When Old Meets New: Wayfindings, Poly-Cartographic Sites and the Distilled Memory of Place

“When as we think architecture with our bodies, we think our bodies through architecture.”

Marco Frascari

Preface

“Involuntarily I glanced seaward — and distinguished nothing except a single green light, minute and far away, that might have been the end of a dock. When I looked once more for Gatsby he had vanished, and I was alone again in the unquiet darkness”.

from The Great Gatsby, 1925, F. Scott Fitzgerald

We begin by evoking the green light at the end of Daisy’s dock because of its illusive nature and poetic power. To some it is a controlling metaphor for life and all that it denies us, the ephemeral and unattainable. To others it is a hopeful beacon of passion and love, or an icon of greed and vice. And yet, to others it is simply a light bulb installed on a dock to mark a point in space in the midst of darkness. The “truth” is that they may be all and none simultaneously, and this resonance, ambiguity, truth/falsehood (or to use the Venturian Architectural lingo), this Complexity and Contradiction is in large part what gives Fitzgerald’s text its enduring nature, a text still relevant to us for nearly a century now.

This course shall be focused on the exploration of this premise - that a site is complex when it offers multiple physical, cartographic and phenomenal readings (narratives) and that it is designer’s charge to tune into the site’s poetics in such a way as to engaging it at its core. Only by undertaking a project in this way this can the outcome lead to a resonant work engaged with

1 Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture, 1966, Robert Venturi
the site’s physical and the temporal realms. It is wayfinding in a dream. It is asking the stones to join in conversation with our senses. Listening to the locus\(^2\) is the prime method by which the designer stands a chance at making something of continuity and relevance to the past, present and future of the place. As Adolfo Natalini puts it: to act ignorantly is inexcusable, to ignore is criminal.\(^3\)

An essential component of the course is to travel to important sites in Spain. No doubt, the travel sequences are among the most memorable portions of the course. That said, we use the travel to support the argument that in the end, it is the experience offered by a resonant space - or as we shall be referring to it in this course, the spatial narrative - that makes the place memorable. We travel the globe to feel these places, to listen to them. It is not their pragmatic programmatic organization that motivates us to travel the world to see a project, nor its beam placements, nor typically its slabs and/or wall construction – rarely are these physical elements alone enough to keep a place meaningful throughout the ages. It is true that with these elements a narrative is conveyed. Yet without the spatial narrative the physicality alone accomplishes little in the way of tell a story. To simplify, stories are told through materiality, yet materiality without a story is only a construction with building materials.

I have often insisted in lectures that Architecture is the Poetry of Space, and that in the same way that written or spoken lyrical poetry relays on language (words and syntax) as its medium, so does Architecture depend on a language of constituent constructional and morphological elements. Such elements carve out an experiential space charged with meaning, message and possibly even emotion. This is the function of Architecture: to make space, for without the creation of space we have only substance, physical objects, or at most, sculpture.

\(^2\)“The locus is conceived of [by Aldo Rossi][as] a singular place and event, which works as the relationship of architecture to the constitution of the city and the relationship between the context and monument. Rossi distinguishes some differences between locus and context. Usually locus is the conditions and the qualities of a space necessary to understand an urban artifact. “Farida Nilufar on The Architecture of the City.

\(^3\)Figures of Stone, 1984, Adolfo Natalini
Again, Natalini takes this idea further in *Figures of Stone* where he describes Architecture as a complex system of infinite elements which fall into three essential categories: “primary elements, morphological elements and constructional elements.” Each of these is essential to the idea of architecture, but without the primary element, what one ends up with is something of limited resonance, a product of the building trade. “The primary elements, [are the] structures of the human psyche, that canalize the satisfaction of needs and desires. Primary elements are not to be taken as models, but as structures and motivations.”

### Course Methodologies and Objectives

“...we cannot exist independently of our relation to the world; and this relationship is a matter of mood and appetite, not rational contemplation.”

*Simon Critchley, Being and Time, part 4: Thrown into this World*

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**Mr. Palomar: The Book, The Man**

“Order is a necessary condition for anything the human mind is to understand. Arrangements such as the layout of a city or building...or a painting or piece of music are called orderly when an observer or listener can grasp their overall structure and the ramification of the structure in some detail...when nothing superfluous is included and nothing indispensable is left out, one can understand the interrelation of the whole and its parts...[yet the perceived order of a system] tends to be manifested and understood as a reflection of an underlying order, whether physical, social, or cognitive.” Rudolf Arnheim, *Entropy and Art: An Essay on Disorder and Order*

We initiate the course with a reading of *Mr. Palomar* by Italo Calvino. If we have an official course textbook, it is this one. In essence, the book is an account of the observation methods employed by the protagonist, Mr. Palomar, in order to navigate his world’s physical and phenomenal realms. It is an account of one man’s active engagement with his context and how he struggles to find order in an otherwise chaotic existence. It is a book about a man not content with understanding his physical realm on the surface, as perhaps an outsider or tourist might see a place for the first time. *Mr. Palomar* is a story told through diagrams, or possibly, of diagram-thinking, structuring spatial narratives that describe places and events beyond the obvious perceptions. Like Palomar, the student’s engagement with site must transcend the physical aspects of territory and location, and by working towards that end, developing spatial narrativestheatre-visualize, re-order, collate and prioritize information sets associated with the place – developing a critical and personal point of view on the pertinent
temporal as well as phenomenal conditions more “real” than those seen only with the physiological eye alone.  

The course, however, posits an even more fundamental, process-related question, which is: how to document the fundamental bridges that guide and pilot our efforts from the purely contemplative, internal and synaptic to the making the physical and 3-dimensional expression? The writer transfers concepts from the yet not fully understood realms of electro-chemical-driven impulses to the page and his job is complete. The painter begins at the same place, yet his work is completed on a two-dimensional surface. The sculptor too begins in the recesses of his mind and completes his work in three-dimensional space. But the architect’s work must both exist and transcend all of these states, and her work must end in the making of space, usable, functional, rooted in site and context; and if it is to be memorable space, relevant and alive with narrative.

No doubt that the process of achieving this is a most complex one. The course shall engage this effort as an exercise in mnemonic (memory making/using/keeping) and semiotic (meaning making). We shall make an effort of developing devices/tools of these types in a manner that their development becomes symbiotic to the development of the idea of the “final project” itself, a myth in and of itself. As someone once said, authors never finish a book. They simply abandon it. The theory to be tested over the term is: Can we build architecture in the process of building the tool?

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5 Plato himself, in his theories on forms, believed that “non-material abstract (but substantial) forms (or ideas), and not the material world of change known to us through sensation, possess the highest and most fundamental kind of reality.” Wikipedia

6 Citation needed.
In *Monsters of Architecture*, Marco Frascari makes reference to *architectura di spolio*: buildings made partially, totally or conceptually “from preexisting buildings produced in other times and by other cultures...[and] that rather than this resulting in a ‘fragmentary’ approach as construction methodology...the disparate elements are reassembled as an architecture of ‘improbable and misplaced elements’[that] lead to a ‘proper construction’ akin to the legendary *Cabinets of Curiosities* (*Wunderkammers*) that were once associated with the ruling classes and which are now considered precursors of today’s museums and galleries; mnemonic microcosms of the world at large. For the architect, ‘this is a fabbrica, i.e., a theater where the mnemonic powers of topical images would activate imagination and inspiration.’”

“Memory,” Frascari continues “is the basis of fantasy.” When we work with memory, therefore, what we create is an amalgamation of disparate yet unified moments or according to Frascari, “a monster, a cultural trophy...an edifying theater of memory...housing the never ending representations of the drama and comedy of the human life.”

This studio contends that without such fantasy design thinking is mute and leaves out the poetic dimension, responding more to technical and utilitarian criteria. Each student shall therefore maintain a *daily* journal in the form of a sketchbook. The sketchbook shall be a receptacle of thoughts, impressions, ideas, and so forth relevant to the studio experience and travels. The sketchbook shall developed as a narration to Mr. Palomar himself, as a multi-layered graphic novel with the use of text, drawing, image transfer, found object, text and the occasional picture. The final book shall be the student’s unique story. In essence, we are talking about the act of *collaging* a book together, a monster of sorts: a process that we ultimately default to every day in our mind’s eye as we navigate through the world, occupying space, experiencing sites and reordering our sensory experiences. The sketchbook shall be an ongoing exercise in the making of a mnemonic instrument for mining and as the blueprint for other studio work to be developed in tandem with it.

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8 Ibid; In the text the author also makes mention of a phenomena that will be very relevant to our course: “This mode of architectural assemblage is present in any architectural age...All around the Mediterranean basin, elements despoiled from many ancient buildings were used in complex architectural compositions.”
Device 2: The Moving Image

"I am a born liar... for me the things that are the most real are the ones I invented."

Federico Fellini

Still from La Dolce Vita

Once facts enter into memory, they become the stuff of the subjective, plastic and re-workable. What we experience in a linear, chronologic sequence becomes simultaneous and dimensionless. In a sense, what we do when we remember is to piece together fragments of complex information into a new vision. The act of collaging is thus essential to this course. It is how we often recall and our sites and the events that define them, and how by re-visualizing them, we can them come to act on them. As alluded to earlier, we are interested in memory in this course because memory is what will fuel our motives.

Further, just as we have our personal memory, so does a singular place, as does a city. Paraphrasing from The Architecture of the City, Rossi describes the European city not as the Modernist movement describes it: as a machine that facilitates exchange among its populace and industry, but as a spatial network imbued with of cardinal, generative moments of significance and collective memory (loci and primary elements); as a place generated by both relevant and obsolete rituals, and of the artifacts and monuments (artifacts/buildings/structures) that no longer house the rituals that brought them into existence – microcosmic artifacts that share in the collective memory and consciousness of the city itself... embedded with cultural significance as well as with collective memories of its inhabitants...some rituals are still housed in artifacts and in the “collective memory” woven together by its inhabitants and thus embedded with a meta-existence and having an important influence on the future of the city itself.” The history expresses itself through the monuments (structures that have lost their generative ritual)...This process of construction links the past and present and thus it addresses the ultimate and definitive fact in the life of the collective, the creation of the environment in which it lives.

Using recorded sound, stills and video, while also and working in tandem with the Sketchbooks, students shall try to capture the essence of each site relevant to the studio project. Not as a work for touristic purposed, but as an act of restating essential mnemonic moments and conditions essential to the site narrative as rediscovered and told from the student’s point of view. Architecture is not opaque. It is transparent and ephemeral in that it is ultimately about

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9 This was in fact one of the cornerstones of Picasso’s Cubism.
experiencing and navigating spaces with our senses. Architecture is more than just the sum of its physical parts. Poetic architecture is experience. It possesses filmic attributes. In a way, both Rossi and Bernhard Tschumi imply the same notion in their respective writings when at length they refer to ritual and the event and draw the conclusions that without these essential primary elements there is no city, nor really, is there any architecture.10

On Diagraming

Sites are different in their DNA as humans are different. Each possesses its own temporal and phenomenal qualities without which the identity of the place itself would radically change. Each is an amalgamation of not only measurable cartographic information, but also as layered, cartographic experiences and fluid events.

The first half of the studio shall be devoted to the search for these previously mentioned primary motivations that exist embedded in us as they do in a site. With this goal in mind, we adopt a diagram-driven approach to the investigation of the site. The premise here is that this approach leads to the student’s more direct and authentic engagement with the site. Diagraming demands as much: a more personal method of seeing a new place and recording it. It is hoped that the diagram as an investigatory tool will also lead to unique design solutions in a way that the plagiaristic method of looking to what others have done -(including today’s “starquitects”) - can never do. Further, diagraming shall not be limited to organizing the relationships of only the physical aspects of the site, its limits, thresholds, terrain, etc...but shall also be keyed into the temporal narratives as well as to the experiential and phenomenal qualities of the place; attributes that give specificity to the place and communicate more uniquely the nature of the place. Diagrams shall re-envision the place hierarchical relationships, collation of conditions, conflicts, harmonies and other circumstances observed and documented.

10 Tschumi and Rossi write extensively on this subject matter in Event Cities and Architecture of the City, respectively. We shall read excerpts from these and other texts during the course. Part of the course shall also take us to popular festivals and other cultural events in search of urban facts.
Sites visits shall begin on the first day of class in Madrid and shall over the course of the first half of the class include places in Valencia, Granada as well as other locations, including the micro–sites that we shall eventually act on in the area of Guardamar del Segura. Using our devices, all shall be diagrammed, re-envisioned, mused upon and re-evoked in our search for the place that exists in the narrative beyond the physical realm.

**Course Itinerary**

* indicates afternoon ONLY class session (6 pm – 9 pm)
⌂ indicates evening movie screening of relevant Spanish films
Note: Itinerary to be confirmed to enrolled student s by May 1, 2016

### Week 1 (June 1–4)

- **W**: Welcome and Orientation in Madrid, collection of pre-assigned essays.켰
- **Th**: Site Visit Madrid - Assignment 1 issued
- **F**: Excursion to Cordoba: Visit to La Mezquita de Cordoba (When Old Meets New)
- **S**: Excursion to Granada: Visit to La Alhambra (Linking Heaven, Earth, City and Water)

### Week 2 (June 5-11)

- **Sn**: Excursion Continues
- **M**: Travel to Guardamar/Check into Pension Accommodations, Premier Workshop
- **T**: Tour of Guardamar Sites, Assignment1 Pin-Up, Assignment 2A issued
- **W**: Assignment 2A independent work day, desk crits
- **F⌂**: Project Site Visit, Assignment 2APin Up
- **S**: Excursion Alicante – Castillo de Santa Barbara (“The Monument” and its domain)

### Week 3 (June 12-18)

- **M*⌂**: in-class charrette, Assignment 2B
- **T**: Tour of Dunas de Guardamar and Local Archeological Sites
- **W**: desk crits, Assignment 2B Pin-Up
- **Th**: Field Trip to Murcia/Elche
- **F**: in class charrette/Narrative charrette, afternoon pin-up
- **S**: Excursion to Island of Tabarca– (The Floating and the Tethered)

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11 Regular class hours shall be Monday-Friday 10 am-2pm and 6pm-9pm. 100% attendance is required. Scheduled weekend class excursions require mandatory attendance as well. Note that in the interest of promoting independent travel to destinations of interest to the students, but not part of the course itinerary, we suspend class following Mid Review for one week. Also, note that some Mondays are marked with an asterisk (*)indicating half days to ease student travel over weekends. Students are asked NOT to schedule trips or independent events that will conflict with this schedule.

12 Students must have read Mr. Palomar prior to arriving in Spain and must write a 500-1000 word essay reflecting on Mr. Palomar’s own reflections and how such thinking methodology can further clarify (or complicate) the architects’ personal vision when approaching a project. Essays must be emailed to the instructor by midnight, June 2nd.
Week 4 (June 19-25)
M*: Lecture on Historical and Contemporary Spanish/European Urbanism,
T: Assignment 2B Pin-Up, Excursion to Alicante
W: Excursions to Alicante
T: in class Site Analysis/Narrative charrette, desk crits
F: desk crits

Week 5 (June 26-July 2)
M: MID REVIEW (Assignments 1-3)
T: Excursion Valencia Day 1, Final Project Program Issued
W: Excursion Valencia Day 2 – Visit to Ciudad de Artes y Ciencias
Th: Excursion Valencia Day 3 – Visit to Archeological Sites
F: INDEPENDENT STUDENT TRAVEL (after 2 pm)

Week 6 (July 3-9)
S-Sn: INDEPENDENT TRAVEL – NO CLASS

Week 7 (July 10-16)
M*: Class Resumes
T: desk crits
W: Pin-Up
Th: desk crits
F: desk crits

WEEK 8 (July 17-23)
M: Pin-Up
T: desk crits
W: Pin-Up
Th: desk crits
F: desk crits, Sketchbooks Due
S: Students to remain in Guardamar for local festivals

WEEK 9 (July 24-29)
S-Sn: Students to remain in Guardamar for local festivals
M: desk crits,
T: final projects due, to be pinned up
W: FINAL REVIEW
Th: lab day
F: lab day, Sketchbooks Returned
S: LAST DAY OF CLASS