

An Architecture of Ingenuity and Empowerment

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Abstract : This paper will present work and discuss lessons learned during a semester-long travel study based in Southeast Asia, which was run in the Spring Semester of 2019 and again in the summer of 2023. The first travel group consisted of fifteen students, and the second group consisted of twelve students ranging from second-year to graduate level, student participants majoring in either architecture or planning. Students worked in interdisciplinary teams, each team beginning their travel study, living together in a separate small town for over a month in (relatively) remote conditions in rural Thailand. Students became intimately familiar with these towns, forged strong personal relationships, and built reservoirs of knowledge one conversation at a time. Rather than impose external ideas and solutions, students were asked to learn from and be open to lessons from the people and the place. The following design statement was used as a point of departure for their investigations: It is our shared premise that architecture exists in small villages and towns of Southeast Asia in the ingenuity of the people, that architecture exists in a shared language of making, modifying, and reusing. It is a modest but vibrant architecture, an architecture that is alive and evolving, an architecture that is small in scale, accessible, and one that emerges from the people. It is an architecture that can exist in a modified bicycle, a woven bamboo bridge, or a self-built community. Students were challenged to engage in existing conditions as design professionals, both empowering and lending coherence to the energies that already existed in the place. As one of the student teams noted in their design narrative: "During our field study, we had the unique opportunity to tour a number of informal settlements and meet and talk to residents through interpreters. We found that many of the residents work in nearby factories for dollars a day. Others find employment in self-generated informal economies such as hand carving and textiles. Despite extreme poverty, we found these places to be vibrant and full of life as people navigate these challenging conditions to live lives with purpose and dignity." Students worked together with local community members and colleagues to develop a series of varied proposals that emerged from their interrogations of place and partnered with community members and professional colleagues in the development of these proposals. Project partners included faculty and student colleagues Yangon University, the mayor's Office, Planning Department Officials and religious leaders in Sawankhalok, Thailand, and community leaders in Natonchan, Thailand, to name a few. This paper will present a series of student community-based design projects that emerged from these conditions. The paper will also discuss this model of travel study as a way of building an architecture which uses social and cultural issues as a catalyst for design. The paper will discuss lessons relative to sustainable development that the Western students learned through their travels in Southeast Asia.

Keywords : travel study, CAPasia, architecture of empowerment, modular housing

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