



# lunch

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# GLOBAL CULTURE AND SITES OUT OF MIND THE CASE FOR THE INDIA INITIATIVE

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How can architectural education be enriched by the seemingly peripheral voices of diverse global cultures? How does the process of creating design propositions within unfamiliar cultures and sites encourage students to question their own assumptions and methods? In order to explore these questions, a research methodology was created to shift the normal architectural studio pedagogical structure, content, and location in order to examine the effect on student learning. Professors Phoebe Crisman and Peter Waldman established the India Initiative at the University of Virginia as an innovative research and teaching program that examines the physical environments constructed by the diverse cultures of India and proposes sustainable strategies for future development. The long-term goal of this research is to create a deeper understanding of the intertwined aspects of environmental design and human culture. Several theoretical concepts support this work, including the educational value of spatial dislocation, experiential learning that engages the bodily senses, reflection, constructed knowledge, and other ways of knowing.

## WHY INDIA

In seeking a rich and relevant place to study global sustainability issues in architecture and urbanism, India emerged as the ideal location. The complex mix of religions, ethnicities, languages, geographies, arts, and architecture of India produces hybrid and rapidly transforming cultural conditions. India, as the

world's largest democracy, is experiencing dramatic population growth, massive rural to urban migration, and increasing economic disparity. Widespread environmental degradation and natural resource depletion plague the country. There is much to be learned from a close study of local sustainable practices that have emerged from a combination of necessity and ingenuity in the Indian built environment. For example, residents of the medieval Indian settlements of Rajasthan stay comfortable in the scorching heat through intertwined natural cooling strategies: arranging buildings in dense clusters, orienting buildings to reduce solar income, creating fenestration to cool sunlit surfaces, using massive stone roof and wall construction to absorb heat, and providing cross-ventilation with complex courtyard configurations. Exquisite fountains and water channels are intelligent evaporative cooling methods that create pleasant microclimates in the courtyards of both civic and residential buildings. These are just a few examples of sustainable strategies for infrastructure, landscapes, and buildings that the India Initiative research seeks to understand in a deep and synthetic way.

## CONTENT AND STRUCTURE

A design research methodology was conceived to immerse both undergraduate and graduate architecture students in the diverse cultures and places of India at two scales of dwelling — the enduring village and the emergent megacity. Each year of the five-year study focuses on one of the five Hindu elements or *panchabhuta*: earth, water, air, fire, and ether (void or space). The first year (2012) focused on water as a spatial generator of highly particular forms of infrastructure and architecture that support the occupancy of water itself and those that use it. The research group studied the formal, material and cultural significance of enduring and contemporary water architecture in India, while proposing new design strategies. The second year (2013) will consider fire — the most sacred of the five physical forces according to Vedic philosophy. Fire is associated with the Sun as the primary source of life and energy. Fire represents light, heat, and energy manifest in architecture through spatial configurations and places of gathering, symbolism, materials, shade and shadow, and apertures that regulate light and heat. Each year we will produce an exhibit and publication that will build an important body of work.

## PEDAGOGY

The India Initiative builds on several years of my own pedagogical experimentation structuring design research studios to explore individual agency in challenging places and with underserved populations.<sup>1</sup> That research focused on the revitalization of contaminated and underutilized industrial sites in Eastern seaboard cities of the United States.<sup>2</sup> By critically engaging social and ethical considerations in difficult real world places, those studios provided students with hands-on experiences of architectural agency. In the past two years this research has expanded to address the global sustainability challenges of the Indian built environment. The India Initiative emerged as a multi-faceted research investigation that includes my own theoretical and praxiological research, as well as three intertwined courses co-taught with Professor Waldman. Students in the spring India Research Seminar explore Indian literary, historical, and philosophical foundations through a diverse selection of historic and contemporary texts, films, art, and architecture. They also develop a research proposal that will guide their independent summer research. During six weeks of intense travel and immersive learning, students are enrolled in the India Summer Studio and Independent Research Seminar that provides a unique



lens for their work. For instance, the fourteen independent research projects in 2012 expanded the focus on water as a spatial generator to the symbolism of water in India, microclimates created with evaporative cooling and more. In this way, both the individual and the collective research are furthered by reciprocal exchange and critique. This format differs from most home-based studios, where students are either enrolled in a studio with a prescribed focus defined by the instructor or left to develop their own thesis or independent research with limited group interaction and instructor guidance. This pedagogy combines the benefits of both models and develops synergy between them. Compared to most study abroad programs that are based in one location for a four- or six-week period, the India Summer Studio studies several diverse urban and rural locations using a comparative method that also values the spatial act of travel.

## SPATIAL DISLOCATION

What is the role of travel and spatial dislocation in the construction of both architectural knowledge and self-knowledge? While many architecture international programs occupy their own permanent facilities or those of a host university, the act of travel itself is essential to the India Initiative. Testing the value of travel as extreme dislocation requires a different pedagogy and program structure.

Scholars such as Theology Professor Frederick Ruf have focused on the multiple values of travel. In his book *Bewildered Travel: The Sacred Quest for Confusion*, he argues that we often travel to unlearn, to challenge and rupture the surface of the known and expected. Ruf recounts poet Mary Oliver's use of particular disruptions and difficult memories obtained while traveling to remind her "you can creep out of your own life and become someone else."<sup>3</sup> Dislocation that challenges our thinking and our very being enriches learning about global culture, architecture and nearly anything else. Georges Van Den Abbeele's metaphor of travel to thought is relevant as well.

*When one thinks of travel, one most often thinks of the interest and excitement that comes from seeing exotic places and cultures. Likewise, the application of the metaphor of travel to thought conjures up the image of an innovative mind that explores new ways of looking at things or which opens up new horizons. That mind is a critical one to the extent that its moving beyond a given set of preconceptions or values also undermines those assumptions. Indeed, to call an existing order (whether epistemological, aesthetic, or political) into question by placing oneself 'outside' that order, by taking a 'critical distance' from it, is implicitly to invoke the metaphor of travel.<sup>4</sup>*

The book *Travel, Space, Architecture* discusses how "physical and metaphorical dislocation affect spatio-architectural practices, and how these conditions redefine the parallel notions of place, culture and identity."<sup>5</sup> This dislocation may be the result of travel, immigration, or other types of forced and self-initiated movement in space. The author argues that architecture theory and practice seen through the lens of travel can "move beyond the centrality of static, place-bound principles into an understanding of more open-ended networks of relationships (or subjects and sites)."<sup>5</sup> This is a powerful argument for conceiving of travel as an essential element of architectural education. While scholars in anthropology, geography, and religious studies have theorized travel within their disciplines, architectural education lags behind.

## EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AND THE BODILY SENSES

When experiencing spatial dislocation our bodily senses are heightened as well. This is an ideal time to learn as we see, hear, smell, touch, and taste new things. Travel stimulates us with places, people and images that generate new ideas.

The students were fully aware of the complex cultural, formal, spatial, and constructional Indian context as they designed. Sensory engagement and experiential learning predominated over the abstract analysis that occupies so much of their time in studio at home. In her essay "Unpacking the Suitcase: Travel as Process and Paradigm in Constructing Architectural Knowledge," Kay Bea Jones argues that objectification and production are the primary focus of many architecture schools, while "experiential means of learning are underdeveloped."<sup>6</sup> Students travel abroad to study architecture, but few faculty have theorized the educational value of these excursions or adequately examined how they are structured. Active learning and "site-based travel pedagogy" are essential to the India Initiative approach, which concurs with the claim that "by observing primary site, architects can use original insights built on past knowledge to inform critical new thinking."<sup>6</sup> Traveling to fully engage buildings and places is more crucial than ever for architecture students, as they are bombarded by slick digital images of global architecture rarely shown in its broader context. The imprecise knowledge gained in a "shaded alcove in the midst of a hot Indian summer" is quite different than the systematic knowledge acquired through abstract analysis, quantification and mapping. Rather than study buildings as isolated artifacts, students understand architecture as part of a larger cultural context and construct knowledge through exploration. By emphasizing constructed knowledge<sup>7</sup> in combination with Paulo Freire's theory of critical pedagogy, the goal is to educate future agents of change that understand the inextricable connection between the social and the environmental as a crucial consideration of architecture.<sup>8</sup>

## SLOWNESS AND REFLECTION

Taking time to experience a place cultivates our ability for careful observation and contemplation. Through the concept of slowness and the possibilities for reflection that it provides, writer Rebecca Solnit critiques the focus on efficiency, convenience, profitability and security that pervades our culture.

*The conundrum is that the language to describe the ineffable splendors and possibilities of our lives takes time to master, takes a certain unhurried engagement with the tasks of description, assessment, critique, and conversation; that to speak this slow language you must slow down, and to slow down you must have some inkling of what you will gain by doing so... Ultimately, I believe that slowness is an act of resistance, not because slowness is a good in itself but because of all that it makes room for, the things that don't get measured and can't be bought.<sup>9</sup>*

This way of working and understanding the world embraces the differences between the normative classroom or studio and what can and must happen differently abroad in the field. Traveling and learning in unfamiliar sites frees students to experience, to understand and then to make.



## CONSTRUCTED KNOWLEDGE AND OTHER WAYS OF KNOWING

The India Initiative pedagogy builds on Jones' compelling argument for an epistemology of constructed knowledge as it relates to travel and teaching.

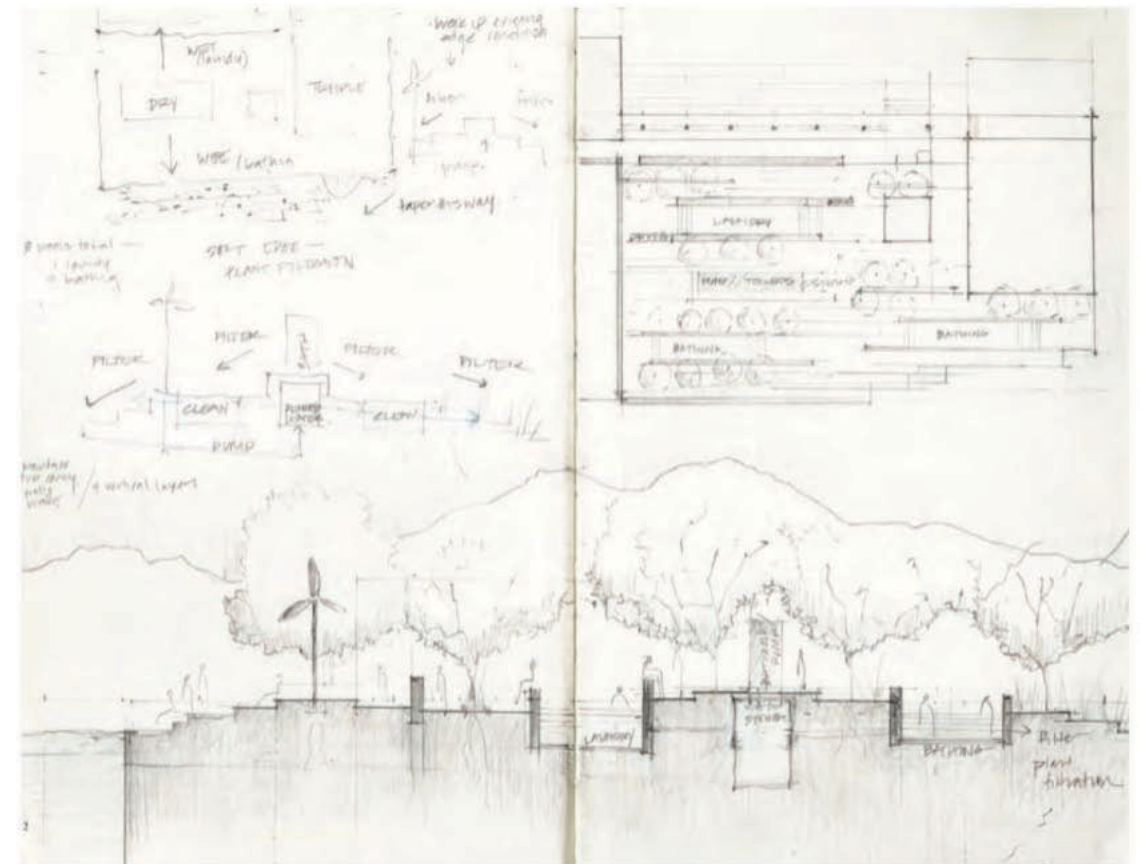
*If we accept that constructed knowledge offers an important alternative approach that is uniquely characterized by intuition, cross-disciplinary preferences, collaborations, ambiguity, integration, personal and social values, and historic contingencies, we can then consider observation of everyday life within the agency of travel... Teaching methods abroad can substitute techniques of observation and group discussion for typical 'objective' examination of learning. Collaborative inquiry strategically located allows subjects to reveal diverse aspects of themselves. Participants who are then equipped to debate differing interpretations provide a model preferable to the usual subordination to definitive authorities or studio masters.<sup>6</sup>*

Several students noted changes in how they constructed knowledge and their design process. Amidst increasing quantitative analysis in architecture schools, the students have a new appreciation for their own perceptions, abilities to synthesize, and the importance of the self, subjectivity and the social.

## CONCLUSION

The India Initiative seeks to study how strategically shifting the typical architecture studio pedagogical structure, content and location can transform student learning. Though it is too early to evaluate the outcome of our five-year research program, there is much to be gleaned from the students' projects and written reflections on how the India experience affected their design work after the first year.

By providing the opportunity for architecture students to question their own assumptions, ways of knowing and personal design processes within unfamiliar cultures and places, their projects were quite different than they would have been in the studio back home. The students were less convinced of the correctness of their assumptions and their design work was more layered and holistically conceived across scales. As they constructed their own knowledge and understanding of the richness of difference and hybridity in these sites out of mind, their preconceptions fell away and new ideas emerged.



*Sketchbook (Catharine Killien)*

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7. See J.E. Hartman (1991) "Telling Stories: The Construction of Women's Agency." In *(En)Gendering Knowledge: Feminists in Academe* and M. Belenky (1986) *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*.
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