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# The Value and place of site visits and field trips in Architectural education

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## CEBE Briefing Guide

### Field Trips and site visits in architectural education

#### **Description**

This Briefing Guide is aimed at design studio tutors and programme leaders who intend to run a field trip or site visit as an integral or adjunct part of studio based work in Architecture, Landscape Architecture and Urban Design courses (although it will have relevance to other built environment disciplines). It introduces the opportunities and potential problems associated with field trips and site visits, and provides a critical introduction to the historic and educational context for such work. A checklist of approaches for good practice is provided, in order to offer design tutors structured guidance for the considered implementation of field trips and site visits in architectural education.

It draws upon the results of a CEBE snapshot survey on the range, extent and scope of field work and site visit activity across UK Architecture Schools between 2008 and 2010. It also takes account of existing publications shown under Further Reading.

#### **Introduction: Definition of Field trips, site visits; defining the territory**

While field trips and site visits in architectural education are widely regarded as essential aspects of the education of an architect, there is a diverse range of interpretation of their placing and value in an expanded context of contemporary higher education and in an architectural education not solely focused on professional ends. Architects' travelling to study and learn is intrinsically embedded in the history of their education, whether in an apprentice framework, a beaux arts education model, or a post-war higher education research-teaching curriculum context [Crimson & Lubbock, Ewing 2008, Jaschke]. Travelling to study and to learn, is seen as an ongoing characteristic of an architect and her professional and personal development over a career. Therefore the habits of practice formed in relation to how to study, learn about and engage with *another* subject in *another* place, are often as crucial as the particular knowledge gained and skills learnt within the frame and format of a particular educational event taking place away from a home institution. There is an expectation that there will be many formal and informal iterations of field trips and site visits in the course of an architectural career, dependent on the scope and extent of architectural practice being undertaken.

Increased recent emphasis on formalised research in the higher educational context, has influenced understandings of the purpose and specific activity of field trips and site visits in architectural education. While there is usually continuity of an underpinning motivation - direct experience, exposure to issues of contemporary relevance such as other environments, other cultures, climate change, rapid urbanisation [Shannon 2005], there is more emphasis on immediate output, for instance local engagement workshops, exhibited or published data, links to design projects, than on foundational habits for architectural practice. The history of published architectural design studio work with a primary research-end bias can be traced back to the 1960s, to Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steve Izenour's *Learning from Las Vegas* publication in 1972 based on the Harvard design studios they led in 1968-9 [Ewing 2009]. This tradition of field trip/ site visit as published research in itself has continued, for instance with OMA's Harvard *Project on the City* of the 1990s, and has directly and indirectly influenced subsequent formulations of architectural design research, as well as of architectural education. The modernist 'genius loci' paradigm of place is being superseded by an understanding of site as

shifting, porous, flowing, networked and these new paradigms influence what and where is being chosen to engage with through field trips or site visits, and how media and methods are encouraged and utilised - from disciplinary traditions of observation/sketching, physical measuring and drawn representation, to working with photography, film, video and digital devices and technologies of mainstream and social media.

An expansion of architectural educational activity, to research as well as to study and to learn, intersects with, and perhaps has contributed to, an increased interest in architectural practice as an expanded field of activity ranging from local social engagement to global research projects, and alternative modes of practice of architecture. Reviews of practices of travelling to study and learn for architects are evident [Harbison 2000]. Avant-garde site and fieldwork practices are experimented with and are often associated with field trips/site visits in an educational framework, being a testing ground for the formation of habits of practice [Ewing et al. 2011]. However these have been somewhat detached from wider debates in other material and spatial disciplines such as geography, archaeology and anthropology in relation to situated knowledge, and in terms of interdisciplinary critical interest in innovative tools and techniques for research practices and methods.

### **How the guide is organised**

This guide focuses on the formalised aspects of architectural education which are identified by educators as 'field trip/study/visit', 'site visit', 'study trip/tour/visit'. Generally, 'field trip/study/visit' refers to an event with a research or clearly defined design practice emphasis; 'site visit' refers to an event focused on preparation for and integral to the working through of a design project; 'study trip/tour/visit' relates to an event organised around a particular thematic or topical itinerary which may be separate from the architectural design studio. Following the *Definition of Field trips, site visits; defining the territory*, which establishes a critical introduction to the historic and educational context, a good practice framework offers design studio tutors and programme leaders structured guidance for the considered implementation of field trips and site visits in architectural education.

The opportunities are both short and long term: an intensity and focus of teaching and learning which can be transformative to an individual and a pedagogic group in a relatively short project, course or studio duration; a nurturing of an essential curiosity and ethical position through guided exposure to the contemporary world; a direct experience which brings a topic or aspect of study to life; a developing of habits and rigours of looking, learning, studying and versatility in communicating which forms a solid foundation for tools and techniques of future practice.

Potential problems associated with field trips/ site visits are primarily short term and logistical: to do with unexpected bureaucracies and changes in travel, accommodation arrangements and itineraries, and the linguistic, cultural and social complexities of working with large and sometimes multicultural groups away from their home and/or home institution. Increasingly apparent is economic pressure for students to self-fund components of higher education which are not seen as core activity, such as additional trips or visits. Despite the consensus in architectural education that field trips and site visits are essential and intrinsic to the education of an architect, there are relatively few robust institutional models remaining which support this within the formal educational structure. The ambitions and implementation of field trips/ site visits are often driven by local, ad-hoc strategies set up by impassioned individual educators.

## Good practice framework

A checklist of approaches for good practice:

Conceptualisation/ choosing destination:

- Are you considering a field trip/study/visit?
- Are you considering a site visit?
- Are you considering a study tour/trip/visit?
- What are your particular aims and objectives?
- Do these foreground teaching and learning and/or research?
- Which areas of knowledge are you primarily concerned with in the trip/visit? (eg. history and architectural precedent; construction knowledge and history; the work of an architect or practice; exposure to environmental, cultural or social differences/issues; the experience of a city; investigation of site(s) for potential design projects).
- Are there particular skills, tools or techniques related to teaching, learning or research which are particularly pertinent? (eg. sketching or light studies of an existing architectural precedent; measured survey; published literature available in advance; mapping and interview techniques; hybrid recording processes which can become communication tools in on-site tutorials and locally engaged workshops).
- Is there a particular place/ network/ itinerary which would support these aims and objectives?

Research/planning in detail

- Is the selected destination(s) easily accessible by public transport and predominantly affordable to students? If not, what arrangements can be put in place to make a group trip/visit most cost-effective (eg. hired coach/guide/ sequential groups)?
- Are there any seasonal, cultural or institutional parameters which might affect when might be the ideal time of year to visit?
- Are there particular visa arrangements required? If so, what lead-in time should be expected?
- Are there any particular risk-factors to be taken into account (the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office [FCO] website is worth checking regularly)?
- Research cost-effective accommodation options and gain second opinions if possible. Often reviews are based on single or paired travellers, which is very different from the needs and dynamics of a large group travelling on

mass. Local knowledge of hostels and good quality student-type accommodation can be an invaluable guide.

- Research cost-effective travel options and gain second opinions if possible. There are several study tour companies who can provide a useful agency service, although at a cost, and many institutions also operate a similar service which can be a welcome administrative support.
- What preparations (language, cultural and social orientation, physical) are useful?
- Spend time developing useful local contacts, and regularly communicate. An advance recci trip/visit is often an invaluable way of consolidating aspects of the trip/ visit as well as developing relationships with local contacts.
- Check opening hours and best contact details of buildings, exhibitions, museums, libraries, bookshops, archives, the architecture school, professional architects' association, NGOs etc. There is usually better access to city maps, building documentation and cultural material at the relevant city archives, building and civic/cultural institutions of the destination than back at the home institution.
- Well researched and planned events are usually the most productive and least stressful.....

#### Introduction to students and staff

- Consider the stage of education and travel experience of students and staff participating in the field trip/site visit: have they been on previous trips/ visits? How much experience of travel do they have? It is important to be clear about expectations of personal responsibility while travelling away from the home institution. While there may be some formally organised group visits and activity as part of the trip/visit, there may also be informal time when students are investigating sites, undertaking documentation work etc on their own.
- Expectations of personal and trip/visit leaders' responsibility need to be understood by all concerned from the outset. Accurate and clear contact details for the trip/visit leaders should be provided to all participants in advance, and it is usually advisable to provide personal emergency contact details of a responsible staff member at the home institution with knowledge of the trip. Full student contact details and emergency contact information should be available on the trip/visit and at hand at the home institution.
- Emergency local details (police, medical, insurance, local contacts etc) should be provided in advance. Lone working should be discouraged and strategies for regularly keeping track of the whole group should be established (eg. daily meetings). Language, cultural and social orientation and participation should be encouraged.

- As with good practice for designing any teaching and learning, supporting documentation should outline the field trip/ site visit/ study tour aims and objectives, working methods, internal and external participants, relevant background content to the place/ topic/project, and as much detailed information on resources and activities as is appropriate.
- Good administrative support throughout the planning, implementation and review of a field trip/site visit is essential (travel and accommodation liaisons; insurance options; costings and budget; payment options if relevant; visa and passport guidance; full student passport name records etc.)

#### In the field/ at the visit/ on the tour

- Given the diversity of aims, objectives and iterations of 'field trip/study/visit', 'site visit', 'study trip/tour/visit', good practice primarily relates to the following through of research, planning and documentation.
- The intensity of the field trip/ site visit, usually due to ambitious itineraries, tasks or network activities, and living, eating and working together in a compressed time, is an exciting and dynamic opportunity for teaching, learning, research, the education of an architect, and the many positive side-benefits to individuals and the group. However, this can be testing and tiring for staff and students, and sometimes a responsive adaptation to the planned pacing (slowing, allowing opt-outs or alternative activities) can be necessary.
- It is impossible to plan for every eventuality, and it is most likely that you will be dealing with the unexpected- whether a student health or personal incident, an overrunning building visit, an on-the-spot opportunity to see something new, have access to a site/building/practice. Balancing an openness to unforeseen opportunities with a pre-planned itinerary is usually most successful when there is some in-built flexibility of time, staff participation and group motivation.
- Continual, responsive communication between students and students, students and staff, staff and staff, and staff and administrators is essential to the hour to hour and day to day running of a field trip/ site visit. Regular reviewing of personal and group well being and any overarching or particular health and safety concerns should be regularly reviewed.

#### Return home

- Approach the return not solely with relief and anecdotes but with time planned for reflective and collective evaluation...ie: how the aims and objectives were met (or which aspects were); which areas of knowledge have been expanded; which skills/tools/ techniques have been successfully developed individually and as a group; how the particular place/ network/ itinerary supported the teaching/learning/research; which aspects of the trip/ visit went as expected; what new opportunities arose; is there any particular advice on travel or accommodation or itinerary which you would pay heed to in a future trip/visit?
- Plan the next one.....!

## **CEBE Survey: the place and value of site visits in architectural education 2009**

The questionnaire was circulated to every UK school of architecture in the second half of 2009 and received responses from 16% of schools. Relevant data was retrieved from a further 27% of schools from published material on school websites and associated school publications [these sources are cross referenced in the CEBE 2009 'Summary of Data Sources']. The snapshot survey reveals that there is a wide range of interpretations and terminologies related to field trips and site visits in architectural education [these are consolidated in the CEBE 2009 'Summary of Terminologies']. Over 50% of destinations were predominantly to Europe, 22% to UK, around 9% to America, 9% to Asia, and just 2% to Africa [see CEBE 2009 'Summary of Destinations']. They take place throughout architectural education, usually responsive to particular aims and objectives of courses- from gaining first hand knowledge to support learning, to acting as a critical anchor for design practice development.

Terminologies used in the survey responses in the general area of trips, visits and tours related to architectural education included 'field trip', 'field study', 'field visit', 'site visit', 'study trip', 'study tour' and 'study visit'. These shed light on differentiated teaching and learning objectives and values.

The '*field trip/study/visit*' was seen generally as a concentrated pedagogic device in relation to a trajectory of evolving design practice, encouraging independent research, and sometimes related to reflecting realities of work in practice. Activities include the collection and analysis of data, local dialogue and involvement (students, professionals, academics, NGOs), multidisciplinary teams, workshop or charette on site. The destination is usually at least one night's stay away from home institution.

The '*site visit*' was seen as directly related to engaging with and gathering data of a particular project location, usually initially guided by a teacher, in order to build up skills of independent investigation as preparation for a design project. Activities include thorough investigation, studying and gathering data on a site (through photography, sketches, interviews, questionnaires), preparation prior to visit. The destination is usually within a day's reach of the home institution.

The '*study trip/tour/visit*' was seen as independent of a design project, usually focused around gaining knowledge on a clear theme or topic (for example an architect, significant architectural precedents, exhibition, museum, of educational interest), with an itinerary and usually accompanied by a specialist. Aims include widening horizons, learning through observation, deepening knowledge of architecture, with emphasis on observation, direct experience. The destinations vary from close at hand to abroad.

Questionnaire responses indicate that destination choices are often made based on previous events, accumulated staff experience, academic and professional links, access to good examples of architectural precedents and/or perceived relevance to contemporary architectural and urban issues. Easy accessibility by air was noted as a factor. In relation to sizes of student groups and risk assessment, no significant aspects were raised: standard institutional Health and safety procedures were usually followed although some field trips/ site visits are no longer organised as compulsory events and therefore students take responsibility for their own travel, accommodation and insurance which can be less bureaucratic and cheaper for the student. Suggested guidelines include following local guidance on safe areas, and a strong discouragement of lone working.

Field trips and site visits are clearly valued in the context of architectural education- both by educators and participating students- “immense side benefits...the amount of focussed teaching that happens on good field trips is astonishing, and it is like a super-condensed hybrid of lectures, seminars and group tutorials in a highly effective manner”. The pedagogic rationale is seen as an essential widening or broadening of horizons, formative for development as an architect, exposure to other cultures and societies, architectures and social dynamics, awareness of different climate needs and different building methods and materials, cross-cultural and transformative learning, developing sensitivity to new cultural needs and challenges, exposure to global issues in the built environment, awareness-raising of the impact of climate change.

Positive benefits cited include: team-building, self-organisation and management, confidence building, discovering practical issues, group working, effective ice-breaking and mechanism for collective bonding, awareness of issues of scale, learning to devise communication skills not based on language, learning to be strategic and inventive, versatility, bringing material back to the school, critical self awareness. Negative aspects cited include: risks associated with international travel; when optional to the course, the trip/visit can not necessarily be afforded by all, and students have to pay their own way, although some saw coaches and low-cost travel companies as enabling the democratisation of study trips.

It should be noted that the survey was undertaken in the early period of the global credit crunch crisis, when many field trips and site visits in architectural education were already underway or in planning. In the subsequently less stable and less optimistic European economic context, where costs of air travel and sustenance have increased, there may be an increasing pressure on the pedagogic rationale and desire to undertake and participate in field trips and study visits/tours as frequently and in as wide a range of locations as evidenced by the 2009 survey.

A summary of the survey is available from CEBE on request.

### **Further Reading**

Crinson, M & Lubbock, J *Architecture, Art or Profession? Three hundred years of Architectural Education in Britain*, Manchester University Press, 1994.

Ewing, S ‘Coming and Going: itinerant education and educational capital’, Bairstow, A, Roaf, S ed. *The Oxford Conference 2008, Re-setting the Architectural Agenda* WIT Press, 2008.

Ewing, S ‘Choosing (what) to learn from: London, Rome, Las Vegas, Lagos...’ in Chaplin, S, Stara, A ed. *Curating Architecture and the City* Routledge, April 2009 p. 23-38.

Ewing S, McGowan J, Speed C, Bernie V (eds.) *Architecture and Field/Work* Routledge, 2011.

Harbison, R ‘Pilgrim’s Progress. On the latter day Grand Tour- how architectural devotees travel to view the sacred sites of their profession’, *Architecture (New York)* Vol 89, no 5 May 2000, p. 91-94.

Jaschke, K ‘Conventions, Tours and other journeys: Why Architects Must Travel’, *Nordisk Arkitekturforskning Nordic Journal for Architectural Research*, Vol 11. No 1-2,



1998 p. 103-114.

Shannon, K 'Global sites, local stories: Strategic thinking across cultures' *Studio Culture 3* Trigger paper, CEBE, November 2005.

Much relevant material, often of an anecdotal and documentary character, resides in the informal and ever updating published space [grey literature] of Architecture School Yearbooks, websites, institutional/studio histories. These are indicated in the survey database where identified.

### **About the author**

Suzanne Ewing is an architect and educator working in academic, practice, and public contexts. Her work centres on discourses of studio and field, future city building and innovative collaborative practices. She is Senior Lecturer in Architecture at the University of Edinburgh, and has experience of leading studio teaching and field trips at all levels of Professional Architecture Programmes, as well as within taught Postgraduate Teaching in Architecture. She has been invited to be a guest critic/ examiner/ professor at various European Schools of Architecture. Her approach to teaching and learning in the architectural design studio aims to enable the pursuit of in-depth research, experimentation and innovative design. She is currently on the Steering Group of [AHRA](#) (Architectural Humanities Research Association), and recently chaired [Field/Work](#), the 6th International AHRA Conference held in Edinburgh (2009).