

## Time, Travel, Documentation

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*“Oh, the wonders of photography! Good old lens: what a fantastic additional eye. I bought myself a terrific camera. Working with it is quite a business but the results are perfect. Since April I haven’t spoiled a single plate.” Charles-Édouard Jeanneret, Letter to L’Éplattenier, Fondation Le Corbusier, Paris (Benton, 2013)*

*“When one travels and works with visual things—architecture, painting or sculpture—one uses one’s eyes and draws, so as to fix deep down in one’s experience what is seen. Once the impression has been recorded by the pencil, it stays for good—entered, registered, inscribed. The camera is a tool for idlers who use a machine to do their seeing for them.” Le Corbusier, Creation is a Patient Search*

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### INTRODUCTION

While some travel immersive architecture programs focus on ‘drawing from travel’ as a primary component of the academic experience, an alternate approach is to promote independent methods of travel documentation. Encouraging the use of multiple mediums, including the camera of the mobile phone, reconciles the desire to see as much as possible with a productive engagement in the seeing and experiencing of architecture in context. The goal is to have students take ownership of the experience itself through their use of a variety of media.

Historically, the architectural Grand Tour was a self-directed study of monuments and master works undertaken as a capstone to a professional education. Since the late 1960’s, elite universities have offered residency semesters abroad, in places like Rome, Florence and Paris, that emulated the American Academy in Rome with its focus on classical architecture as a foundation of western culture. More recently, travel has become a fluid and integral component of the academic experience. The length of travel and the focus ranges from brief site studies for a studio project or research seminar to history surveys and drawing courses. Yet, the travel recording methods retain much of the legacy of the Grand Tour.

Today’s academic travel provides the opportunity to explore travel documentation as a subject of architectural study. The act of recording should be as Le Corbusier described *“une chose active,”* an active thing, a way of developing one’s own expertise. The published travel sketches of Le Corbusier, Louis Kahn, Alvar Aalto, Michael Graves, Alvaro Siza, and Charles Rennie Mackintosh are aspirational for the variety of subjects and the techniques of drawing and sketching which differ according to the context and the eye, hand and interests of the producer. Their authenticity recommends their study as valuable resources.

In contrast, the stylized version of the ‘travel sketch,’ popularized in the 1970’s and 80’s, using felt and fountain pens with marker and watercolor washes is the most commonly endorsed travel drawing technique of the architect/architecture student. This style of sketching, linked to post-modernism, prioritizes shared public pedestrian space and the architecture that supports it recalling ideas of

human-scale, ornamentation, and context. One must question a stylized drawing techniques' ability to draw out an individual point of view or engagement. With current interests in architecture framed by fast urbanization and mega-cities, sustainability and energy, regionalism and materiality, models of emerging practices, local and global architecture, what is the technique for documenting the complexities of today's architectural environment?

What does it mean to travel, see, and record? How do we encourage students to develop "*une chose active*." Le Corbusier in his journey to the East wrote letters and columns for his hometown newspaper, maintained sketchbooks, made paintings and documented sites through photography. Students should consider their methods of recording as a way of seeing and taking note of the things they encounter. Investing in both the observation and the method as a productive endeavor looks to find a balance between what is observed and what is retained.

## LEARNING FROM LE CORBUSIER

In conceiving of a course that would complement visiting the work of Le Corbusier in four countries, it was appropriate to reflect on Le Corbusier's own informative travel production (1907-1911). The travel years for the young Charles-Edouard Jeanneret represented a period of transition from formal education in drawing and the decorative arts to self-education in architecture.

His first trip to Northern Italy, with his classmate Léon Perrin, conformed to a normative concept of the Grand Tour. His media for documentation was very closely related to his academic training—detailed pencil drawings with hand written notes and watercolor washes mostly on loose papers. Small studies were made on 16 x 20 cm watercolor paper and detailed work on larger 25 x 32 cm sheets. The subject of the work included paintings, sculptures and the decorative details of building facades, portals and interiors. There is a clear extension of his work from L'École d'art. While the trip did not include Rome as the common destination of the Grand Tour, Jeanneret in contemplating architecture as a profession traveled instead to Vienna to see the work of Josef Hoffman and Otto Wagner.

He used the drawings and paintings from his first trip to attain an apprenticeship in the office of Auguste Perret. It is while in Paris that he made his first use of a pocket-sized sketchbook. After working as an apprentice for Auguste Perret, Jeanneret returned to the La Chaux-de-Fonds and then traveled to Germany on two research projects under the guidance of his mentor Charles L'Épplatenier. The research involved a quick pace of travel, a significant amount of writing and the need for visual note taking to capture the structure of urban space. He began to draw on the backs of post cards and to carry, what would become his signature carnets or, sketchbooks, of which he filled six on this trip. The research trip productively linked drawing, note taking and writing with the purpose of reporting on urban spaces and schools of decorative arts. His drawing techniques differ when studying urban conditions compared to building forms. In general, the drawings are more abstract than his earlier travel work. The more detailed work is still done on loose sheets.

The journey to the East, in 1911 for 24 year old, Jeanneret, traveling with August Klipstein, was in his words "his most decisive year of growth as an artist and an architect"(Le Corbusier, 1987). Klipstein, a painter and student writing his dissertation in art history, and Jeanneret set out on what Adolf Max Vogt and Radka Donnell describe as the "Reversed" Grand Tour with Constantinople as their destinations. Unlike the Grand Tour, where all roads lead to Rome, that romanticized the south as beautifully warm, culturally rich and lacking in progress, the trip to the East, represented a freedom of personal quest, an indication that high art and folk art co-exist. Klipstein's own unpublished travel journal, *Orient-Reise*, offers a reading of the trip in which art history and travel experiences co-mingle. Klipstein's own study under art historian Wilhelm Worringer included his bringing *Abstraction and Empathy* along on the trip. This text valued the art of the abstract primitivism and empathetic realism equally and generated interest in the art of Africa and Southeast Asia. As travel companions, each was

seeking the freedom to challenge the academic constructs of art, architecture and culture through their own productive lens (Vogt and Donnell, 1987).

Le Corbusier had developed his drawing and observational skills in his earlier travels. He was not burdened with his previous research agenda but he now had new expertise in architectural production from the offices of Perret and Peter Behrens. His skill at analytic and reductive drawing had advanced beyond the need to record every detail or to represent things realistically. Le Corbusier was free to use all the media he could handle to convey his travel experience (Brillhart, 2016). He wrote letters to family and mentors, articles for the newspaper *La Feuille d'Avis* in La Chaux-de-Fonds; and photographed, sketched and painted landscapes, buildings, people, and places.

The publications of Giuliano Gresleri, *Le Corbusier, Viaggio in Oriente* and Tim Benton's *Le Corbusier Secret Photographer*, shed light on the photographs produced during Jeanneret's travels. Benton concludes from the material evidence that Jeanneret used three different cameras from 1907-1917. Two involved tripods and one was a handheld device. All involved a serious commitment to the technical production of photographs from camera operation to developing the images him self. His letters from Italy indicate dissatisfaction for the quality of the images and a preference for his own drawings ability to take him back in memory (Colomina, 1987). On his trip to Vienna, he also remarks on the quality of photographs being better than the actual interiors of Josef Hoffman. In this way, he sees photographs both diminish the experience of a place he preferred and improving the quality of place he did not find appealing. The power of photographic manipulation is not lost on Jeanneret.

For his trip to the East, he tries his hand at glass plates seeking a more polished or professional image from that which he achieved in Italy. At much expense, he no longer develops the plates himself and the results are quite improved. But he abandons the glass plate camera for a Kodak Brownie upon arrival in Naples. Despite Le Corbusier's own words declaring the camera a tool for idlers, the 600 photos published by Gresleri affirm its extensive use while traveling. Beatrice Colomina notes his willingness to draw from photographs as well as his use of altered images in later publications that remove the background or context from a subject. Benton suggests that after investing and learning the photographic process, Jeanneret took to the less cumbersome and professional obligations of the glass plate for the looser hand held visual note taking of the Brownie at the same time his drawings were becoming increasingly more analytical. His travels from 1936-38 also involved photography and movie making. One can only imagine that the 39-year-old writer of *Vers une Architecture* with his interests in liners, planes, automobiles and mass production houses would have a similar fascination with the camera as a mechanized device.

The recordings, of this six-month voyage to the East, are the foundation of his non-academic method of working (Colomina, 1987). After two failed attempts by Jeanneret to publish the work in 1912 and 1914, the body of work edited by Le Corbusier was published by Jean Petit as *Le Voyage d'Orient* in 1966. It captures the critical moment when Le Corbusier commits to a life work in architecture, theory and writing. That the work of Jeanneret from 1911 appears in his final publication *Creation is a Patient Search* is testament to the value Le Corbusier placed on the recordings made on his travels.

The formation of Le Corbusier as author, artist, architect, and planner emerges in his travel documentation--writing, drawing/painting and photography. The reproduced drawings of Jeanneret from 1907-11 show a significant progression from a student of art and design seeking to master skills to an observer of life, buildings, landscapes and urban space producing analytical drawings, visual notes and abstract representations. His 73+ carnets are a testament to a working method that began on the backs of post cards and persisted for 55 years in the pocket sketchbook. His initial forays into writing for *La Feuille d'Avis* gave rise to Jeanneret/Le Corbusier production of 35 books as a writer, theorist, and publicist beginning with his research in Germany of 1911, *Étude Sur Le Mouvement D'Art Décoratif*

*en Allemagne*. His photographs contribute to the narrative of his interest in the local experience of place, whether it concern form, light or culture.

## REFLECTIVE RECORDINGS

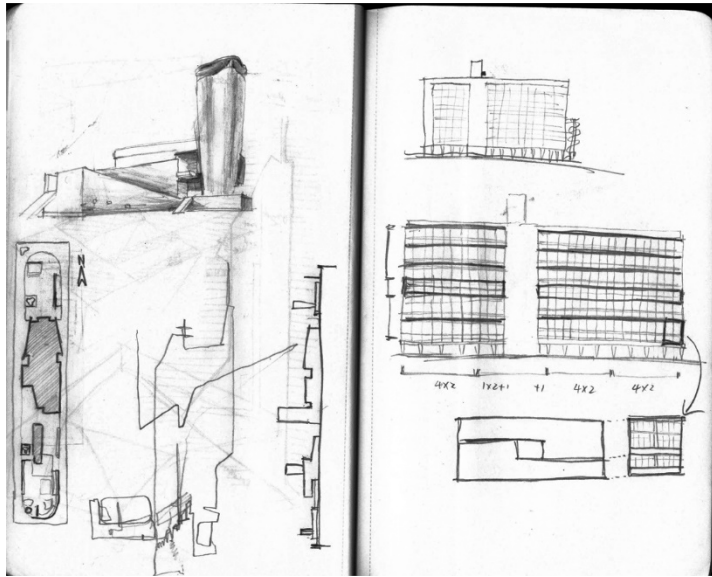


Figure 1 Sketchbook, Yang Kang

The product of Charles-Édouard Jeanneret's seminal trip stands as a formidable challenge to all architects and artists who travel to discover through their own lens. And while Le Corbusier's travel was self-initiated and free of university protocol, one might consider how to instill the sense of independent drive and discovery in a credit-based course entitled Reflective Recordings. The aim of such a course is to present some alternatives to travel sketching that embrace media, medium and method. Assignments that promote sketchbook development, photography and photomontage, writing and correspondence, mapping and interventions prompt the use of multiple mediums to help students develop individual methods of reflection and recording that align with their interests.

The goal is that students invest in both the observation and the method of recording as a productive endeavor knowing that it may be years before the work actually manifests a long term "*une chose active*." Might travel documentation activate a way of working beyond the travel moment? While the course does not look to imitate the work of Jeanneret, it does use his early travel output as a springboard for finding contemporary experiences that provoke and challenge students to think about their level of engagement in travel.

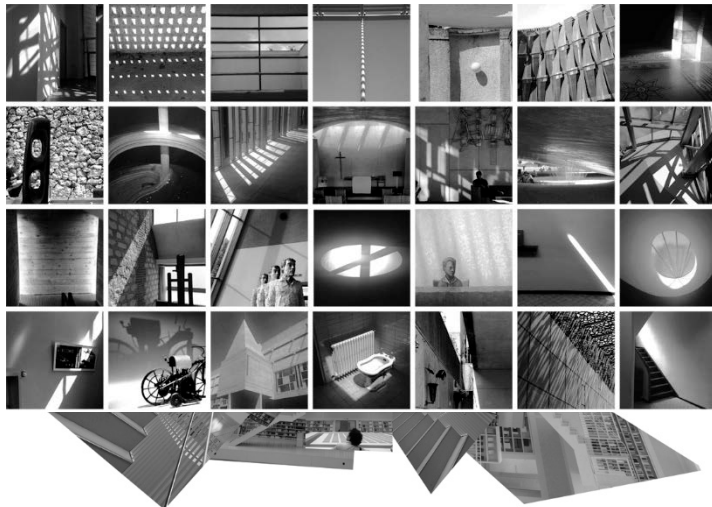


Figure 2 Stuttgart Library, photomontage, Yang Kang

The keeping of a sketchbook is an obvious requirement of the course. Students are encouraged to make a minimum of one entry per destination regardless of the length of stay. While students are familiar with sketchbook keeping, not all of them embrace it as working method. Too often they associate drawing from life as a task of representative realism. Some students are far more interested in photography than drawing and it is not uncommon to find student drawings that have been produced from photographs after the fact. For the habit is essential to encouraging those less comfortable or less skilled in drawing. Some organized drawing instruction and suggestions of analytical drawing types helps open the drawing

process to one of personal investigation. Passing sketchbooks around for other students to identify



successful sketches helps students see the value in their own work and the work of others. Asking the student to articulate why they are drawing what they are drawing helps them focus their interests. What do they want a sketchbook to be? If a medium is to be used, its photography takes many forms but most importantly asks for students to review, carefully select and discard, and ultimately engage in framing and editing their photographs for a variety of purposes. The ease of digital photography should be utilized toward a productive end. It is necessary to make students aware that for the number of photos recorded, the digital photo is of little use if it is not acted on—organized, printed, published, viewed. Towards this end assignments include documenting buildings, posting on social media, the production of observational videos and the production of a serial collage.

In documenting buildings students use two comparative methods. The first method is to produce a single image of a building that describes the character or nature of the architecture. While this is

Figure 3 28 Days of Light and Shadow, Yang Kang

obvious, it takes time before the students are able to move away from depicting the whole building in

one image and begin to carefully consider a single moment of the building that expresses the whole. The second is to repeat the process with a composite of photographs using photomontage. The montage often elicits a more vibrant experience of space and allows for a narrative to become part of the image making. The use of two methods engages photo taking and image processing to express a qualitative experience.

A group social media account encourages students to choose the best photo of the day for posting. They must be selective and avoid redundancy. The Instagram account corb\_iit provides a collective public face to the trip more akin to photojournalism. Finally, an assignment associated with the four weeks of travel entitled "28 Days Of" asks each student to select a single focus that has emerged in the

travel experience and complete a 28 image serial composite or a three-minute observational video. The observation about an architectural or non-architectural element or experience—28 days of light, openings, transportation, umbrellas, food, pattern, and people in uniforms. The observational video requires significant editing such that students must hone the compression of time and space. The video challenges their ability to capture place and experience where image sequencing must hold the interest of a public audience.

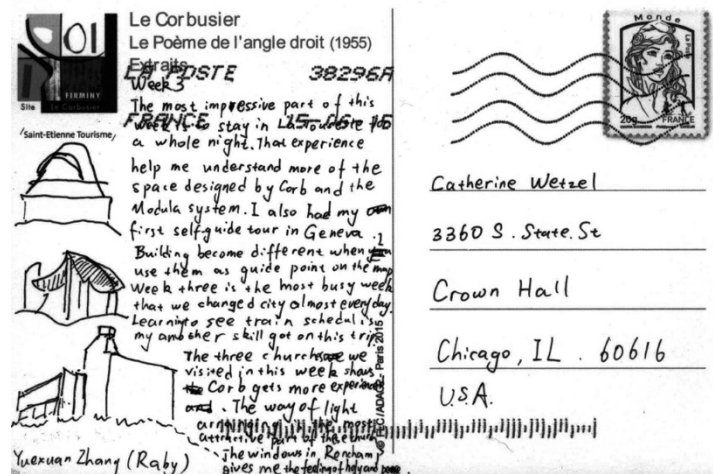


Figure 4 Week 4 postcard, Yuexuan Zhang



Figure 5 corb\_jit, Instagram screenshots of posts including video of installation

As a response to Jeanneret's own letter writing, students send a post card each week to their professor reflecting on a building or experience of the week. The language must be professional and articulate their point of view. Because the post cards are sent to the university, they are not read until the travel is complete. They often include drawings and reveal individual impressions and responses to the urban experience rather than the architectural destinations. Students find navigating the postal systems of different countries both intimidating and rewarding. It forces participation in a local system that is neither particularly tourist-oriented nor common for the internet

generation. Taking the time to communicate their thoughts requires personal reflection. The post cards become easier to write each week as they gain confidence in their observations.

Another participatory moment in the travel program, the students make an intervention in a public place. This intervention is recorded through video as part of an observational recording of the event. In organized a color exhibit of buoyant polyethylene forms commonly known as pool noodles. The noodles were arranged on a wall along the canal on a warm sunny afternoon. The students disbursed to points of observation and filmed the public interaction with the display. The film captured spontaneous sword fights and conflicted takings and forced returns of the noodles by passers-by until all of the objects were carried away and spotted else where in the park. The group effort to film and later edit a final video allowed students to use mobile devices to capture an interaction of people and place.

The final work of the course is the production of a book of the maker's choice using online book publishing tools. The book is not a travel log or a journal and

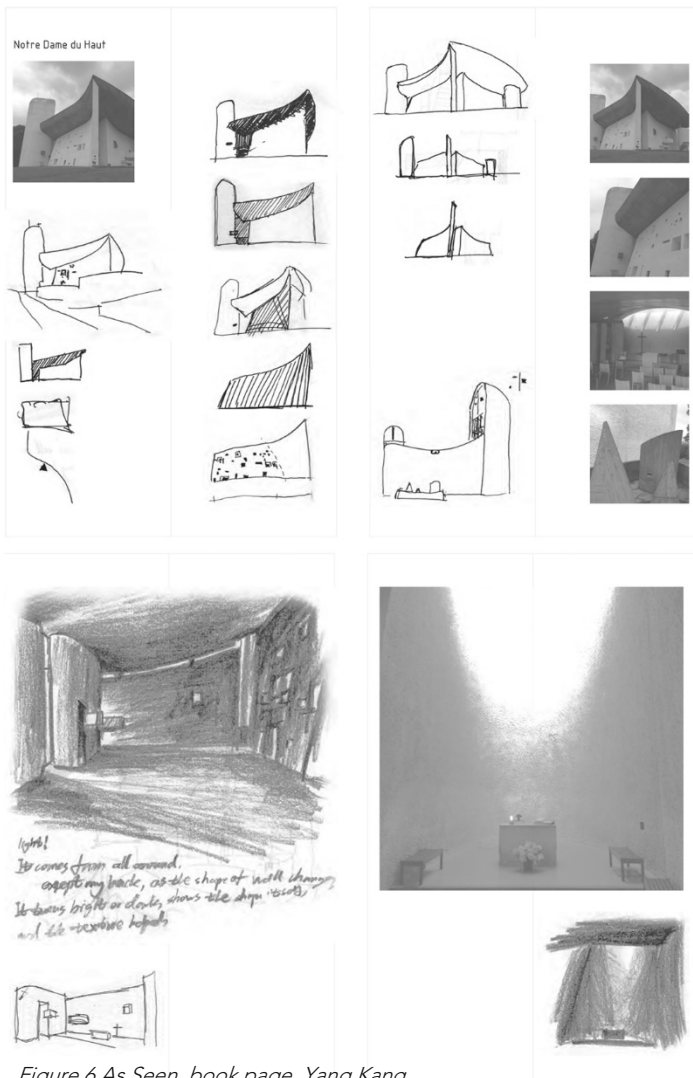


Figure 6 As Seen, book page, Yang Kang

need not correspond to the entire trip but it must take a position. It may use any or all of the mediums.



Figure 7 InstaEurope, book pages, Caleb Baldwin

Most often students choose to focus on their photographs or a comparison of the drawn and the photographed. In editing and selecting photographs, students confront their visual habits and preferences in forming a narrative. For one student the book was about the horizon as a line that divides. The range of photos shifted from rural to suburban to urban with the horizon fluctuating in position as one flipped through one hundred photographs. Another book focused on how people inhabit the built environment by framing people in open spaces using a repetitive photograph device. A third student documented his Instagram followings during the 30 days of posting while traveling. Each book is ultimately the companion to their sketchbook. It serves as a work produced from a singular organized 28-day group travel experience. It is often given to their parents as a thank you gift or souvenir.

## CONCLUSION

To think of the work as souvenirs or mementos of things to remember is a bit simplistic. My own travel experience suggests that the thing remembered is not always correlated with the work produced or the item brought home. Yet the work produced is a medium for an experience that is broader than simply seeing a place. Establishing working methods for students through assignments will never match the instinctive drive of an ambitious individual in a self-directed search as described in the early travels of Charles-Édouard Jeanneret. Yet as an educator, learning from Le Corbusier has informed and framed a way of thinking about travel documentation that reaches beyond "drawing from travel." While the production of a travel sketchbook may be the goal of one student, there are other mediums that may help other students engage in their travel experiences. To consider that students may in fact become filmmakers and authors, educators and architects, helps expand the travel experience. Ultimately, the narrative of travel is the one created by the traveler.

As an amateur photographer who has used 35 mm SLR cameras and digital pocket cameras, I love the camera of a mobile phone. I take much better pictures without the bulk and pressure of a sophisticated camera and the forced attempts at imitating professional photography styles. The mobile phone camera allows me to take photos unnoticed in a crowd of other mobile device holders. This inconspicuousness matches my desire to record the everyday with a minimum of fuss. In this way, I can identify with Jeanneret the visual note taker. The observational documentary as a device opens up possibilities for recording and sharing experiences that express the culture of place in an age of global uniformity and jadedness.

As each of us strives to make sense of art, architecture and cultures, using all the media we can handle aims at inclusion. Our current month long academic travel courses do not correspond to Grand Tours or

Jeanneret's travels by boat and wagon more than a hundred years ago. To ignore, the day-to-day uses of the mobile phone as a navigation and recording device is naïve. To be productive and to encourage productivity remains the challenge. Affording multiple platforms for productivity while traveling looks for opportunities for students to initiate and drive their own efforts to document, record and create their own narratives of their experiences. When I look at the work of students, I prefer to see an individual's perspective rather than a homogenized style. While I have great respect for the pen and ink drawings of others, I myself prefer the smudges of a soft lead, the errors of the effort and the genuine interest to record.



*Figure 8 Corb++ exhibition, Crown Hall*

## **NOTE**

Charles-Édouard Jeanneret is used to refer to Le Corbusier prior to 1920 when he began the use of his pseudonym.

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