A crisis at home can also be life changing. London-based Arup Associates architect Paul Brislin grew up in South Africa where he started out studying art at the height of apartheid. He explains: ‘In the final year of my degree in Fine Art, I joined a volunteer group of architectural students in the Limpopo province of northern South Africa. They had raised money for materials and machinery to build an antenatal clinic in an impoverished rural area. The impact of turning the red African earth, of laying the bricks that became walls, the powerful connection to the entire village community that laboured with us – all of these gave me the sense that there was something primal in architecture that could make a difference. I felt that making space was a powerful tool that bonded people and mended lives. The experience affected the artwork I produced that year, and as soon as I graduated, I began a degree in architecture.’⁵

He continues: ‘The architectural courses were not inherently politicised, but the intense period of resistance to apartheid conditioned my sense of outrage at the injustices of power, and the culpability of planners and architects in that process.’ The one course that stood out took ‘a phenomenological approach that isolated a series of architectural components as the basis for

projects: ground plane, threshold, entry, ceiling plane, materiality. Here, focus was on how people interacted with space, rather than the creation of architectural objects. I remember these archetypal lessons every time I make a building.’⁶

Time spent in Africa also changed Juhani Pallasmaa’s perspective. Although he was educated in his native Finland, where there was a fine tradition of craftsmanship, it was not as much in vogue as rationalistic design and standardisation were when he was a student in the 1950s at the Helsinki Institute of Technology. In the early 1970s, however, he spent two years teaching architecture in Ethiopia, where he began to question the emphasis in his formal education and develop the interests in the psychological and social aspects of architecture that led to the sort of substance and detail that came to characterise his jewel-like work.⁷

Craft came naturally to Diébédo Francis Kéré since he grew up in the tiny village of Gando, a rugged three-hour drive from the capital of Burkina Faso, in West Africa, where almost everything was handmade. The son of the village headman, he was able to go to school in a nearby town, trained as a carpenter, and became an instructor for the German ministry for development. This led to a scholarship to grammar school in Germany and then an opportunity to study architecture at the Technical University of Berlin. But craft remains central to his work. Clay, combined with innovative European technology, is one of his primary building materials. Today he is building an oval clay library with a ventilated iron roof, a timber-framed women’s centre that curves around an old-growth neem tree, and a secondary school, all in Gando. He now practises in Berlin, but works and teaches worldwide, and continues to do work in Burkina Faso, where he founded a nonprofit organisation to build schools. A clay-brick primary school he designed for Gando, built with manual labour, received an Aga Khan Award in 2004.

It is not always travel that provides an international perspective. The principals of Pezo von Ellrichshausen in



Sean Godsell, Park Bench House, Melbourne, 2002

Godsell was inspired by his first raw encounter with homelessness in London in the 1980s to produce, some two decades later in his studio in Melbourne, an ingenious and compassionate response to the requirement for rudimentary shelter in his home city – a park bench by day that provides a house by night.

Concepción, Chile, Mauricio Pezo and Sofia von Ellrichshausen studied in South America. Pezo graduated from the University of Bio-Bio in Concepción and earned a Masters in Architecture at the Catholic University in Santiago, Chile. Von Ellrichshausen studied architecture at the University of Buenos Aires, in Argentina. But, Pezo believes you ‘are not educated just by the instruction you receive from schools’. Von Ellrichshausen explained: ‘Coming from Argentina, I think I have a very strong local influence, but, due to my family heritage, I also have a lot of external references. In my house we spoke English, and my grandparents are German, so Europe was always very present. Our bookshelves were full of European art and literature. We probably know Europe much better than most Europeans know South America. But we grew up in South America, so we also have these other references extremely present.’ Pezo notes: ‘We try to go back to our roots, which in an undeveloped country or a still rural context is much closer to the very roots of architecture.’ Their strong, assertive geometric buildings dramatically set in natural settings stand out from the landscape, but somehow also emphasise their natural characteristics.⁸

Similarly, Josep Lluís Mateo found his cultural catalyst close to home. He was born in Barcelona, where his initial training, in 1968, was ‘based on the hands-on practice of the time, in direct contact with construction (a leitmotif in Spanish architecture) and references to modernity’. At the time, ‘the political and cultural trends – music, fashion, new lifestyles – were hinting at a world beyond, which I was very interested in sharing,’ explains Mateo, who later earned his doctorate at the Polytechnic University of Catalonia. ‘Very quickly, first in my academic and critical activities, and then as an architect, my physical and cultural space expanded ... I always try to see a place ... as if for the first time, and to protect it by improving it.’⁹

Bijoy Jain, who practises in Mumbai, grew up in India, but studied in the US (at Washington University in St Louis). He learned to absorb local traditions in a roundabout way. It was an experience on his first job – working in the model shop of

Juhani Pallasmaa and students at the Haile Selassie I University, Prototype house funded by the Red Cross for the settlement of 150 leper families in Ambo, Ethiopia, 1972–4

A two-year period working away from Finland in Ethiopia was pivotal for Pallasmaa, shifting entirely his understanding of the potential cultural, environmental and psychological impact of architecture.

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Three-year-old Juhani Pallasmaa at his grandfather's farm on a haymaking day. He lived on his maternal grandfather's farm in central Finland while his father was away fighting during the Second World War. The vitality of rural life centred the early life of Pallasmaa, providing him with practical skills, a love of nature and a strong sense of home.

Richard Meier's office in Los Angeles when the Getty Center was in design – that proved the most useful when he returned home after practising for several years in London. Jain explains: 'When I started working in India, I made a whole set of drawings for a house we were building. When we started construction, I found that none of the people who were actually building the project could read the drawings. ... We had to describe the project by talking and gestures – hand movements and body movements. Then, with the builders, we collectively built a physical model – the only tool that we used in constructing the project. Our use of models evolved from that experience. There is no distinction between where the studio starts and the workshop ends. There are two architects: me and Samuel Barclay, an American who has been in India for five years. The rest are carpenters, masons, plumbers, electricians. Most of them come from a lineage of 20, 30 generations of practice of whatever it might be. They are highly skilled, very professional. The only thing they don't have is a formal education. But they're intimately involved in the concept of a project, in discussions of space, material, weight, mass. The idea that I'm giving them a set of instructions that are then carried out is wrong.'¹⁰

Transcontinental partnerships have become a feature of current international practice. This is certainly true of both WOHA, which is based in Singapore, and Serie Architects, which has offices in London, Mumbai and Beijing, focusing on architectural solutions relevant for the high-density context of Asian cities. WOHA's Richard Hassell, who studied at the University of Western Australia, and Wong Mun Summ, who trained at the National University of Singapore, met working at the offices of Kerry Hill Architects in Singapore and realised that they had a similar take on cities and their problems, so they created their own practice. After winning acclaim for some very elegant minimalist houses, WOHA started to concentrate on complex, dynamic, enormous urban projects intended to deal with unique problems of overcrowding, infrastructure and sustainability in Asian cities. Serie Architects does dramatic, innovative, visually exciting urban planning projects in Asia, which are closely linked to the research at the AA that partner Christopher CM Lee does as Director of the Projective Cities Masters Programme. Lee graduated from the AA in London and is now doing doctoral research at the Berlage Institute in Rotterdam. His partner, Kapil Gupta, graduated from JJ College of Architecture in Mumbai and did graduate work at the AA. At Serie, academic work and practice meld into one.

International education can also only foster sensitivity to the local, and it can keep ideas from other places alive during winds of change in various parts of the world. Kongjian Yu is actually restoring the landscape where he grew up on a rice paddy in southeast China as part of his larger 'Ecological Security Plan for China'.

Despite the continuing parade of international architects to China, some of the most interesting work being done there is by native Chinese. None has garnered more attention lately than Wang Shu, who practises with his wife, Lu Wenyu, in their firm Amateur Architecture Studio. Wang Shu won the 2012 Pritzker Prize. Like Bijou Jain, he eschews the computer, though he does draw – in pencil. He was educated in his own country, though he now teaches at Harvard as well as at the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou. Instead of being dazzled by the shiny new towers rising in Chinese cities, Wang Shu and Lu Wenyu draw inspiration from native sources. They settled in Hangzhou, a city where historic fabric has been preserved, and they use that fabric for both inspiration and actual building material. Their Ningbo History Museum (2008) has tilted walls made of recycled masonry and stone salvaged from local buildings.

International education can also only foster sensitivity to the local, and it can keep ideas from other places alive during winds of change in various parts of the world. Kongjian Yu is actually restoring the landscape where he grew up on a rice paddy in southeast China as part of his larger 'Ecological Security Plan for China'. This massive project has international importance because ecological planning of its scale and kind have been 'all but abandoned in the US' where the groundwork for them was laid, 'in favour of laissez-faire land development and speculative urbanization'.¹¹ He is able to undertake a project like this because of a unique set of circumstances that led to his education in China and the US. He was born in 1963, the year then Premier Zhou Enlai proposed the 'Four Modernisations' for Chinese agriculture, industry, defence and science/technology. These reforms helped a talented rural boy to attend the prestigious Beijing Forestry University, which had just been returned to Beijing from remote southwestern Yunnan Province, where it had been exiled during the Cultural Revolution. Because it was a major university for landscape architecture, it had an unusual library with English-language books on landscape ecology and planning by authors such as Kevin Lynch, Ian McHarg and Richard Forman. Kongjian Yu studied their writings when he entered the Masters programme in landscape architecture, where he met his wife, Ji Qingping.

The contents of the library books and his familiarity with English were helpful when Kongjian Yu entered Harvard's new Doctor of Design programme in landscape ecology and planning in 1992. He studied game theory and learned to aggregate large datasets of ecological information through geographic information systems (GIS) software at Harvard's Laboratory for Computer Graphics. His thesis analysed ecological functioning at various thresholds of change and proposed 'three distinct security points: ecological, visual, and agricultural ... associated with ecology, tourism, and food security'.¹² After working as a landscape architect in California with SWA for several years, Kongjian Yu returned to China where he accepted a teaching position at Peking University and founded Turenscape, a private design and planning consultancy, on the Western model. Despite the fortuitous circumstances that led to his expertise, he believes that 'the experience of farming and the scale and space of the villages and fields, the seasons and cycles, and the touch of earth during my childhood still influence me. You can find their clues in my design.'¹³

Li Xiaodong shares this commitment to building the future out of the past, and to his native place, but believes it was experience abroad that made him sensitive to it. He explains: 'I did my first degree in architecture in Tsinghua University in Beijing, which gave me a fundamental understanding about building. Then I went to Holland and worked on my PhD in Delft at the University of Technology, which provided a theoretical framework to look at architecture. After that I went to Singapore to teach at the National University of Singapore for eight years. Together, those experiences clarified what I should do with my practice – reflexive regionalism. I came to realise that I needed to create a dialogue between the “local condition” and contemporary thinking before I started every design. This is what I have tried to do in all my designs in China.’¹⁴

Li Xiaodong’s observations ring true for the architects featured in this issue: the local requires a wider cultural engagement. To be truly responsive to the specific, it is also necessary to be fully engaged with the world around you. It is a continuous, interactive process that might start in earliest childhood and intensify with the more varied influences of education, but truly never stops. ▽

Notes

1. From an email to Jayne Merkel from Edward Denison, 22 March 2012. Denison and Guang Yu Ren are the authors of *Modernism in China: Architectural Visions and Revolutions*, John Wiley & Sons (Chichester), 2008.
2. Murray Fraser and Joe Kerr, *Architecture and the 'Special Relationship': The American Influence on Post-War British Architecture*, Routledge (London), 2007.
3. Jonathan Kirschenfeld in an email to Jayne Merkel, 18 March 2012.
4. Sean Godsell evening lecture at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, 16 April 2012, as recounted by Helen Castle.
5. Email to Jayne Merkel from Paul Brislin, 21 March 2012.
6. Ibid.
7. Peter Mackeith, 'A Door Handle, A Handshake: An Introduction to Juhani Pallasmaa and His Work', in Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*, 3rd edition, John Wiley & Sons (Chichester), 2012, pp 92–7.
8. Mauricio Pezo and Sofia von Ellrichshausen in an email to Jayne Merkel, 21 March 2012.
9. Josep Lluís Mateo in an email to Jayne Merkel, 27 March 2012.
10. Bijoy Jain in an interview with Gregory Wessner of the Architectural League, New York City, 14 March 2011.
11. Charles Waldheim, 'Afterword: The Persistent Promise of Ecological Planning', in William Saunders (ed), *Designed Ecologies: The Landscape Architecture of Kongjian Yu*, Birkhäuser Architecture (Basle), 2012.
12. Ibid.
13. Kongjian Yu in an email to Jayne Merkel, 18 March 2012.
14. Li Xiaodong in an email to Jayne Merkel, 21 March 2012.

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Terraced paddy fields in Zhejiang Province, southeast China, where Kongjian Yu grew up. The region is famous for its scenic mountain water and its vernacular architecture. Despite periods studying at Harvard and working in southern California, the experience and knowledge of the landscape of Kongjian Yu’s childhood remains the most formative in his work.



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