

*Experiences*

## **ARCHITECTS FINDING INSPIRATION IN EUROPE: ERASMUS MUNDUS PROGRAM EXPERIENCES**

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### **Abstract**

The European Union has run its higher-education exchange program “Erasmus Mundus” to enable the mobility of students and academics between Europe and other continents, including Asia since 2004. The benefits of studying abroad are multifold, but for most people it gives the once-in-a-lifetime chance to experience what they have read in books or heard about in lectures. In this paper we share our own study-abroad and staff mobility experiences which were enabled by the European Union’s Erasmus Mundus scholarship programs for 1. A senior lecturer of architecture at Universiti Malaya (UM) to conduct research as a visiting scholar at the University of Porto. 2. A recent graduate in architecture degree from UM to study for a master’s degree in the same discipline at the Milan Polytechnic. For the young student, living and studying outside of Malaysia for the first time was exciting and challenging, whereas for the experienced academic, who used to live and study in the U.S.A. and U.K., her month-long experience in Porto was rejuvenating her passion for architecture, travel and life despite her disability. After finishing their programs, they both returned to Malaysia. In this paper, they share the impacts of their Erasmus Mundus programs on their personal and professional lives.

*Keywords:* Erasmus Mundus, architecture, study-abroad, disability

### **Introduction**

It is no secret that many Malaysian architects study in Europe, and their years spent in this part of the world *might* influence their careers (Yaacob and Hashim, 2018). The Erasmus Mundus program allows students and academics from the East to experience life in the West (EU countries). In this case, the program had enabled the journeys of two architects, Naziaty, a disabled academic, and Pacilia, a post-graduate student. In 2015, Naziaty attended a staff mobility program for a month in Portugal, whereas, Pacilia enrolled in a two-year master’s course on architecture conservation in Italy. Both women faced particular challenges based on their needs and circumstances during their programs. The details of each architect’s journey in Europe is shared below, in the hopes that others (architects or not) will benefit from our accounts and anecdotes.

Firstly let us briefly introduce our narrators, both of whom were women. 1. Naziaty, at 53 years old was suffering from stage 3 to stage 4 Osteoarthritis and traveling with the aid of a manual wheelchair, and used her circumstances as a participant observer while traveling and visiting places and also rediscovering her teaching roots at FAUP (*Faculdade de Arquitectura da Universidade do Porto*) School of Architecture at the University of Porto<sup>16</sup>. The one-month stint provided her a much-needed chance to reflect on her mid-career situation, seven years before compulsory retirement. As a visiting scholar and researcher, Naziaty shared and learned from her colleagues at FAUP, as well as from the architecture professionals whom she met. She is sure that this knowledge and experience has enriched the contents and approaches to her teaching and advocacy work in disability and accessibility of transportation and heritage buildings. 2. Pacilia, at 27 years old had never been to Europe before. She previously did her undergraduate architecture degree at Universiti Malaya and worked for three years after her graduation. Understandingly, she grabbed the opportunity to do the two year course under Milan Polytechnic although based in Mantua<sup>17</sup>, a small town surrounded by three artificial lakes and rich with Renaissance Architecture, which is the backdrop of her studies, she entered headlong into an experience that built her character, giving her much needed boost in her confidence, which she struggled hard to gain within the context of far-off Italy, especially in small-town Mantua, in contrast to her multi-cultural Malaysian background. Traveling alone for most of the time, she delved into a world that forced her to engage, adapt and embrace a *foreign* society in the heart of old Europe.

### **An academic's journey in search of the roots of architecture**

Naziaty deliberately chose Porto as the place to re-discover her architectural roots, even though the new construction activity in the city is not as rapid and fast growing as in Kuala Lumpur where Naziaty lives and works, Portugal's favourite architecture school ties imagination, innovation and identity consistently through the legendary work of Alvaro Siza and Souto de Moura in this vibrant city. This is clear in the architectural heritage and education of FAUP, which is definitely not *old school* but a fervent follower of the modernist tradition undeniably appreciating the non-digital drawing skills and methodical architecture talents.

On the 21<sup>st</sup> of June 2015 was the day that Naziaty arrived at Porto, where she stayed at an Airbnb residence and wheeled and walked at times 1.6 miles to and from FAUP. In learning and teaching architecture history, she had heard of Alvaro Siza, a famous architect from the modern movement era, but she did not know of his great influence on FAUP and Porto. Professor Rui Fernandes Póvoas who was in-charge of CEAU (Centro de Estudos de Arquitectura e Urbanismo) a research centre located at FAUP met Naziaty on the 23rd of June with Maria, his ever-helpful assistant. Naziaty was given a room at FAUP and was assisted by several tutors whom she met regarding the design studio content and program of the various years. Her visit also included a trip to the north of Porto to various heritage sites and meeting a local authority officer. Naziaty was doing research work on urbanism namely on 'accessible transportation' and 'accessible heritage', but life in FAUP amidst the students and tutors and focusing on 'architecture education' was a vital part of her staff mobility program. She concentrated on doing research using observation techniques and interviews for all the themes mentioned.

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<sup>16</sup> Today, Porto is the second largest city in Portugal, and one of the major urban centres in the Iberian Peninsula. The city's population (237,591 persons), is much larger than that of Mantua (48,353 persons). However, Mantua (established in 2000 BC) is historically older than Porto (300 BC). Source: Wikipedia.

<sup>17</sup> See 1 above.

During her stay and afterwards, Naziaty is very much an admirer of FAUP's architecture curricula, which concentrated on developing the technical as well as the analytical and intellectual strength of the graduates. At FAUP, the first year immediately starts with an architecture process or the very least an artistic process of a hypothetical site with a measured scale to it, where the basics are mastered whilst the learning process is step-by-step rather than complicated in the beginning, directly working with models and the material, in dealing with space,—seamlessly taking abstract (artistic) exercises and quickly converting into a more architectural design process. At UM, where Naziaty is teaching, however, the curriculum had been the same since its inception 24 years ago where the artistic process is learned in the first year's first semester but the human scale is not seamlessly incorporated.

Ever eager to learn more, Naziaty had many discussions with each of the year's studio tutor. Mario, the first year tutor explained that the students created an abstract model in the larger 1:1000 scale, translated it step-by-step to the 1:50 scale, then the students worked with a 5 x 5 x 5 metres cubic space. As well, the use of 'styrofoam' allowed for the excavation of spaces. Although it started with an artistic process (abstraction) the immediate process where they put a scale to it, gave a sense of space that had a reference to real life space in the minds of the designer. In Naziaty's mind, such exercise is significant because doing *mere* artistic exercises and not putting it in human scale will not teach the students to understand the sense of the human scale and measurement.

Naziaty quickly learned that at FAUP, the architecture faculty members were not mere academics, they were design practitioners too, and this dual teaching-practice situation is similar to many of the best architecture schools in Europe. Moreover, almost all FAUP's graduates managed to gain employment after graduation, mostly in the United Kingdom even though their English is not that good. Their employability was due largely to their highly skilled architectural drawings. The students' projects from first year to third year were using mostly manual drawings. Later in fourth and fifth year the students were allowed to start with computer-aided drawings, unlike at UM, where the use of digital means is rushed in the second year. Also at FAUP, each student was expected to produce "notebooks" in which the students would use to practise and reflect on their work. Luis (the third year tutor) enthused *that the better notebooks are the ones that get drawn over and over*. (Photo 1). Pedro, the second year tutor, explained about a year-long project located near the Trindade metro station in which the importance of topography and the students therefore need to be sensitive to changes of levels. (Photo 2). The program is a cultural centre and a teaching block. The medium is totally in pencil or pen, which is on tracing paper. At FAUP, students are not allowed to do digital drawings in second year. This reminded Naziaty of her own student days at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia in the early 1980s, where the students' rigorous technical competence was taught to be consistent with the philosophy and training of a skilled and good designer.

Traveling around the city, Naziaty visited many places including parks, markets and religious buildings. Porto has noteworthy outstanding buildings and places such as the Casa das Musica by Rem Koolhaas; the contemporary museum, Boa Nova Tea House, swimming pool and the FAUP building by Alvaro Siza; housing and office buildings by Souto de Moura and many more. The investigation on 'accessible transportation' using participant observation techniques included Naziaty traveling to Sao Bento from where she lived by using the bus service and the Metro. She noted that although Porto sits on a hilly terrain, the construction of the sidewalks and the availability of public transportation including relatively cheap taxi rides made it affordable and accessible to older persons and physically disabled persons (Naziaty is a wheelchair user). With the assistance of a tutor from FAUP, Clara, she managed to meet Lia Ferrera, an access officer at Porto Municipal. Lia gave a lot of insight regarding accessibility as she was a wheelchair user, more from the advocacy point of view. (Photo 3 and 4). Clara

also arranged for a trip to the north of Porto visiting a monastery cum hotel, an archaeological visitors centre and a theatre in the city centre of Porto. At Viana, at the Santa Luzia archaeological site with Gabriel Silva the Heritage Centre architect and Clara, Naziaty discussed with her trip companions about the accessibility issues and the design of the ramps over the ruins. (Photo 5). Later, Gabriel took Naziaty to the heritage building of Teatro Nacional Sao Joao. As someone who studied accessibility of heritage buildings for her doctorate, it was a lively discussion with Gabriel in particular where Naziaty made corroborative statements on the solutions that the heritage centre provided at these places.

All in all, the visit to Porto provided Naziaty with much knowledge and inspiration to continue with her work as an academic and disability activist. More importantly she managed to enjoy travelling alone in her wheelchair, and to take the time to observe her surroundings, something that she rarely does in Malaysia because of her busy schedule or because she is driving her car.

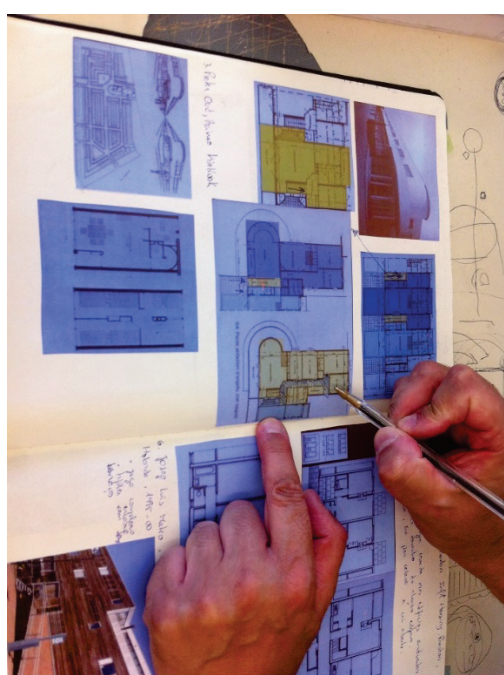


Photo 1: Naziaty met Luis, the coordinator of third year design studio who explained about FAUP's studio curriculum.



Photo 2: This is a second year design studio 1:500 scaled model which was done with mounting boards so that it can be detailed including the windows and allows the individual model to be slotted in.



Photos 3, 4: Naziaty traveled alone most of the time and this was taken by Lia who is an access officer working at the City Council of Porto.



Photo 5: It was a great day at Viana, at the Santa Luzia archaeological site with Gabriel Silva the Heritage Centre architect discussing about the ramps over the ruins solution for accessibility into heritage sites.

### **A post-graduate in Mantua**

Pacilia was a recent architecture graduate from Universiti Malaya, who decided to go to Italy because she always wanted to explore architecture conservation. It was an ideal opportunity to obtain a master's degree at the Politecnico di Milano (Milan Polytechnic), with a fellowship supported by Erasmus Mundus for two years. The prospect was too good for her after working for three years in a few architectural companies since graduation, a proper chance to study again before doing her Part 3 exams in the future in order to be a professional architect. Coincidentally, taking this break from the normal working life, she reflected that this was the best point in her life to do this, with the right timing and moment, with no regrets, although there were personal challenges from social and cultural aspects, which will be discussed later.

Mantua (Mantova) is an UNESCO town rich with architectural and historical significant buildings such as *Palazzo Te*, the *Duomo* and the *Basilica of Sant Andrea*, and many other examples of iconic architecture from the Renaissance period. Although run by Politecnico di Milano, the new masters of science program named 'Architectural Design and History' offers "a study plan to train students to be cultured architects, well-aware of the historic and artistic context in which they work as well as of the other cultural fields" (Politecnico di Milano, 2018). Regarding 'learning', Pacilia remarked on how complexly the subjects of studio. The two years program covered Architecture Design in Heritage Context, History of Architecture, Urban and Landscape Design Studio, Building and Construction Techniques, Sustainability and Built Environment, Urban Preservation Law and Policies, Museography, Design Thesis Work and Internship for 3 months. The program also included a visit to FAUP and Porto.

One of the subject is, architecture heritage design studio which is using a new novel approach. The study sites were historical places related to the history of Mantua. The tutors decided to use the existing buildings, which is then critically analysed and studied to be preserved, for the adaptive re-use approach in the studio projects, which includes studying details of significant arch ways, rooms, other features, fresco and materials. This first-hand method requires the student to review the process of building by thinking what comes first, gradually, where for an opening for example, a 'window arch' construction process. Pacilia noted that she was taught

in a detailed manner, the negative and positive aspects of this novel approach, tracing back the historical change of function and change of use of the building, for example how it was a house which turns into a museum, in a step by step process. Another remarkable workshop which was leading by Eduardo Souto de Moura (Photo 7), a Pritzker Prize winner in 2011, to revitalize a selected site in Porto, to carefully place the new functions buildings such as hospitals accommodation into that site. (Photo 6). Pacilia had benefited a lot from this workshop having the opportunity to visit the Siza's work and to do the field trip study with the students.

Pacilia expressed her admiration for the Italians who are proud in preserving their culture exemplified in their homes which are almost entirely modified inside, but well preserved on the outside. She opined the effort done to preserve their house façade which was more out of respect and pride rather than merely following rules and regulations. Learning about Italian culture, was the most enjoyable part of staying there. Pacilia is close with the Italians, such as her roommate, and she mixed well with different age groups, including younger Italian students of architecture, her roommate's family, church friends and classmates. She views the Italians as a more enclosed and preserved society and not easily to accept others while keeping close to their culture, although younger people are more exposed, especially in sampling different food. Pacilia became more laid back and patient, as the local environment and people take everyday life and issues slowly. She managed a few words in Italian to get by, using gestures and expressions, although the local Italians may have understood English, they have difficulty to speak or don't want to speak. There were no bad encounters as they were very friendly.

The program was officially to be conducted in English but a lot of the discussions were in Italian. During the lectures the professors would speak English but Pacilia felt that they can deliver better in Italian, as she tried to understand and always ask her Italian friends, as many of the projects are in group work format. Furthermore the documents are in Italian, although some Spanish speakers in the group did help. (Photo 8). It was not entirely consistent, where she recalled that they discussed the work again and again, but there was only one time that they needed to read the documentation, so Pacilia did other group work that did not require reading, instead. Almost all of the work are group work, where it is a struggle in the beginning, but later, she changed the way she felt, where she explored a bit more other facets of discovering the place and people. There were also difficulties with the tutors (apart from the lectures) including other visiting and external critics, always talking Italian, though she could guess the ones they translated though they did not usually translate the words she could not understand.

The program included a visit to FAUP and Porto, where Pacilia enjoyed the Porto trip, of which most of it is visiting and talking about Alvaro Siza's works in Porto. She did not know she liked Siza that much until she visited the Boa Nova Tea House facing the sea. She considers Siza's work to belong to the sensitive and thoughtful architecture, which includes the works of Carlos Scarpa in Italy and Geoffrey Bawa in Sri Lanka, all of which she had visited previously. When she had the spare time during weekends and breaks, she went all over Italy including Venice, Verona, Padova, Florence (Photo 10), Naples, Rome and etc. That was when she visited the restoration of an existing building by Scarpa called the Castelvecchio Museum in Verona (Photo 9). The adaptive re-use program of taking an old existing building to become a new museum, though integrated in a modern way, by carefully and respectfully integrating the old and new elements together. Pacilia also visited other countries such as Spain, Switzerland, Netherlands, UK, Ireland and etc.

As a girl from a small town called Banting, the Erasmus Mundus program allows for East to West exchange and vice versa, from staff mobility to students studying academic courses at various places around Europe and Asia. Pacilia went through an experience in character building and she expressed that she is much more at ease conversing with people from different

background. The confidence and maturity that she felt was a natural progression, where she quipped, “100 percent more confident”. She further added that, “I see things in a broader way, am more critical and analytical about what someone else would say. Last time I would just take anything that people said at face value”. Pacilia believes that as a designer and a professional it is important to empathise with people’s needs and one can build a better relationship when possessing this trait. She discovered she became more firm in making decisions, starting from her traveling experience, where she had to make countless decisions whether she could catch the trains and buses. She recognized that this little steps accumulated make huge strides, realizing that until she did it on her own, did she finally see.

Living on her own overseas also affected Pacilia’s religious outlook. She said she was prepared to face the challenges as she believes God has a better plan for her to explore in Italy Europe. She managed to find an Evangelical church despite being in a Catholic country. She mixed with different people, such as an Irish couple who was a full time missionary in the church. The church community helped her a lot to find herself at times when things are rough. Even though it was a positive and significant two years of her life, she encountered egoistical and difficult people although on hindsight the problem with verbal communication was a barrier. She felt that in general, Italians are quite insular and determined in preserving their culture, to foreign people’s dismay. Culturally they try to preserve themselves and will not change, whether it is to do with food, thinking or mannerisms. She said that Malaysians, whom she is one, are more flexible as, “we are consisting of three races and have to learn to tolerate each other.” she remarked Italians love their language, art, music and heritage.

When asked whether she sees herself “working overseas”, Pacilia said that she is opened to the idea to go overseas if there is an opportunity for employment, adding that she prefers a medium size architecture company rather than an international company. However, her priority now is to complete her Malaysian Architecture Board’s Professional Part 3 examinations to be a registered architect. The idea of professionalism was also gained from the Italian experience as she said that accepting other people’s ideas is important, and is the same, when working or studying. She said, “It is not about whether one’s ideas are better than others but to explore the best ideas in the situation, therefore one must consider the best ideas”. She added that, “the person must be a humble person so that she is able to accept other views”.

Finally, when asked to reflect whether her two-year experience in Italy was *the* reason her current employer took her in (her overseas living experience and architectural exposure), she agreed that it *might* be as she feels she is now bold enough to interact with people regardless of their nationality. In fact these days she enjoys holding a conversation with her international clients.





Photo 6: Pacilia was presenting the site analysis during the workshop which was lead by Eduardo Souto de Moura.



Photo 7: During the final review, Pacilia with Eduardo Souto de Moura



Photo 8: Group photograph at the end of the presentation.

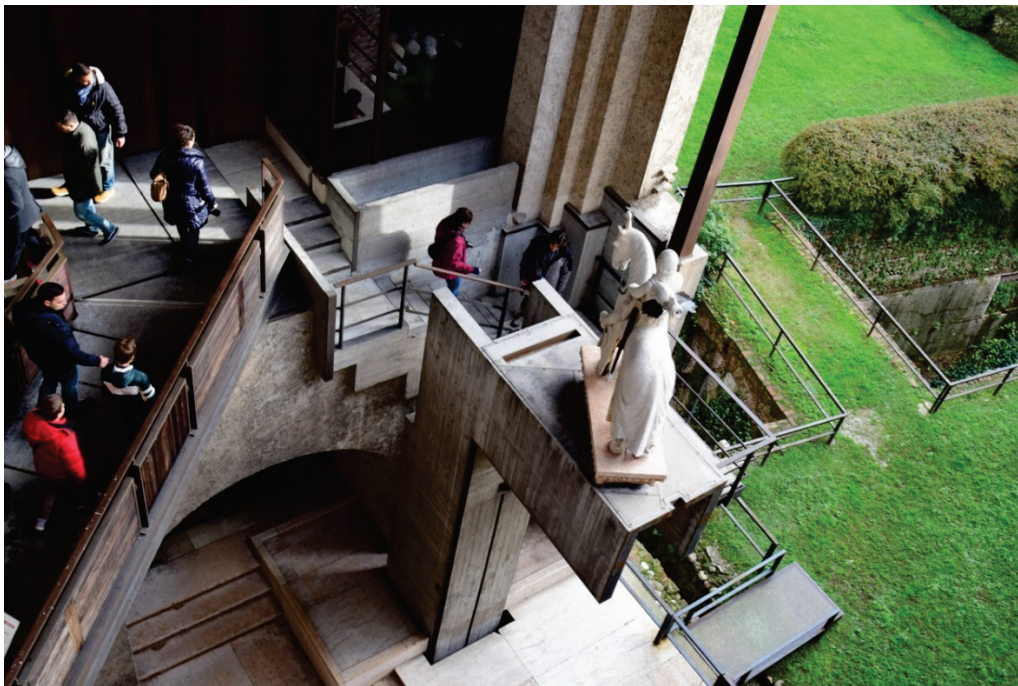


Photo 9: Castelvecchio Museum in Verona.



Photo 10: Florence City taken from a high vantage point by Pacilia, who loves photography.

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