

boredom

Boredom and Impotence. How absurd, to be ruminating on these themes while laying back in the verdant meadows of Hyde Park on a blue sky London day.

In a brief gap after lunch in London, we had wandered to the park in the hope of glimpsing this year's Serpentine Pavilion in progress. With the construction site hidden away behind hoardings, we satisfied ourselves in the gallery bookshop. I picked up two books: *Boredom - Documents of Contemporary Art* a collection of essays and critical reflections on the subject of boredom edited by Tom McDonough and *Futurability The Age of Impotence and the Horizon of Possibility* by Franco Berardi, an Italian theorist ruminating on how we can imagine an emancipatory vision for the future amongst the crowded landscape of impotence stuck between neoliberalism and a Trump / Brexit / Putin flavored new order.

Perhaps these topics attracted me in this moment as they felt so distant. I was enjoying the privilege of dedicating two weeks to experiencing architecture, the city and travel with such intense indulgence and the great stroke of luck (or great planning)

that pre-supplied thoughtful, open and superbly talented traveling companions that were as stoked to be there as I was.

Despite my personal privilege and hyperbole-laced good times however, the themes of boredom and impotence still resonated. This bleak discourse about the city echoes those occurring more broadly in society and politics. The threat of homogenisation, local isolationism and protectionism, staggering inequality and structural unfairness.

While reading *Boredom - Documents of Contemporary Art*, the following passage struck a particular chord:

“ We are bored in the city, there is no longer any Temple of the Sun. Between the legs of the women walking by, the dadaists imagined a monkey wrench and he surrealists a crystal cup. That's lost... The poetry of the billboards lasted twenty years. We are bored in the city, we really have to strain to still discover mysteries on the pavement billboards, the latest state of humour and poetry”

Ivan Chatcheglov Formulary for a New Urbanism 1953

I identify with this boring city. Pedestrian shopping streets touting the same wares from Brisbane to Barcelona: H&M, Tiffanies, Sephora and Gucci. Private space masquerading as public space where the size and nature of inhabitation is tightly controlled. Generic placeless residential complexes for the elite. These cities can be seen as a symptom of an ideological and political climate that result in feelings of boredom and impotence.

In this particular trip however I felt I was able to see another side of cities. Places that were resilient against urban apathy. Spaces where humour and poetry existed as did beauty, joy and experimentation. This revelation came from how we traveled and who we traveled with. We moved through the city consciously with eyes and minds fully open. We traveled as a group of strangers who had a shared appetite for the city, it's stories and it's people. Facilitated by the thoughtful planning of both Dulux and the Australian Institute of Architects, we were greeted in Barcelona, London and Prague by local architects who treated us as colleagues and equals. We were invited into studios, construction sites, iconic buildings and hidden corners.

The real key to finding these resilient cities was through the relationships that opened doors and the time invested in (and by) us to connect in meaningful ways. When I think about it, I really do believe that the Temple of The Sun still exists in our cities but that temple is built new everyday with time and mutual endeavour. The remedy to boredom and apathy is conscious and generous engagement in the city. The 11 days of the Dulux study tour were ecstatic with an energy that excited our collective consciousness about how architecture can create transform the places in which we live and which we love into non-boring, non-impotent cities.

This post-tour repost gives an account of our time under the themes of; Bearings / Connection / Common Ground and The In-between. This is not a comprehensive or chronological account, rather a reflection on how we traveled, the connections formed and the provocations and inspirations that continue to resonate.

Bearings.

City Tours: an anchor in a city.

In each city of the Dulux Study Tour we spent the first day getting out bearings with a city tour. These big-picture introductions were hosted by local experts; an urbanist, historian and architect for Barcelona, London and Prague respectively. To traverse the city with a local gave us bearing in the city that was comprised of not only the urban fabric of buildings, streets and layered histories, but also a bearing on the life of the city through the eyes of a local.

Barcelona

In Barcelona, we explored the city by bike. The pace of the bicycle and the accommodating infrastructure of dedicated bike lanes meant that we were able to cover a lot of ground. We traced a huge loop through the city, drawing a path through the mess and intensity of the medieval city, the industrial revolution and the revolutionary city expansion via the Cerda city block, the optimism and re-connection with the ocean in preparation for the 1991 Barcelona Olympics up to the present day including contemporary works particularly concentrated around The Forum area. Aided by a map scribbled on the back of a napkin over lunch in a suburban square,

this looping trajectory provided us with the bearings in the urban fabric and history of the city. Our guide Jaume Carné is a Barcelona local, architect and urbanist and he approached this tour with a mix of enthusiasm and cynicism reserved for a devoted local. His candid nature allowed the group to get a little closer to peering under the skin of this tourist saturated city. Is Gaudi a blessing or a curse for Barcelona architects? Is a privately funded park really public space? Can we acknowledge the brilliance of Enric Miralles and still be critical of his work? It was these provocative -and often open ended- discussions that allowed us to get our bearings in the architectural and urban life of the city.

London

We arrived into London the day after the Manchester terrorist attacks and in the middle of a summer heat wave. Streets spilled over with unbridled sunny-day exuberance shared by beer-toting revelers and armed soldiers. David Garrard, an academic and specialist in architectural conservation was our city guide who carved a path through the city on the Tube, by black taxi, Uber and on foot Britishly



Detail from Diagonal Mar Park by Miralles Tagliabue EMBT



Roof by José Antonio Martínez Lapeña & Elías Torres Architects

impassive to the mood of the city. At the time, the logic of David's tour eluded me. It felt like we were pin-balling around the city crossing centuries, empires and revolutions in a heartbeat. The places where we paused were fascinating but disconnected and de-contextualised. Walmer Yard a collection of 4 intricately crafted town houses that boggled the mind in complexity and expression. Indeed these 4 small houses, saturated with moving parts, colossal concrete canyons, riotous colours and fleshy leather have provoked some of the strongest but unresolved reflections of the entire tour. A taxi-ride away we visited John Pawson's Design Museum, an austere insertion into the sinuous curves of a 1962 double parabolic concrete shell roof. Beauty aside, larger questions about provision of affordable housing and the wheeling and dealing of clients and council that involved Rem Koolhaas and John Pawson were hinted at but never elaborated. A long lunch was held in the restaurant at the top of the new extension to the Tate Modern by Herzog & de Meuron, so long in fact that we literally needed to dash past the new folding brick facade, through the monumental atrium of

the Tate proper, past the tanks into the lifts only to linger in the restaurant to ponder the panoramic views of the city including some very intimate views into the living rooms of nearby apartments. The afternoon was spent on foot bouncing around between some of the cities iconic, nicknamed towers; 20 Fenchurch St (Walkie Talkie), 122 Leadenhall St (Cheese Grater) and finally 30 St Mary Axe (Gherkin).

On reflection, perhaps this glancing tour is as much as London can reveal in one day. Our penultimate stop of the day, to enjoy sunset cocktails at the top of the Gherkin left us to wonder at the complexity and impenetrability of the city we had just spent 8 hours traversing in the impossibly long twilight.

Prague

On a free afternoon, the day before the Prague city tour, the group had explored the city on our own and were shocked by the density of red-faced tipsy tourists backed up through the old city centre distracting and at times obscuring the intense beauty of the city. The next day, our city tour guide and practicing architect Marcela

Steinbachova guided us back through the same small area but deftly avoided the tourists as only a local can. We conducted parallel discussions that examined both the styles in the city - functionalism, cubism, art deco, baroque and contemporary - and also about the structure of the city - covered arcades, plazas and squares, towers and alleys.

We navigated the city via these covered arcades and hidden shortcuts. The city showed us so much in its immaculate preservation which is a result of its escape from the ravages of the urban destruction during the second world war but also concealed so much through the overlapping primary and secondary public spaces at street level.

Marcela showed us a sublimely beautiful city that was able to proudly tell stories of centuries of mixing cultures and trade and a strong national identity. Perhaps as the smallest of the 3 cities we visited, I felt that we really connected with the soul of the place which was a far cry from the beer soaked, saccharine pretty postcard we glimpsed on the first afternoon.



Lloyd's of London Building by Richard Rogers

Connection

Building visits and the way being in a space forms connections.

Architects are tactile beings. Uninvited we run our hands along the walls, probe gaps and shadows, open cupboards and wander off the path. We can also be creatures of habit; visiting and returning to the same projects and types of spaces that compel us. One of the unexpected pleasures of this trip was to be thrown into buildings and places that were selected on our behalf. There were some comforting visits to modernist and contemporary classics such as The Barcelona Pavilion by Mies van der Rohe and Mercat de Santa Caterina by Miralles Tagliabue EMBT. But there were the most unexpected others; Walden 7 by Ricardo Bofill, Walmer Yard by Peter Salter and Prague Castle among others.

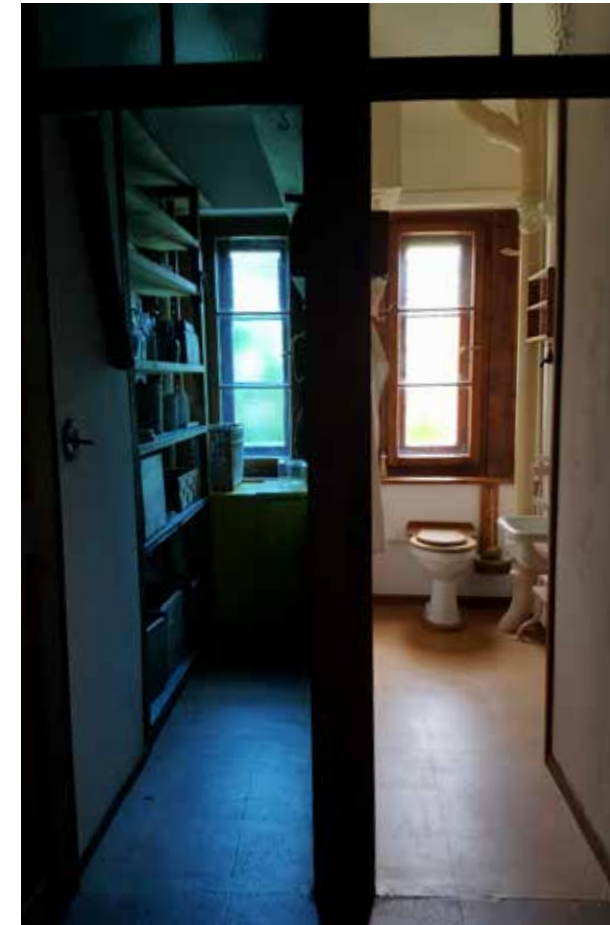
To arrive at these places without the fussy pre-meditation of a holiday itinerary meant the experience was direct and unpolluted by expectation or pre judgement. One one hand I could connect directly with a visceral experience; Walden 7 gave me vertigo and forced my back against rough rendered walls with sweaty palms. Villa Rothmayer genuinely moved me as I was seduced by my imagination of a family life

in sun drenched rooms. On the other hand, we had the benefit of traveling together as a group and the shared experiences of exploring these spaces together. My experience was enriched by each shared observation. Louisa searching earnestly in Walmer Yard for closet space, while Morgan interrogated a cupboard door handle. A lengthy discussion if Jože Plečnik could be simultaneously a post modern and a pre modern architect with Kaitlin and Clair standing outside the colossal Church of the Most Sacred Heart of Our Lord.

After all, we are architects and seduced by the craft of what we do. The building tours provided punctuation and moments of connection to place throughout the tour. The shifts in scale and typology lead to unexpected comparisons – The grandeur and fuss Antonio Gaudi's Sagrada Familia with Jože Plečnik's fine scale interventions at Prague Castle. The protected internal courtyards of Gardunya Square by Estudio Carme Pinos against the colossal internal voids of Walden 7 by Ricardo Bofill.



Walmer Yard by Peter Salter



Villa Rothmayer by Otto Rothmayer

Common Ground.

Practice visits and the inevitable search to recognise your own practice in other architects.

To be welcomed into an architecture practice on the other side of the world you shift instantly from the unfamiliar streets of a foreign city to an intimately familiar landscape. From practices of 1000 people to that of 4 people we all tend to share a tendency towards cluttered desks, half-made models and piles of tracing paper. It is in this familiar / unfamiliar space that I found myself searching to recognise my own practice.

The offices where we spoke candidly about the very basic things of architectural practice were reassuring; council approval processes, client frustrations, exciting new materials and the constant endeavour to push, explore and experiment. Studio Octopi in London were particularly generous with their time and were able to show us how they tempered some of the routine aspects of architectural practice with an experimental and entrepreneurial approach to researching and speculating on subjects of interest to them such as public bathing in the Thames.

AL_A – also in London - indulged our curiosity in their model driven process and

were one of the few practices we visited where it felt like the practice was abuzz with energy and production. Project teams gathered and crouched around enormous drawings on the pink carpet, giving a real insight into the intensity and collaboration that AL_A are known for.

At the other end of the scale, the un-familiar parts of some of the practices we saw were astounding. Foster & Partners in London is unlike any other architecture practice I have ever witnessed. The 1000 person strong workplace was overwhelming in scale and complexity. My preconceptions that an office of this scale must be a de-humanising machine were challenged and completely disarmed speaking to full time architectural illustrator, Narinder Sagoo. I connected immediately with the giant drawings on his drawing board and was blown away by the animated illustrations he was crafting by hand and recording on his i-pad. The overall impression of the practice was like the amplification of all the familiar parts of my own practice but played out to an extreme of complexity and resolution that was an inspiring challenge to imagine the potential futures of practice.



Drawing by Narinder Sagoo - Fosters & Partners



The office of Miralles Tagliabue EMBT

The Inbetween

Wandering / discussing / eating

The times in-between the scheduled visits of the study tour were as rich with meaning and connection as the structured parts of the trip. As a group we filled these incidental times wandering, discussing and eating.

On the Study Tour, wandering signified a change in pace and a switch of focus from destination to journey. We would wander back to the hotel after dinner, or wander off in a free hour to seek out a sunny corner or a briefly mentioned project that piqued our interest. For me, this time spent walking through Barcelona, London and Prague is where the insights and observations of the day crystallised. Disparate observations or sights glimpsed from a moving taxi, came together to form experiences and connections with the place.

The evening of wandering that made the strongest impression was walking through Prague in search of a night cap in a bar Marcela had shown us earlier in the day. In the process of getting lost for about an hour in a 4 block radius the city became mysterious and exiting. The day with Marcela became dream-like. My impressions of Prague now, are filled by

a sense of wonder and romantic beauty created by this evening of whispered discussions in the dimly lit bar filled with tango dancing locals.

Amongst the frantic schedule and journeys through the cities, moments of stillness were carved out over food, wine and conversation. In this stillness seeds of ideas propagated and we got to know each other.

On Reflection

These three cities were completely non-boring and non-impotent. The collective consciousness of our group illuminated the humour, poetry, beauty, joy and experimentation in the streets and in the hearts of our European counterparts. The most potent reflection from the tour is on a renewed commitment to engaging in my work as an architect with curiosity and an appetite to make my contribution to a city where a Temple of the Sun can be built in an afternoon and mysteries and abstracted visions crowd the pavement.

