

Engaged Storytellers- Drawing Out Stories - Amplifying Voices

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This paper is dedicated to the memory of Essy Baniassad, former Dean of the School of Architecture at Dalhousie University who passed away in 2023. Essy was a cosmopolitan architectural educator and a man of many stories. At a memorial for him in Hong Kong this spring, his students, colleagues, classmates and friends from four continents quoted him saying “In architecture, there is little to teach but much to learn”. It is in this spirit that I begin to tell this story – for so much of what we learn or need to learn comes from hearing the stories and amplifying the voices of all.

Until the lion tells his story, the tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.¹

-African Proverb

INTRODUCTION

This paper argues that the act of storytelling can connect us to others and foster an understanding of both how we are similar and how we are different. This is instrumental for our journey to become cosmopolitan architects. Imagining and telling the story of a better, if not perfect, situation - a joyful story- a comforting story, a community story can be the impetus to provide a place or places for the story to occur. If we do not know that the lion has told his tale; if we silence her voice or tell only the hunter’s tale, we cannot make a place to accommodate the lion.

Through illustrations from projects and pedagogies, this paper further argues that promoting our users, builders, clients, owners, and community members to share stories of their experiences will open paths for seeing. The examples illuminate situations of inequity or injustice as well as potential opportunities. These enable our buildings to better accommodate ‘everyone’. Such will allow us to acknowledge difference and support valuable cultural traditions and comfortable ways of living through promoting an understanding of both difference and sameness ‘in a world of strangers’.

The arguments are inspired by Cosmopolitanism, the insightful book by Anthony Appiah.² The arguments are based on findings from a number of pedagogical strategies employed in design studios, field experiments, and seminar courses. The examples

reveal the importance of critical storytelling in design education which aims to accommodate a cosmopolitan world – create not just “ethics in a work of strangers” but “accommodation for a world of strangers”.³

Storytelling is a community activity. It requires both tellers and listeners. Furthermore, the best stories are those which remain in the memory to be retold. These examples of storytelling are taken from studios and courses I have taught in several places, things I have learned from colleagues and from my own research, works of sculpture and literature. Hence, you may recognize some of these in ideas we have shared together; in a certain way they are ‘stories twice told’ or told many times.⁴

The architectural and pedagogical stories adapted here are embellished or altered with my ‘twist’ or ‘interpretation’ of their tales. For example, the Florence mosque project was initiated by American colleagues and taken to Florence. My addition was to engage a ‘real community’ in a storefront space.⁵ Similarly, courses I co-taught and discussed with others became an addition built upon the foundation of my own work.⁶ I have added my own impressions to ideas my teachers taught me and things my clients have taught me about comfort and its specificity, culture and its specificity language and its specificity, climate and its specificity. As architectural educators, we are fortunate to be a community which shares a quest for understanding each other and the world. This great fortune molds the possibility of an approach to design and education that might be very accommodating of the human condition. The pedagogical stances from these stories are revealed within the framework of the paper.

I AMPLIFYING VOICES – AUTOBIOGRAPHY, ETHICS AND MEMORY

As children, we are compelled by stories. Especially strong are fairy tales and fables. These often have a ‘moral’ or ‘lesson’ to be learned that remains with us and precipitates memories long after the story is told. Such stories can inspire our thinking, provide new perspectives or reinforce our sense of responsibility. Childhood stories that focus on universal values such as truth telling (The Emperor’s New Clothes)⁷ or kindness (The Little Match Girl)⁸ remain with us throughout our lives. Although

illuminating tales from fictional characters, the fables resonate with many universal matters of the human experience.

In recent decades, tales of communities surviving natural disasters or seeking refuge from climate change or stories of persons who triumphed over disparity; poverty, injustice, marginality or violence also remain in our memory, especially when told from firsthand experience.⁹ Relaying a bad experience, whether to a friend or to a trained listener, can assist in the healing process. Pedagogical strategies for sharing stories can allow articulated voices for justice, equity and diversity to emerge within the classroom or studio. A multiplicity of ways of seeing and the telling of stories in architectural and urban settings allows responsible and inventive placemaking. We learn from stories in our own lives and in the lives of others.

BIOBOX

Encouraging students to share their own stories promotes a sense of belonging. For example, an early project making and writing a biographical postcard or a 'biobox' formally modelled after studying Joseph Cornell's boxes allows formal representation of each students' own story.¹⁰ See Figure 1. Although any story could be represented by students, they had the opportunity to use more abstract representation to reveal or conceal aspects of their lives. This exercise was equally powerful for students who had experienced trauma or difficulty in their lives as for those who wished to celebrate their experience or culture.¹¹



Figure 1. Joseph Cornell The Hotel Eden, 1945 wkiart.org

II AMPLIFYING VOICES -HEARING THE STORIES OF OTHERS

The writer of a novel or a play will quickly impress upon us the importance of a setting. 'Setting the scene' occurs before the telling of the tale and often before the introduction of the characters. Clearly, events occurring within the scene are affected by

its very nature. Settings carry complex information that might be considered more intricate than words or stories. Within architectural education, it has long been argued that architects and urban designers create settings for events which inspire the events themselves. Textbooks highlighting settings and rituals replaced more prosaic history textbooks in many schools of Architecture in the 1980s.¹² Settings facilitate comfort. Memories of places or visual settings remain with us long after a visit is over.

Architects and designers are skilled creators of settings for human activity. Yet, even for gifted observers, it is not always easy to see or understand the voice of an outsider or one who is different from ourselves. Sometimes we speak different languages or different dialects. Similarly, our activities and notions of comfort can be in different languages.

Actions as simple as sitting may not be universal. In his beautiful essay *On the Sitting Position, A Question of Method* Joseph Rykwert tells the story of how even the act of sitting can be a culturally specific act. Observing the 'squatting' positions of several Asian traditions and the 'lying down' resting positions of several African traditions, Rykwert illustrates the cultural specificity of chairs or headrests, as pieces designed to accommodate the sitting preferences of their users¹³ This includes but also extends beyond universal design to reveal our blind spots. Think about what chair you sat in (or wished you had sat in) to view your favorite sports event.¹⁴

L'IMMORALISTE

Although some might argue that familiarity provides the only authentic voice, it can also be the clarity or strangeness experienced by an outside viewer that clearly sheds new light on an event. Often we become so familiar with the status quo that we fail to see either the problems or the potential in a situation. Undoubtedly, stories from immediate or personal experience are invaluable. We want to hear it 'from the horse's mouth' (or maybe the lion's?). We also understand that stories take on a multiplicity of perspectives depending on who is telling them. The value of firsthand stories has much to claim in movements like "Black Lives Matter" and other movements that 'speak truth to power.' Yet, it can be the freshness of an outside point of view that is most clear.

We can be so familiar with the status quo that we fail look critically to see either the problems or the potential in a situation. Consider the perspective of the child in *The Emperor's New Clothes*. In Andersen's fairy tale, the Emperor's tailor played a trick on the Emperor, claiming to be dressing him in finery for a parade when he was actually unclothed. Amongst all of the flattery he received from adults, a child's voice was the only one to claim the nakedness of the emperor.

Altering an angle of vision slightly can add new depth and dimension to understanding. For example, in a story informally told by CBC radio, Chinese researchers who worked with Canadians

on a project in the Canadian north were able to find comfort in desolate cold conditions, despite the fact that they were used to a warmer climate. When students were asked to speculate on why, they were unable to come up with the truthful reason. Unlike Canadians, who were used to observing personal spatial distances, being very close together was not uncomfortable for the Chinese scientists. They arranged their sleeping bags side by side and benefitted from the warmth of sleeping close to others.¹⁷

Providing an unfamiliar scenario for a student design project can bolster clarity of perception. For example, in a project based on the 1902 novel *L'Immoraliste* by Andre Gide, students designed a house for the protagonist Michel, whose existential struggles are revealed in the text. The story tells of the death of Michel's wife while on their honeymoon in North Africa and his call to friends to take him back to Paris. Michel feels that the only meaning in his life is found in the sensual, which has replaced his morality. For the design studio, Michel becomes the client whose deepest fears and desires are revealed in the story.¹⁸ Figure 2 shows some examples of student designs based on close readings of the text.

III AMPLIFYING VOICES- DEVELOPING PRECISION AND POINTS OF VIEW

Adopting the precise methodologies of the ethnographer to understand human behavior can assist in understanding complexities of how exactly the built environment interacts with human activity. In my research, I often silently observe.¹⁹ In research, this can bring acuity to our viewpoint. Quietly observing activity in an unfamiliar cultural setting can both direct our questions and help to find the answers. We ask "Am I understanding this correctly?" Altering an angle of vision slightly can add new depth and dimension to our understanding.

DESCRIBING AN OBJECT- POINT OF VIEW

To develop acuity in writing and also to communicate clearly, I have developed an exercise that can be used at the beginning of classes. In threesomes, students are asked to write a brief description of several discreet objects which are passed from group to group in envelopes. The intention is to write from the point of view of formal, functional, scientific, narrative, historical. The perspective and the object must be clearly conveyed in

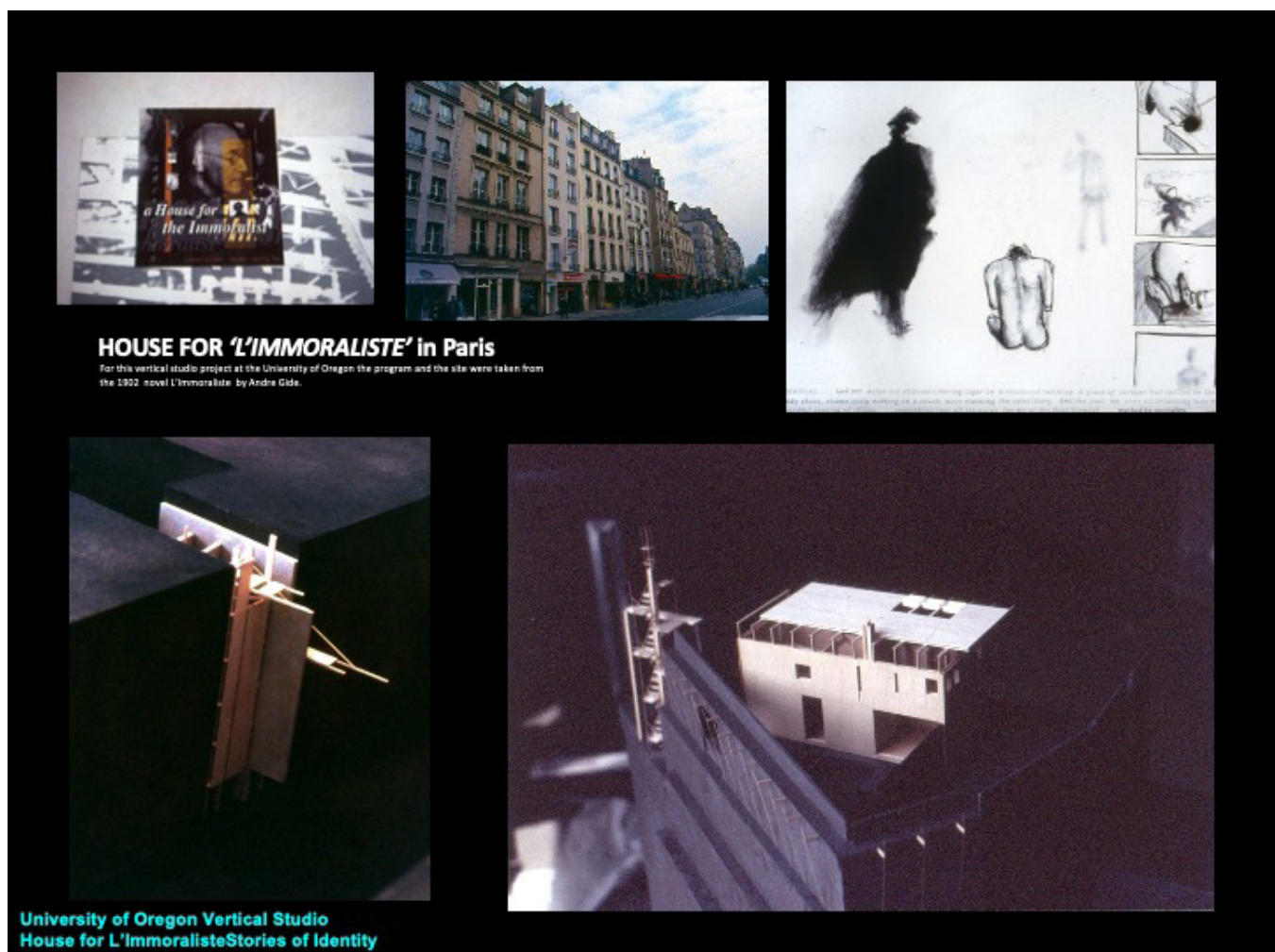


Figure 2. Student drawings and models of House for L'Immoraliste, University of Oregon.

the description without naming the object or the point of view. In a later class, students then check the accuracy of the description by having to identify the object and the description type based only on the piece of writing. It becomes clear that while some stories need to be scientifically provable, other description types are more open to embellishment and or individual artistry.

This exercise illustrates the power of both precise observation and point of view in drawing out particular stories embedded in the objects. The description types (formal, functional, scientific, narrative, historical) are selected to connect to ways of understanding important to designers. The exercise points to the potential for careful observation of human activity to reveal an understanding of cultural norms, traditions and notions of comfort that may otherwise go unobserved and therefore disregarded. Figure 3 illustrates a collection of objects distributed for the exercises. These include a fava bean, a Mardi Gras baby, a Toronto subway token, a guitar pick and a coughdrop



Figure 3. Objects to Write About: Developing Precision and Points of View

The extension of this exercise can lead to more acute observation and understanding of unfamiliar communities and their cultural practices, resulting in the understanding for architecture to empower communities in urban places which may have been marginalized and/or disenfranchised. Through precise consideration of what we are seeing and hearing, we can better understand diverse perspectives, culturally specific situations and particular human needs. Listening to both personal and community stories, we can trace a history of injustice, for example, but also recognize, celebrate and help to strengthen self-empowered communities thriving through invention and perseverance.²⁰ This suggests that through precise listening, architecture can better assist to empower people and communities

IV AMPLIFYING VOICES - ADVANCED URBAN ISSUES IN THE CITY

The training from precisely describing objects from diverse points of view can be extended to considerations of more complex situations, such as those encountered in cities. A range of viewpoints and ethical questions can be investigated through close readings and critical discussion of carefully chosen images (for example, of an informal housing settlement, or the line between a new urbanist neighborhood and a neighborhood waiting to be gentrified). Through ensuing discussion of the images, various points of view are raised. Students also design and sometimes carry out 'experiments' which challenge discriminatory practices or illustrate design problems: for example, housing rental practices where potential tenants might be screened based on age, appearance or ethnicity.²¹

WRITING PRECISELY ABOUT ADVANCED URBAN ISSUES

The power of close observation and storytelling is exemplified in a current course in Advanced Urban Issues which critically explores world cities. Herein, students become Socratic 'actors' in the classroom and the city, asking critical questions about what they observe and read, finding voice through designing and completing short experiments on inclusion/exclusion in the city and exploring cases of 'sameness' and 'difference' by sharing research on cities where they have never been (and often I have never been). Students research the great aspects of the cities through making travel posters which highlight the most unique and remarkable aspects of the cities.²² Following this, the assignment is to critically explore problems in the city which are highlighted on a timeline.²³ Finally, these issues are investigated in greater detail through the writing of a research paper. Writings are critical and articulate

V CONCLUSION- THE RELEVANCE OF STORIES TO REAL LIFE EXERCISES

The combined methodologies and exercises explore the potential for storytelling as critical strategies that have allowed the articulate voices for justice, equity and diversity to emerge within my classes. The explorations promote close observation and asking questions to draw out potentially overlooked perspectives. From writing about objects from various points of view to carefully observing cities and addressing design problems which challenge norms, students develop philosophical stances to their work and openness and abilities to confront completely new experiences.

Through these processes, students acquire skills of promoting storytelling, listening well and developing voices that allow sensitive humanistic approaches to design studio projects. This enables students to work on such projects as a mosque in the center of a historical Renaissance city (Florence) to accommodate a multi-ethnic and multinational community currently housed in a renovated garage.²⁴ In short, they allow the lions' tales to be told.



Figure 4. Sample student travel poster and critical timeline, University of Hartford.

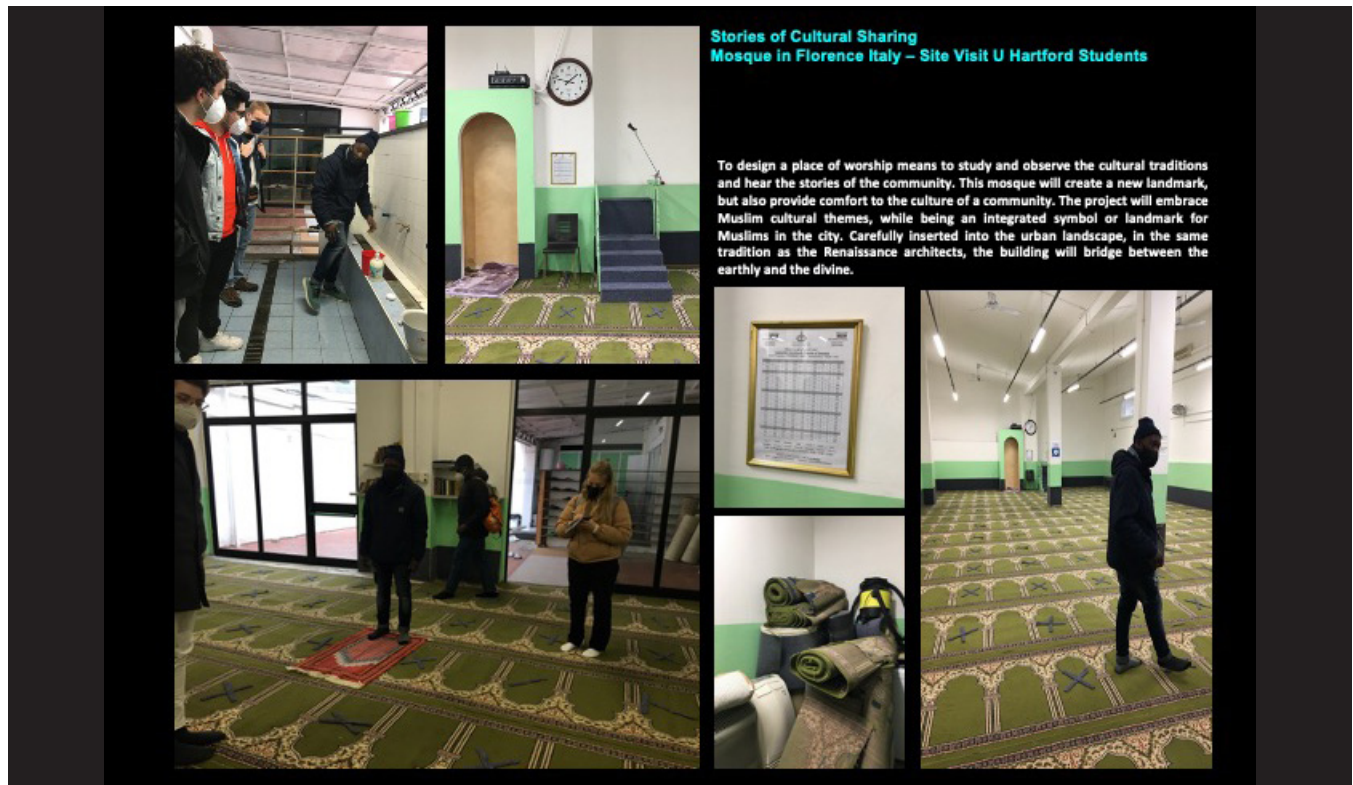


Figure 5. University of Hartford Student at Mosque in Florence, Italy.

Let us consider this African proverb once more. In less than twenty words, the proverb speaks of power, beauty, action, engagement, and interaction. It also implies that the outcome of a story and how it is told can be an agent that can affect consequences.

Exploring diverse stories and ways of seeing nourishes a variety of points of view that expand understanding. When we fail to engender multiple perspectives in architectural education, to be realized in our design practices, we negotiate the world with voices muted. We are like the story of the hunt which always glorifies the hunter.

The writer Chinua Achebe transposed the African proverb cited earlier to read “Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always will glorify the hunter”.²⁵

Perhaps we should say that “Until the lions learn how to design, all designs will accommodate the designer.”

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ENDNOTES

1. African Proverb written on the door of an African American museum in a small town.
2. Kwame Akoma-Ampim Kusi Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism - Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York, WW Norton, 2006).
3. Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*.
4. Christine Boyer *The City of Collective Memory- Its Historical Imagery and Architectural Entertainments* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1996).
5. Michael Crosbie and Theodore Sawruk, from discussions at the University of Hartford.
6. Sara Stevens at Sala University of British Columbia (208-19) and Theodore Sawruk at the University of Hartford (2021).
7. Hans Christian Andersen, 1837.
8. *Ibid.*, 1837
9. Consider Spike Lee’s film *After the Flood* made with in-situ film clips in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina.
10. Cornell made three dimensional collages from found objects. For examples, see Joan Sommers, Ascha Drake and Joseph Cornell, *The Joseph Cornell Box, Found Objects, Magical Worlds*, Cider Mill Press, Kennebunkport, 2006
11. Southern University School of Architecture students (1998-2000). Many had been victims of Hurricane Katrina. The majority was African American.
12. Spiro Kostof, *A History of Architecture Settings and Rituals* (USA, Oxford University Press, 1985).
13. Joseph Rykwert “On the Sitting Position- A Question of Method”, *The Necessity of Artiface* (New York, Rizzoli International, 1982)
14. Author’s recollection of living in a house in Florence in 2023 filled with a range of medieval uncomfortable antique furniture inspired this thought.
15. Bayard Rustin, a Black Quaker coined this phrase in non-violent political tactics. It was later used by Ghandi and Martin Luther King Junior.
16. Hans Christian Andersen “The Emperor’s New Clothes” 1805-1875 *The Complete Hans Christian Andersen* (New York, Gramercy, 2006)
17. Informal comment from Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) Radio One, date unknown.
18. Andre Gide, *The Immoralist* (New York, Dover Thrift Editions, 1996)
19. Author’s graduate training at University of Cambridge 2012.
20. Authors research in New Orleans, 2018.
21. University of Oregon School of Architecture and Environment course inclusive Urbanism students 2019 tested walk from a house to a grocery store to test the walkability scores of a neighborhood of interest.
22. University of Hartford Advanced Urban Issues course co-taught with Theodore Sawruk, 2021.
23. Dr. Sara Stevens shared methodology at University of British Columbia 2019-2020.
24. University of Hartford at ISI Florence students completed this project in 2022 and 2023.
25. Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* from *The African Trilogy*, 1958.