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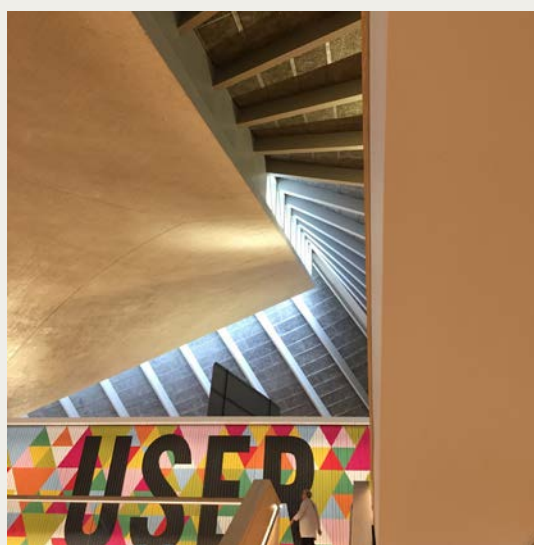
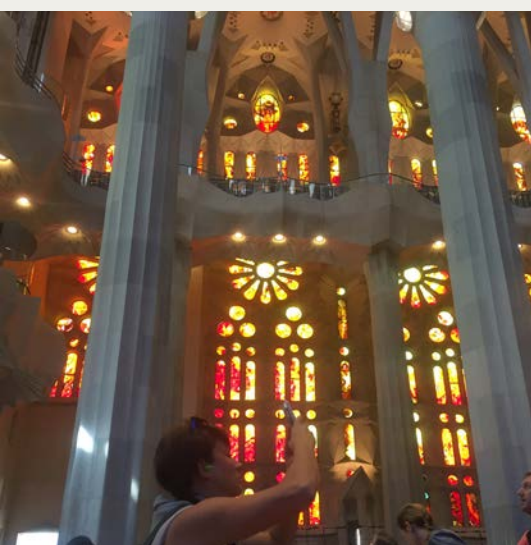
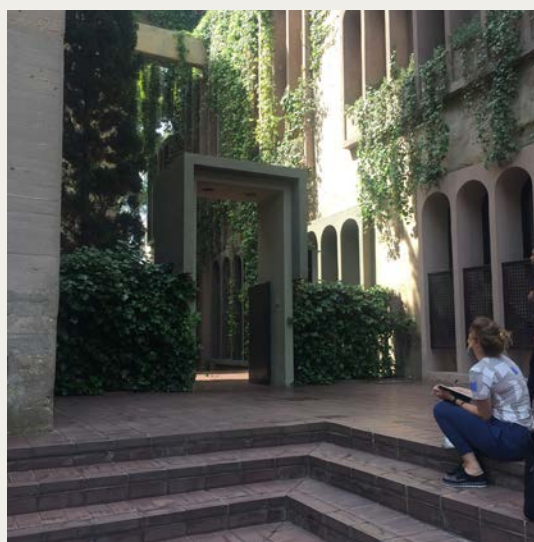
In a culture that is increasing global, I was interested in the local and the specific. Dulux Study Tour was a unique opportunity to connect with 'the local' in an international context. I was keen to make the most of the opportunity to speak with overseas practices, and understand what shapes their work at a deeper level, beyond what we see in the photos and plans. I hope to learn from their methods, and reflect on these to form a richer understanding of our context back home.

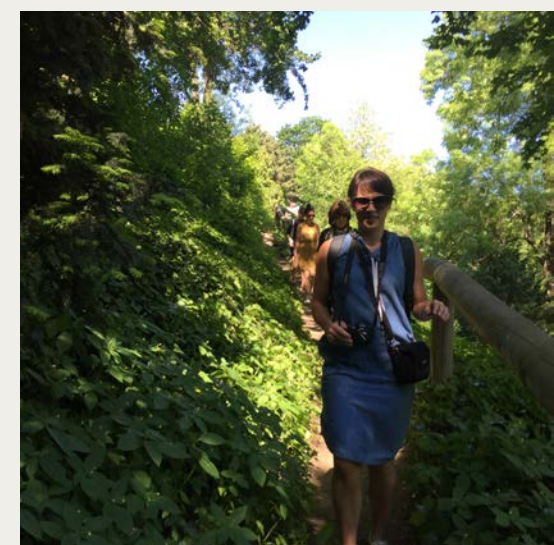
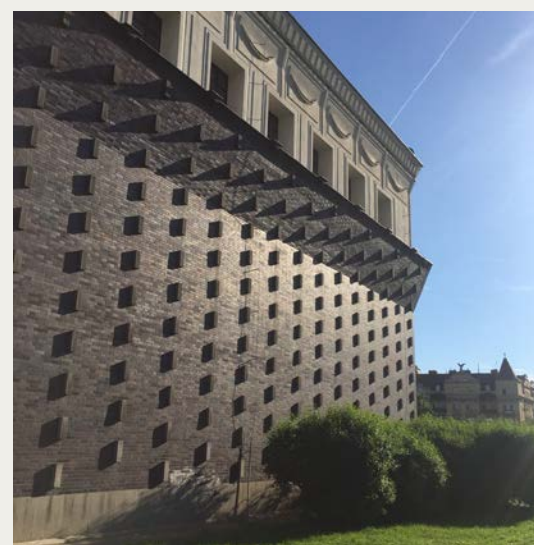
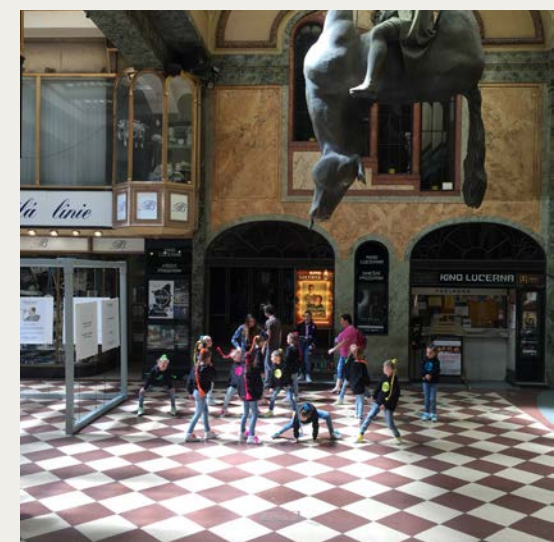
Upon reflection traveling in quick succession to 3 countries provided us with a brief insight or soundbite into the prevailing forces of architecture in that city. Distilling our trip down to the most relevant architecture to visit the differences were striking, and unexpected.

Barcelona gave great hope in the relevance of architecture in the public realm, as well as the strong connection between architecture and government. Most of the project we saw were contributing to public space, or were public institutions. I was surprised that a city where I had expected less building due to economy, development was everywhere and much of it was funded from the public purse.

In stark contrast London was ripe with commercial growth. Many of the buildings we visited were city towers, each pitching to make their mark on the London skyline. Reduced to a memorable one liner, it felt like architecture was simplified as an attempt to be relevant and engage with the inhabitants of the city. Amongst this though were practices finding alternative ways to deliver thoughtful projects. Both DDRM and Studio Octopi worked opportunistically to piggyback off other commercial developments to find space for architecture.

Prague again left me with greater curiosity. With an emphasis on the older and more historic works, it was difficult to see where the contemporary architecture found its place. New projects were in recent subdivisions, where the scale and density seemed in opposition to the old city. Our walk with local architect Martin showed us some very particular qualities in Prague's urban fabric that have really stayed with me. The notion of secondary circulations; an overlay to the obvious.





DAY 3

designing for the city or as a city? dulux study tour blog

There are some projects that require you to interrogate further your own values in order to devise your opinion. These projects are polarizing, difficult, and are the ones that make an impression. The Walden 7 housing development by Ricardo Bofill was one of these projects, and with its monumental red-tiled facade, and sci-fi references, was our first visit for the day.

A speculative, low-cost housing development, Walden 7 was a utopian vision for a fringe community outside Barcelona. The 14 levels of the building contain 446 individual and unique apartments bound together by a labyrinthine plan – including 6 kilometers of external corridors.

To greet us is the enigmatic Alessandra, a resident at Walden 7 for over 25 years. She whisks us from the bright Barcelona light into the heart of the building to begin our journey to enlightenment. We make our accent, like pilgrims, winding up to the terrace on the roof. This journey is incredibly animated, as we are captivated at each turn. Breaks in the terracotta walls give views out over the surrounding landscape and bridges over the voids remind us of where we are. Moving from dark and narrow stairs, across projecting bridges and balconies, every step opens up new connections and vistas. We take lots of photos, and try to imagine the people living here.

Our next stop is just 100 meters down the road to a decommissioned cement factory where we find the office of Riccardo Bofill Architects. Walking through this industrial ruin overgrown with plants, gives the impression of wandering through a film set. It is a quiet and monastic space.

Back in the taxi we head to Santa Caterina Market, a building that has teased us with glimpses of its colourful roof as we have been wandering the city over the last few days. We met with Arturo and Gabriella from EMBT who talk us through the development of the project.

The roof is incredibly expressive and clad with bright colours. With an intent to reflect what is held within, a photo of fresh produce is abstracted to a pixelated pattern in 72 colours of local ceramic tiles that have been laid over a complex timber and steel roof frame. There is a bacalao washing station at the back of the market that I particularly take delight in; a modest celebration of a very specific and local tradition.

From here we follow them to the studio: a historical four-level building in the Gothic quarter full of models, drawings and character. Model making is integral to the practice, and myriad handmade physical models are used as the key design tool for every project before it enters the digital world. Being a believer of the physical model, I found this inspiring.

Pushing every minute to its maximum, we hurry to our next visit. Darting through the narrow streets we emerge in a square surrounded by the gray debris of construction. In the distance we see a striking woman with flowing watermelon pants, stacked sandals and silk. It is Carme Pinos. With barely a greeting, she ushers us into the construction site for Gardunya Square. Radiant and engaging, but with no nonsense, she talks us through the project. She pulls out models twice her size, and takes plans from the walls to talk us through her approach.

We tour the building in construction and are impressed by her intimate knowledge of every detail, though it was worked on by a team of many. She has a confident honesty and expressed delight in serendipitous outcomes that were not intended, as well as a frankness to less favored moments. There is a rigor to the design process to ensure the outcome was not a singular expression of the architect, evident by little discussion about the view of the buildings, and more about how they engaged and enhanced with the fabric of the city.

The visits done for the day we head to a little bar near the office of EMBT. We revisit our discussion on Walden 7, and try to frame the uncertainties in our minds through collective inquiry. Uplifting or overbearing? “Psychedelic purgatory” or sustenance for the eye and mind? There are wonderful moments, but this at the price of an over prescriptive system? There are no answers tonight but there is an energy in these discussion and a keen curiosity to keep the conversation going.

DAY 9

the alternative path dulux study tour blog

From my previous experience of Prague, I remember feeling overwhelmed by the tourists and found it near impossible to understand how someone might live here.

Royal Way is a well-trodden path set up as a direct link from the city gate, over the famous Charles Bridge to Prague castle. It is congested with groups of tourists and being there the previous night it was rowdy. A hot spot for bucks nights (perhaps due to the very affordable beer), we spotted multiple packs of men in matching t-shirts with glib slogans. Some even rode the streets sitting on a pedal-powered beer bar. Is this what Prague is?

As we met for the morning we headed towards the city. With a little anxiety about the potential of crowds, we were all relieved to take a sharp detour. Martin, local architect and our guide for the day diverted us into a “passageway.” These links were developed in the 1920s as a way to increase the commercial shop frontage, but also creates a secondary circulation through the deep block of the medieval city. Often lit from above with glazed bricks, these curious in-between spaces, neither building nor street, allow you to navigate the city in a completely different way, free from the tourists.

Unlike the street network, it forms an interrupted and disjointed pattern. As we wandered through the blocks of Prague, we learnt about the defining points in history for this city, and how they resonated in its contemporary architecture. The fabric of this city is made up of the bohemian heights of the Art Nouveau (1900s), a time of great intellectual prosperity, lush detailing and collaboration with artists; National Style (1918–1920), where the newly founded Czechoslovakia produced stoic, yet highly decorative buildings in the national colours; Cubism (early 1920s), a movement that only existed in Prague and only includes a handful of buildings; Functionalism (1920s), a movement where Prague was at the forefront (Le Corbusier travelled here at the time and thought the Czechs had already designed what was in his dreams); and post-Soviet occupation contemporary.

It felt as though architecture spoke directly of what was happening socially and the shifts were clear. Having not been bombed during the war ensured this fabric, and that of its pre-modern past, has remained intact.

We hopped on a tram to the Prague Castle, high on the hill, looming over the town. Its presence in the city is strongly felt, and been described by Kafka in the Castle as an omnipotent presence for all those of the city. Until recently it was a fortress used only for the King, but with the forming of the nation in 1918, the new president looked to Jože Plečnik (controversially a Slovenian architect) to reconsider the complex and open it up to the people. What he did was a series of highly considered and crafted insertions that gave an alternative circulation through the castle. Paths, openings and connections break through the mass of buildings to give unexpected views back to the city, and make something of small gaps. Again we manage to detour through and around the hundreds of people who have come here. We navigate the grounds not through its axial lines and dehumanising and monumental gates, but instead through a woven yet broken network of negative spaces.

Later that night, we decided on a nightcap and try to seek out a bar in those passageways we explored earlier, but without our guide they had near disappeared. With some perseverance, the keen navigation of Alberto we found one. Entering up the stairs we arrive at a mass of couples, dancing the tango together. It is a Sunday night, and the dancing is beautiful. Footwork interlocking, couples engaging and reading each others every movement without a word. The Fred and Ginger building by Frank Gehry we saw earlier is given a context, and we walk home feeling as if we have experienced a view into something of another world. Emotive, beautiful and full of curiosities, today gave us a glimpse on a life here well beyond the postcard.



In my submission for the Dulux tour, I spoke about the idea of collective learning – it was one of the elements that excited me about the tour. An in-depth exposure to international architectural practices and projects together with an invaluable opportunity to develop stronger critical connections with my peers.

When people ask me about the trip, this is the very first thing that comes to mind. Amongst the group we had studied in different cities, had varied points of reference, professional backgrounds and interests which gave our daily conversations and debates depth and rigour. A group of curious minds we were all keen to flesh out our opinions as well as those of others.

As well as this were the architects and guides that were incredibly generous and showed us an insight into their practices. Many of these experiences have stuck with me and will continue to provide me with inspiration. Being on site with Carme Pinos, and feeling the energy and commitment to her work has left a lasting impression. Seeing the rigorous pursuit at AL_A to tactical material exploration, as well the tenacity of Studio Octopi to find a way into the public realm was also inspiring.

What feels now like an eternity ago, looking back at the photos there was such an intensity and commitment to the trip that I will continue to borrow from throughout my career. It is hard to walk away from it not feeling somewhat changed. I'm excited to be a part of the growing alumni, and furthering the global connections made on the trip.

