Travels with Annmarie, Melissa and Cathy

Annmarie Adams
Melissa Harris
Cathy Schwabe

Annmarie Adams: Once in a while I try to think about how I got to where I am. Most of these private ruminations turn around various geographical displacements, revisiting my decisions to do this here and there. What if I had never been born in London, England, rather than London, Ontario? What if I had never taken Peter Collins’ architectural history course at McGill in 1980? What if the RIBA Library hadn’t closed for renovations the summer I went there to write my dissertation? What if I had never attended the urban history colloquium at which I bumped into guitarist-cum-historian Peter Gossage, whom I eventually married? It’s a rather amusing game of connect the dots. What if, what if, what if.

Recently, my game has focused on deconstructing my architectural interests, wondering in particular how these may have been shaped by the places I’ve been. And I’ve concluded that there have been two pivotal experiences in my adult life when it comes to my architectural priorities: a year I spent travelling in 1985-86 and going to graduate school in California.

I had always done okay in school, mostly because I enjoyed it so much. At least I was able to convince a few institutions in faraway places to accept me as a student and to allow me to study interesting things. Nevertheless, I was thrilled and surprised to be chosen in 1985 as one of four graduating M. Arch. students at the University of California at Berkeley for the John K. Branner Travelling Fellowship.* What could be better? I was 25 years old, had no real responsibilities (I would have disputed this point at that time), and had been in university for 7 consecutive years (in three different places). The “Branner” was U.S. cash to travel for two semesters, to go wherever I wanted (as long as the itinerary included Italy and France), to look at buildings, and to be inspired. No strings attached.

Looking back, this time spent far away from books, classrooms, and campuses was the most instructive year of my life. I think it’s when I decided, subconsciously, to become an educator rather than a practitioner of architecture, and I think it cemented some of my other architectural values. This article is an opportunity to try to understand some of my decisions and to articulate some of these ideals.

When I found out about the Branner, Melissa Harris had been my classmate for the previous two years at Berkeley. She’s now Assistant Dean of the

Figure 1. Melissa: Pastel of Hands
"The fellowship was established in 1971 in memory of San [sic] architect John K. Branner. He left a trust to support travel for outstanding qualified students studying to become architects in the School of Architecture [sic] at the University of California at Berkeley, California."

Figure 16. Cathy, Piazza San Marco (see p. 44)

Figure 17. Cathy, Basilica San Marco (see p. 43)
College of Architecture and Urban Planning at the University of Michigan, but when I met her in the fall of 1985 at International House in Berkeley, where we both lived, she was fresh out of architecture school in her native Raleigh, North Carolina. I had never heard an accent like hers except on television, and her drawings were even more amazing than her southern drawl. Melissa had been sketching since she was a toddler, keeping a journal as a way to document everything around her. To me, her spontaneous, high-contrast, multi-media sketches of everyday life were incredible (fig. 1). Her father, Abie Harris, is an architect and had long since established the procedures of journal-keeping in the Harris family. These hardcover books had both images and text; no pages could be removed; the drawings and notes were not precious, but were just ways to remember. Her room at I-House was full of these tomes, organized in chronological order. And she didn’t go anywhere without one, or without a black felt pen tucked behind her ear, held there by her reddish curls.

A third classmate and friend, Cathy Schwabe, won a Branner fellowship too, so when Melissa got the AIA Henry Adams Medal, which came with some cash, we three decided to see the world together. We charted our course quite roughly using a map of the world’s cheeses, which we found in the front of a cookbook, and adopted the Harris method of architectural education-in-a-blank-book as our mandate.

Where we went is less important than how we went (although countries known for their cheeses, not surprisingly, took priority). Suffice it to say that between August 1985 and May 1986, we covered most of western Europe and a little of the Soviet Union. Cathy and I each had $9,000.00, and the three of us shared one guidebook, Brian Sachar’s *Atlas of European Architecture* (1984). What follows are some of the lessons that we have derived from our trip.

Melissa Harris: The process of forming personal values is structured by forces both internal and external. The inquiring character of two friends, Annmarie Adams and Cathy Schwabe, my former studio classmates and companions in travel, profoundly shaped who I have become. They continue to restore my faith in believing that the subjects which capture my heart have relevance to architecture. They remind me that choosing the situations and people who surround us matters. They have helped unleash opportunities for self
discovery, and this has meant clarifying questions I pursue in my work as a teacher and an architect.

In 1985 I had the privilege to travel with these two friends in Europe for nine months. Scanning systematically through my sketchbooks which we maintained religiously during our "grand tour," particular thoughts coalesce. Some recur like persistent hungry mosquitoes; others emerge green, revelational. The persistent thoughts deal with lessons, as Annmarie has called them, notions which reaffirm their significance through cleverly disguised insinuation into my life. Those "emerging" thoughts include the observation that time enables a refreshing degree of objectivity.

Cathy Schwabe: One of the good things about having friends who teach is that they take their own ideas and experiences—some of which you've even had with them—and subject them to the very same question-and-answer process they do with their students. The amazing thing is that they can then pull lessons from these experiences which they then can pass on to their students. Thinking about that trip, I find it wonderful to remember and re-examine experiences we shared 13 years ago, and to reflect on what "lessons" I have learned.

-Since my thoughts are mostly about sketchbooks, a passage from Somerset Maugham's "A Writer's Journal" which I copied into a sketchbook that year seems like a good place to begin.

I forget who it was who said that every author should keep a notebook (sketchbook), but should take care never to refer to it. If you understand this properly, I think there is truth in it. By making a note of something that strikes you, you separate it from the incessant stream of impressions that crowd across the mental eye and perhaps fix it in your memory. All of us have had good ideas or vivid sensations that we thought would one day come in useful, but which, because we were too lazy to write them down, have entirely escaped us. When you know that you are going to make a note of something you look at it more attentively than you otherwise would, and in the process of doing so words are borne upon you that will give it its private place in reality.

In school, teachers were always saying "keep a sketchbook." I don't remember ever seeing one of theirs. Always the dutiful student tried; I hated my drawings, so mostly I doodled, wrote a little and then quit. But, for this trip, I was determined to do better and stick with it.

I took two new sketchbooks with me at the start of the year. When I began I couldn't imagine that it would be possible to fill even one of them. One was a cheap 8 x 10 softcover, pad-paper notebook which I found in a drugstore. The other was a beautiful hardcover book with good paper which Melissa had bought for me. I had started in the cheap one because the way I saw it was since I couldn't draw anyway, why waste a good book on my lousy drawings?

No surprise it wasn't fun to draw in that book. The ink soaked through the pages, the binding got in the way of my hand, the pencil just slid over the shiny paper and I quit. I must have complained to Melissa about this in a letter because she wrote to ask if I didn't have the nice book she had given me. Considering that drawing was the primary thing I was intending to do for the year I needed to draw in a book that I loved. Stop being so worried about how bad the drawings seemed, she wrote, it was only paper. So I switched (fig. 2).

Melissa: A valiant but small Renault carried us from Holland to Italy and back. We were on a trip, though hardly vacationing. Our business was looking. In retrospect, it was a luxurious time, but we were not reveling in that luxury; rather, we were seriously engaged in defining precisely what it meant to look and see.

Annmarie: Lesson #1: There's a fine line between work and play when you really love what you're doing.

We produced about ten drawings per day. We worked very hard on these drawings, but never considered it work. Every day we would be out on the architectural beat, no matter what the weather conditions, or at least researching where we would go to next. And we drew everything from the greatest hits of architectural history (fig. 3) to the most mundane moments of our daily existence (fig. 4). To us, the drawings were ways of remembering.
Melissa: Drawing was a hands-on approach. We did not theorize the relationship between perspectival and orthographic projection by comparing the implicit position of a viewer to the omnipotent objective slice. We drew what we saw and drew in the way we had been taught to describe our own projects—with plans, sections, and elevations. By regularizing this process of shifting between these types of drawings, a certain fluency of imagining and then translating mental images to paper developed. What time now also reveals is that such a fluency is elusive. Drawing is a language and flourishes only with practice.

Cathy: When I first started to draw I didn’t have a clear idea of what I was going to draw. I would sit down somewhere and look around and then randomly choose something to sketch. What I drew didn’t look much like what I was looking at and it was kind of boring. Sketching, it seemed, was like playing at being a sidewalk artist and I was pretty bad. And then one day I happened on two small openings in a wall in Ronda in southern Spain. I looked through them and saw two narrow alleys fronted on each side by row houses. They sat back-to-back with one another (fig. 5-6).

On one side, Callejon del Indiano, new three-story housing and on the other, Patio de Santa Ana, old traditional one-story housing. I forced myself to overcome the sense that I was trespassing and entered each “street,” walked around and started to draw. I drew plans and wrote about the differences in what I saw and experienced and I found my “topic” for the year—small semi-public exterior spaces made by housing. My original topic to study the differences between contemporary and traditional housing in several cities had been difficult to do because it hadn’t occurred to me that access to what is essentially private space was going to be a problem. But this was close to my first idea and was accessible (fig. 7).

There were many lessons here. One was to have a theme or several themes to give me a reason to stop and draw. Another was to have an idea about what I was going to draw before I started. This helped me to structure and focus my looking and recording. A third was to use the architectural drawings skills which I already had to help me record my observations. Also, the more I drew the more confident I became, the more I enjoyed what I was drawing and the better I got. I learned to ignore, tolerate and then actually enjoy.
people watching me. Since what I was drawing was often where they lived or worked I was proclaiming it special. Of course it helped that I often did not understand the language and could just be imagining their responses, which leads me to lesson six—there is no such thing as a sketchbook police. No one is going to come by and check out whether you got it right and then mark you down in the book of life if you don’t measure up (fig. 8).

Annumarie:  

Lesson #2: The best way to see is to draw.

The juxtaposition of the great and the mundane have become important to my subsequent research interests as an architectural historian (after the trip that’s what I became).

One of the most disciplined things we did was to record, in plan, every hotel room we stayed in, so the juxtaposition of high-style and vernacular architecture was implicit (fig. 9). Having just been out to see and record Antoni Gaudi’s Sagrada Familia or the Roman Pantheon, we drew the Hostal Palacios in Barcelona or the Albergo Vecchia Roma with the same seriousness. The hotel drawings often included brief narratives. From Room 4 in the Hotel Italia in Ravenna on April 8: orange and green flowered wallpaper here; train noises from this side of the room. On January 9 in Langogne, France: two bubble baths; should have been a window here (I’m not sure now whether this meant the builder had missed an opportunity, or whether the note pointed to a mistake in my plan). What we learned from this exercise is how deceptive plans really are; a hotel room might look in plan like the monument we had seen that day, yet we hadn’t really learned in school how to analyze anonymous spaces. Why not?

We paid a lot of attention to these hotel drawings, perhaps because of the cold weather we encountered in the north, but also because our modest lodgings revealed themselves as surprisingly sophisticated architecture. Three of us slept most nights in one tiny space. We dried our laundry on radiators. We even cooked with a coil intended only to heat water for tea or coffee (and planned to write a cookbook for travelers, “Cooking by the Coil” that never happened). These hotels were the only constant for us during the year and we found rather ingenious ways of finding privacy in our fairly crowded little world.
As I mentioned, we tried to do about ten drawings a day, sometimes many views of the same building. And unlike the journal regime, there were no real rules for visiting the buildings. We found remarkable agreement on where we should go and how long we should stay. During the drawing sessions, we generally kept within sight of each other. Even when I look back at my worst drawings, I can feel myself back in the exact spot I sat to draw and can imagine where Cathy and Melissa were at that moment. While my worst drawings at least function as souvenirs, other images are rather archaeologically correct, accurate, as if drawn from a photo or from measurements (figs. 10-13).

Melissa and I took thousands of slides, perhaps because even then we knew we would need them to teach some day. Cathy, more of a purist in this regard, brought no camera along, adamant that photography would distract her from drawing. We drew very quickly and tried to capture the spirit of the places we visited. At night we were often surprised to find out how similarly we had seen certain places, like these cartoonish drawings of Pisa (figs. 14-17). But just as often we delighted in how different they were. While one of us had focused on the details, another had emphasized what was not there.

Cathy: I had this idea that you couldn’t be a real architect without a camera. So I bought one. On my trip I carried it with me everyday and rarely used it. I don’t much like mechanical things like computer games or slot machines and usually don’t spend much time on them because I get bored. For some reason using a camera was like that for me. I would rush to use up all of the pictures on a roll of film in order to be done and the result was a bunch of shots of some place I didn’t really care about. I tried to tell myself that the way a camera crops one’s view is similar to the editing or distilling process one uses when you draw. Somehow it wasn’t the same. When I draw, part of what I love is the pace of the experience. How you can lose yourself in the drawing process. How the drawing itself can suggest something else. And then how once you’ve put pen to paper the results are so immediate and can be so surprising. By the time I got my pictures back I couldn’t remember why I took them.

I had a conversation during the year with one of my former teachers Sandy Hirschen. He told me that
Figure 10. Annmarie photo: Scarpa

Figure 11. Annmarie Scarpa

Figure 12. Annmarie photo: Scarpa

Figure 13. Annmarie: Scarpa
when he travelled he would decide in the morning if it was a sketchbook day or a camera day and then just take with him what he needed. This sounded like a great idea. So each morning I would wake up and decide what kind of day it was. The funny thing is that it was always a sketchbook day (fig. 18).

When I drew what I saw and experienced and personalized it, I understood it better and it became mine. Keeping a sketchbook was not always easy. It can be hard to get started and then harder to keep going, but it is a wonderful way to describe the world and architecture back to oneself. It is true that you learn things from your drawings, they do “speak” to you, and they allow you to see things in new and different ways. Even if you only have access to familiar places, if you draw them you begin to know them more deeply (fig. 19).

Annmarie: Lesson #3: Go into every building you can.

It’s the only way to understand the plan, even in architecture intended for the dead. We went to enormous lengths to get into particular buildings, maybe because we had come so far to see them. The extreme example was the time I unknowingly attended the funeral of a Swedish mafia boss at Gunnar Asplund’s Woodland Crematorium. A friend back in California had told me to go to the building, to wear black, to carry a single rose, and to wait at the entrance for a funeral party to arrive. It was the only way, he said, to get into the modern masterpiece.

His instructions worked, although appearing to know the prayers in Swedish was problematic for me. But the next day my photo and description appeared in a Stockholm newspaper. I was the unknown young “American” whom nobody could identify, apparently grieving for the deceased. When the police contacted me, I confessed to being an Asplund junkie.

The places in which we spent more time, not surprisingly, became most meaningful. We slowed down at Christmas, for example, and stayed for two weeks in an extraordinary place Corippo, Switzerland (fig. 20), a tiny village perched on a Ticino mountainside and constructed entirely of local stone. We made all our own decorations and some presents, and had to call Melissa’s mother to find out how to cook turkey. We tried to record every detail of our beloved Corippo, using all kinds of drawings (fig. 21). I think it will always be one of my favourite places in the world.
Lesson #4: I like small places.

Our drawings often converged when we looked at smallish spaces, like Corippo, or Matisse's chapel of the Rosary (figs. 22-23). Perhaps the scale seemed familiar from all those nights in cheap hotels. And Melissa was especially good at editing our world through drawing, like the way she turned this café at Cannes into a beach (figs. 24-25).

Lesson #5: I like places which combine old and new.

I knew this before we began the trip. My proposal for the Branner, in fact, had been based on documenting new additions to historic buildings. I had promised to study the detail which joins new and old in buildings of national or civic importance and I did. My one hundred or so sites ranged from obvious examples of monumental juxtapositions to mundane do-it-yourself renovations.

Carlo Scarpa's museums, not surprisingly, were among the most poignant examples of this detail. Seeing his work in person, in fact, made me change my position on additions to some extent. I had started out assuming that the best additions to historic buildings were those which continued patterns initiated in the original building. Scarpa's Canova Museum at Possagno, however, did no such thing. While the original building was essentially an axial space, whose experience was akin to a one-point perspective, Scarpa's addition is a fluid, rather unfocussed arrangement.

My interest in new/old came from my masters thesis, which had been on additions to historic buildings: a proposed addition to the library by Julia Morgan at Mills College in Oakland, California. I set myself an interim deadline, then designed an addition to my own addition. Melissa had used these same deadlines and changed the function of her thesis building, from a firehouse, to a church, to a school, in order to test flexibility in design. Cathy's thesis had been a Quaker meetinghouse. Our thesis projects provided plenty of opportunities for discussion on the trip. We agreed on one thing: that the projects would have been much better had we finished them after drawing two or three thousand other buildings.

Lesson #6: I like places that presume people as users.

This lesson excludes a lot of work by famous architects, but to me the best places seem to just hap-
pen. We tried to capture this in our drawings, although none of this was obvious at the time. It has only been in poring over hundreds of my drawings to put this article together, which began as a lecture for the second-year design studio at McGill, that my earlier preoccupation with people congregating has become evident.

Melissa: Looking back I see a collection of drawings which continually contrasts the quotidian with the canonical. People seem to occupy the centre. My attention did not always gravitate to the "monuments." Instead, I found the convergence of other basic needs, food and social interaction, with architecture to be most compelling.

Communication lies at the heart of all meaningful relationships—people to buildings, architects (or students) to clients, and drawings to physical reality. Drawing has the potential to encourage connections to other people, to places, and to a clearer understanding of how one's own perceptions may be applied in design.

Architects draw to create, assess and describe ideas about buildings. But few architects draw frequently, if at all, from life. It is this activity which fosters a reciprocal relationship between drawing and critical vision, and lends the capacity to quickly evaluate the built environment. As professionals whose existence is defined by the shaping of space, we must be skilled readers of how buildings affect our perception. Drawing in its most intimate sense is a connective tool. In my explorations drawing is a social device focusing attention upon formal, experiential relationships which define the most memorable aspect of places. The resulting image is a recollection of a total experience, calling precise attention to its unique architectural aspect.

In a world in which information is transferred and acquired electronically, it is easy to overlook that how one acquires information has great effect upon the depth of retention. There is no substitute for long hours of shifting between existing realities and those constructed visually. The aim is to prime and refine the intuitive sense. To develop the necessary empathetic sensibilities and critical vision through regular drawing from life may encourage the production of buildings that resonate rather than compete with the rhythms of our lives.
To keep both experiential and formal considerations afloat in the design process, fluency in visual analysis of existing buildings is essential. The way these drawings are produced, and the actual drawings themselves, promote for both architect and viewer an awareness of architecture’s relationship to people. Three characteristics define drawing as a tool for visual inquiry. First, the crucial views of plan and section drawings should embody comprehensive information (fig. 26). These initial drawings must be done from life, in situ, where the body (i.e. hand) is the primary translating device between reality and its two-dimensional representation. Secondly, the drawing technique and the choice of view determine the didactic potential of the work. Each medium has inherent properties just as building materials do. Oil pastel, for instance, is remarkably flexible but resistant to fine motor work. With a bulky stick in hand, one may not see specific architectural details that might be called for. Finally, the drawing should reveal the salient characteristics of a particular place or building by abstracting the physical characteristics into colour, shape and texture (fig. 27). Respect for formal principles of composition, color interaction, and linear weight allows the drawing to articulate guidance in the further process of design.

Annmarie: **Lesson #7: Study the entire oeuvre of an architect.**

What a luxury. I’ve been fortunate enough to visit many of the major buildings of Le Corbusier, including those in Japan, and also to have seen most of the work of Alvar Aalto, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Julia Morgan. These are more as a result of travel opportunities than any special interest in these particular architects, with the exception of Morgan. In any case, like most architects educated in the postmodern era, I went to Corbu prepared not to like his buildings. This photograph shows Melissa drawing his grave (fig. 28). Much to my surprise, I loved La Tourette (again, perhaps because we were able to stay there a while), and many of Corbu’s houses, especially the use of materials, the lighting, the little details. Because we were drawing the buildings, and not just looking at them, I realized how much Corbu’s buildings resemble drawings of buildings. When I look back on the journals thirteen years later, I’m astonished at the discipline we showed and at the depth of our stud-
ies. No wonder somebody had thought we were good students.

Lesson #8: Have heroes.

I’d like to conclude by saying a few words about heroes. I had been in Joe Esherick’s last studio at Berkeley just before setting off on the trip. I didn’t realize at the time just how influential he had been for me. Now that I’m a professor, I find myself returning again and again to things he said: that “dumb” (his way of saying simple) buildings are the best ones; that if you can’t figure it out in plan just forget it; that if you build on the best part of the site it’s gone.

And I guess his architectural ideas probably affected me through a kind of osmosis, too, since Joe had been a member of the team that had designed the 1964 building in which I had studied for so many years, Wurster Hall, famous as the ugliest building on the Berkeley campus. The general idea behind this most brutal of Brutalist buildings is that the architects left it unfinished, a shell for others (read students) to complete. Besides its reputation for ugliness, Wurster Hall is also much celebrated for its graffiti (figs. 29-30). Like everything at Berkeley, its very existence invites commentary.

Wurster Hall is not a precious space. There are no beautiful moldings, no expensive materials, no details its architect-to-be inhabitants would ever want to copy. Nobody yells at you if you cut on the floor. And the pipes, I noticed after spending three years in studio, are painted the colours they should appear in plans of mechanical systems. If anything, Wurster Hall is more like a living editorial of architectural education. It’s a building you must inhabit in order to love, and that’s why nobody at Berkeley from outside the College of Environmental Design understands it.

Not all of Joe’s buildings are so brutal. The smallest building on the Berkeley campus, the Pelican Building, is also his design. It accommodates the student newspaper, pays homage to the Spanish Revival architectural traditions of the area, and recalls other masters of the region like Bernard Maybeck, who, like Joe, used industrial materials in a rather irreverent way.

Joe’s most famous projects, however, in addition to his 1968 re-use of The Cannery in San Francisco, are probably his houses at Sea Ranch, a few hours up the coast from the Bay Area. As his students, we designed houses for two sites at Sea Ranch. As part of the project, we had a chance to stay in the famous Sea Ranch condominium, designed in 1964 by MTLW (Charles Moore, Donlyn Lyndon, William Turnbull, and Richard Whitaker). Later I learned that the structural bays of the condominium had been determined by the architects while they were playing with sugar cubes. Looking at Joe’s houses at Sea Ranch, which seemed to come from more human concerns, made me realize that the best buildings, in my burgeoning architectural opinion, were those that began with an architectural idea, rather than one drawn from another realm, such as sugar. I still believe this.

The same impulse which made me begin this essay with my penchant for connect-the-dots has convinced me to end by mentioning another hero, Julia Morgan. She’s best known as the architect of Hearst Castle, but as I mentioned, I worked on her library at Mills for my thesis and this gave me the chance to do some research on her design process. This was difficult to do, since she burned all her papers before she died in 1957, ensuring that we would know her only through her buildings. And although this absence of documentation made my research more difficult, I realized now that she was right to do it. It forced architecture students like me to get out of the classroom and to judge her work through real buildings.

Melissa went to work for Esherick Homsey Dodge and Davis (EHDD) in San Francisco when we got back in 1986; she accepted a full-time teaching job in 1990. Cathy is now Senior Associate at EHDD. I went back to school in the fall of 1986 and tried to win more scholarships like the Branner. In 1990, I started teaching at McGill, where Peter Collins’ history course had first sparked my interest in architecture. Things had come full circle.

Lesson #9: Students always learn much more from their classmates than from their professors, although some day what teachers said may make sense.

Dead architects have things to say, too.

Lesson #10? Apply for travel grants.

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