CROSS-CULTURAL EXCHANGE IN DESIGN EDUCATION BETWEEN JAPAN AND TURKEY

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Abstract

Cross-cultural exchange is invaluable for young generations, but specifically for students in the design field. Experiencing another culture within the field, with expertise, techniques, communication skills, and representation methods introduces students to not only knowledge of the field, but also prepares students to be more open to learning itself. This openness to learning leads students to the path of becoming world citizens, which is a significant defining key characteristic in the competitive professional world. With this in mind, through an agreement between the departments of Architecture at Chiba University-Japan and Interior Architecture and Environmental Design (IAED) in the Faculty of Fine Arts and Design (FFAD) at Izmir University of Economics (IUE) in Turkey, an exchange process was begun. During this time, students of both universities have had the chance to experience the culture and collaborate with designers from another department for the past eleven years. Especially, in the past six years, the experience has been accepted as an official internship, resulting in a total of 48 students becoming interns, and learning about the cultures of both countries in Turkey and Japan, developing joint projects together. This was a chance to observe Japanese design approach up close and review the architectural work as part of the Exchange/Communication. A significant improvement in language skills, worldviews and intellectual levels of students were observed as a result of the internship experiences. They benefited from the chance to learn about a new culture in every way, and observe the study environments, projects, and design approaches of students at Chiba University. Moreover, students stayed with Japanese families and learned about their culture in addition to a rich office experience this year. Students had the opportunity to perform internships at both Chiba University studios as well as at design and interior architecture offices at Tokyo. They also experienced examples of traditional and modern architecture, and visited major cities such as Tokyo, Kamakura, and Harajuku. Until now, several design projects have been completed at varying scales, in which the focus has been on cultural exchange, as it is believed that students will gain much more than design experience in these exchanges. The past year, the same students in different teams within the larger group then worked on student housing at Izmir's 8,500-year-old prehistoric settlement: Yesilova Tumulus, as a second project. The nine Japanese and nine Turkish students conducted on-site examination in Izmir. They designed a research center for students taking part in excavations. Students conducted on-site research at Yesilova Tumulus and the Ancient City of Ephesus. In addition to their internships, this was a chance to learn about traditional and contemporary architecture in Izmir. Meetings with professional institutions enabled transnational sharing of ideas. The finalized projects provided specific themes and creative conceptual solutions to the design problem. Six mixed teams of Japanese and Turkish students also presented their work with various media such as, posters, digital representations, and films. The paper discusses the benefits of cross-cultural exchange at the undergraduate level of design, exemplified by design projects and students' feedback, as well as shedding light on possible future directions.

Keywords: design education, interior architecture, architecture, transnational studies, cross-cultural exchange.

1 INTRODUCTION

The need for cross-cultural communication and exchange is increasingly important in the fast faced and collaborative work environment at the global scale today. In design fields, which are by nature collaborative and human-focused, participation, negotiation, and consensus has never been more important. In addition, design thinking skills that include divergent thinking and creativity, necessitate feeding from a variety of resources. Through the example of an exchange agreement between the departments of Architecture at Chiba University-Japan and Interior Architecture and Environmental Design (IAED) in the Faculty of Fine Arts and Design (FFAD) at Izmir University of Economics (IUE) in Turkey, the students and faculty of both universities have had a chance to experience the culture of a
foreign country, design together, and build lifelong professional communication skills and friendships. This paper will focus primarily on the most recent year of collaboration, as it was the most fruitful with both groups of students visiting the other country in the same summer. In the paper, the projects produced during a period of two months will be discussed and future directions will be presented.

The multicultural context enables the comprehension of cross-cultural canons through the design language of various cultures, enabling creative design solutions [1]. By focusing on two cultures at the same time, it is possible to observe commonalities and differences, and develop a richer understanding of both.

The integration of this understanding in design education is invaluable as it enables the development of the approach that is respectful to other cultures as well as derives creativity from them at the global scale. Projects that combine technical and social aspects have contributed positively to students’ education [2], [3]. Integrating diverse values and ways of living, as well as a heightened awareness on cultural aspects, help to strengthen design education through the exploration of cultural variations [3].

Designing has been seen as a creative problem-solving process, during which designers define and redefine the problem, develop, and generate suitable solutions [5] with the necessary element of change to a desired situation [6]. The aim in design education is to improve these problem solving skills while developing technical and social knowledge. Cross-cultural educational environments are believed to stimulate creativity by exposing students to the richness of other cultures [4]. Moreover, various communication methods have enabled close connections, with the distance growing and time shortening, and therefore, the probability of keeping these connections alive in the long-run have been possible [7]. Cross-cultural consciousness, language skills, and self-esteem have also been observed to increase in similar collaborations [8], in addition to contributing to a sense of humility. In this paper, the aim is to discuss one such example of collaboration.

2 METHODOLOGY

With an agreement between Chiba University and Izmir University of Economics, Japanese and Turkish students have had the chance to visit and study in the rich cultures of both countries. In previous years, students also received an 80% scholarship provided by the Japanese Government, and the latest two exchange groups participated in design competitions, which was an educational and inspiring process for them. In the summer and fall of 2018, eight Turkish and nine Japanese students, received a chance to get to know the corresponding culture, visiting through an exchange program.

The projects of 2018 that were completed in first Japan and then Turkey, focused on a conceptual competition and then on creating archeological sensitivity, respectively. First, eight students visited Japan and under the supervision of a professor and together with a Japanese student group, had an intense working program, with several visits to significant places, where students learned about architectural approaches and cultural habits.

After two weeks, the Turkish students returned and continued working on their projects, sharing the experiences with the department. This was followed by the same Japanese student group visiting Turkey to work on a weeklong project in Izmir. In both countries, a historical background was given about the cultures, supported by introductions to professional associations. With this gained background on the history of the city, student groups were made and were asked to design an excavation site and research center for a team of ten students. The resulting projects were presented and exhibited with a ceremony at which certificates were given.

The project was to be conceptually designed for the Yesilova Hoyuk Visitor Center, which is both a museum and an active excavation site dating back to 8500 years. The building is award winning, and provided a well-planned structure for the students to work in. Students listened to seminars and participated in a walk-through with both the head of the excavation and the architect of the building. Therefore, not only were the students able to experience the many facets of archeology and excavation, but also understand a participatory design process at a sensitive site, respectful to the historical background.

3 RESULTS

There were five groups formed out of mixed culture students of three or four. All groups prepared their conceptual presentations in four days, and all were valid solutions. All groups concentrated one aspect of the connection to the historical background, which were one of the aims of the project. While
architecture students focused more on structural aspects, interior architecture students focused on the furniture and materials. Moreover, all groups were able to work harmoniously, finishing every studio day with a social trip and gathering within the city.

Group 1 focused on the patchwork idea, with a notion that we can only reach fragments of the past, which we combine to create meanings today. The patchwork idea was abstracted and turned into hexagonal planning approach and modules (Fig. 1).

![Figure 1. Group 1-Patchwork](image)

The second group again wished to create a connection to history, through archeology. This group was specifically captivated by the excavation methods, where one experiences several layers of history at the same time (Fig. 2).

![Figure 2. Group 2-Connection to History](image)

The third group drew their creativity from the nature that was constant at the site, although the culture had changed through the 8500 years. They observed that the material at the site was varied, and wished to reflect this in their projects (Fig. 3).
The fourth group focused on the passing of time, and aimed to represent the space as a time-capsule, though a modular and adaptable approach. They wished to create a lively environment for the working students that were defined as the prospective users of the building (Fig. 4).

The fifth group aimed to create a connection through the application of no borders. They used the excavation methods as their inspiration and concentrated on the layers on the excavation enabling us to see several years’ culture and productions at the same time (Fig. 5).
The students produced successful projects in teams and presented their work at the end of the process with an exhibition at IUE. It was apparent that they had matured in their stance as designers and were more self-confident at the end of this process. They received their certificates signed by both universities, which will contribute to their portfolios.

The students gained historical and cultural respect for the culture they visited, but also for their own culture. During this period, the students visited several sites, learning about the Japanese and Turkish culture with the help of this exchange agreement and there are many countless benefits for the short and long term for the students, both professionally, and personally.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Students’ feedback was invaluable to explain their gain:

“I feel very fortunate and excited to have seen the unique Japanese culture. I want to learn about other cultures and lifestyles. We learned about Japanese architecture from the professors and students while we were there. This internship and trip has contributed to my life greatly, both academically and personally”.

“To witness the architecture of another culture is something that excites me to a great extent. Moreover, Japanese design is humble and values functionality, which I believe will help me in my approach to space planning from now on”.

“I am fortunate to have been immersed in a very different culture to mine. It has been an experience I will not forget. Internship in the East… to discover… to learn… to try… to love… and more!”

“The experience in Japan has contributed to me both culturally and as a design language. I believe in observation and experience in the universality of design. I am also proud to represent my university in these types of activities. I have made many friends that I will keep in touch with for life. This experience has contributed to me immensely”.

There is great short-term and long-term value in cross-cultural exchange of undergraduate students, especially in fields concerning spatial design. Cultural and historical awareness added to the development of a “visual library” which is expected to support all design decision of the students in the future (Fig. 6).
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