

Aarhus School of Architecture // Design School Kolding // Royal Danish Academy

Beyond Bagging Buildings

Foote, Jonathan

Published in:

20x14. reflections on studying architecture abroad

Publication date:

2021

Document Version:

Early version, also known as pre-print

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for pulished version (APA):

Foote, J. (2021). Beyond Bagging Buildings. In *20x14. reflections on studying architecture abroad* (pp. 168-173). ORO Editions.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

AFTERWORD

Beyond Bagging Buildings

Jonathan Foote

Traveling abroad for architecture students is often likened to the nineteenth century Grand Tour. By this comparison, study abroad is a tradition whereby young travelers absorb the work of the great masters of Italy, transforming themselves in the process from students of architecture into learned and connected professionals. The mythology of the Grand Tour is no doubt the basis on which many study and travel abroad programs are based today. Thus, each new generation of architecture students seems to have a responsibility, to the extent of their means, to make a ritualized 'return' to the origins of western architecture to experience and revalidate the architectural canon, both contemporary and historical.

In today's increasingly inter-connected and complex world, however, the notion that a single canon exists for the architecture student is more tenuous than ever. The transformational basis of study abroad must therefore justify itself beyond the proverbial Grand Tour as sum of visiting important buildings curated by an architecture professor - what a former colleague once joked as "bagging buildings". The idea of stuffing buildings into one's travel bag is a humorous take on the nagging legacy of the Grand Tour, where the goal is to collect some canonical examples that can be uncritically absorbed into one's personal design language. If history is to be our teacher, however, it might behoove us to take a slightly different point of departure. For this I refer the reader to the famous 'study abroad' taken by Filippo Brunelleschi and Donatello from Firenze to Roma in the early 1400s.

The trip is remembered on account of Antonio Manetti's *Vita di Filippo Brunelleschi*, and it was later repeated and elaborated upon by Giorgio Vasari in his own biographies of Brunelleschi in 1550 and 1568. Filippo was in his mid-twenties when he departed Firenze for Roma, which in those days was a five- or six-day journey by horseback. Together with Donatello, they sought to study ancient architecture and sculpture, although it was not exactly clear what kind of knowledge would emerge from such a project. Roma at this time was a squalid and chaotic place, having shrunk from a city of over one million at the height of the Republic to less than twenty thousand in 1400. Clues to an ancient glory were abound, but after enduring nearly a millennium of abuse and neglect, the city's greatest secrets had succumbed to untold layers of mud, broken bricks, and stone fragments. Thus, the duo would spend their days primarily as excavators, an act that earned them the notoriety of the locals, who reasoned they were either looking for buried treasure or, worse, re-enacting pagan rituals of predicting the future through geomancy. Although, by our standards today, a trip from Firenze to Roma would hardly count as 'abroad', the conditions are similar: the travelers found themselves cast into a foreign urban setting, having to live by their wits in a place characterized by a strange language and inexplicable customs.

Brunelleschi brought tools with him for measuring. He measured and surveyed details, elements, and even entire buildings. He created his own secret notational system of recording his findings to the bafflement of his travel companion. Not only were they mocked and estranged by the locals, they had problems with money and lived like paupers. Donatello returned to Firenze early, but

Brunelleschi stayed on and off in Roma for several years, it seems. Vasari recounts that Filippo took no interest in eating or sleeping, as he was singularly focused on uncovering the architectural secrets of the past. He dug into mud of the Roman fora, crawled onto the roof of the Pantheon, and intently pinned his measuring compass on practically any architectural detail he could find.

Traveling to Roma at the time was common for religious pilgrims, but nobody imagined the city as a source for excavating knowledge from the pagan, ruinous landscape. Brunelleschi's trip thus represented an entirely new kind of journey - a secular 'pilgrimage' that brings about a personal transformation through knowledge gathering and purposeful otherness. In this way, although Brunelleschi ostensibly traveled to Roma to 'bag' some architecture, the conditions by which he worked indicated a much more broad and abundant learning process. Unlike the travelers of the Grand Tour, the sites and experiences were not pre-curated or determined ahead of time through a guide book or atelier master. Rather, for Brunelleschi, the struggles and strangeness of living abroad were linked intimately with the task of discovering architecture. This duality promotes a vision of study abroad that is not based on canonical learning but rather on becoming an architect through challenging one's cultural boundaries, inventing solutions amidst uncertainty, and taking command of one's personal curiosities.

It becomes quite entertaining, then, to link some of Brunelleschi's activities with a few of the anecdotes of this book, itself emitted from the city where Filippo called home. For instance, in recording and inventing ways to record one's surroundings, we can easily refer back to chapter five ('B.Y.O.S! Bring Your Own ... Sketchbook'), on the importance of learning to sketch, or chapter seven ('Steal! And then Return Like the Bees do'), on how studying great buildings or ideas of the past forges a path toward the re-invention of those ideas in new ways. I also am reminded in chapters nine ('Fall in Love!') and thirteen ('Get Your Hands Dirty') of how Brunelleschi eschewed the pleasures of eating and sleeping and singularly focused on architecture while in Roma, using his physical and mental resourcefulness to excavate knowledge and new ideas wherever they could be found. And finally, when following the advice in chapter sixteen ('How Tall is a Chair in Centimeters') to carry a metric ruler and measure common objects, Brunelleschi's obsessions with first-hand knowledge of measures and proportions comes to mind. The astute reader will no doubt find many other connections between Brunelleschi's journey and the opportunities for an architecture student to study abroad today.

Although Brunelleschi arrived to measure the monuments, they were not tourist attractions like today. He literally had to excavate the city to find them. Quite apart from 'bagging' his findings, Filippo had to take tools out of his bag and actively engage with his context. Today, with the monuments on full display, framed by guidebooks and regulated by ticket sales, the discerning student can re-live Brunelleschi's journey not by focusing on the great buildings of the past but by doing their own digging. Your tools: a sketchbook, an open mind, and the tenacity to follow your measuring stick and shovel, wherever it may take you.