

Life after MARYStudio

Three years of collaboration between ISI Florence Architecture Program and School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation at the University of Maryland

Spring 2017

The 2017 Spring Semester marked the beginning of the partnership between the ISI Florence Architecture Program and the School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation at the University of Maryland (aka UMD).

In January that year, a first group of six shy undergraduate students made themselves comfortable at the desks of the architecture studio that I usually teach. Broadly speaking, the main objective of that course is the ‘discovery’ of both context and all the tools that allow designers to navigate unknown environments. More specifically, that Spring Semester the design goal was a housing program in the south district of “Firenze,” just outside the medieval city walls.

The small group of undergraduate students from University of Maryland was joined with their peers from Marywood University. This first ‘mixed team’ laid the foundations for the MARYStudio (also nicknamed Merrystudio by the same group). From then on, the second floor of Palazzo Bargagli came to be known as MARYStudio. At the end of that semester, I found this moving thank-you note attached to the door of my office.

Spring 2018

In Spring 2018 a cohort of 11 students from the UMD School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, left College Park to join ISI Florence. More precisely, they were headed for the so-called MARYStudio on the second floor of Palazzo Bargagli in “Firenze.”

That semester the Studio worked on two different assignments: first, the extension of the local Museo Bardini as part of a design ‘charrette’ organized in collaboration with Dutch students from TU Delft; second,

Franco,

To our architectural father! Thank you for an amazing and fun semester. You taught us so much about the true Firenze and architecture. You made our stay here fun, interesting, and educational. This experience has shaped us all as architects and people, and you played an important role in that. Most importantly, you taught us to resist the urge to be cool and to love architecture, design, and that being happy is most important. We will try our best to make you proud in the future!

-The Merry
Studio

the project of an art gallery to be located in Piazza Tasso, a very peculiar neighborhood in the city's historic district.

That Spring Semester, UMD student Alicia Moreira won the ISI Florence best student award for architecture.

After their semester abroad, UMD undergraduate architecture students attend the Fall Semester studio with their peers back in the States; that academic term usually ends with the Senior Intra-Studio Design Competition. On average, more than 50 students participate in it with their fourth-year studio projects. That Fall Semester, three out of eleven students who studied in "Firenze" were shortlisted; one of the two prize winners was among them.

That was definitely a rewarding moment for the ISI Florence architecture program; even more remarkably, the same thing happened the following year, when many of the awarded students spent a semester abroad at the MARYStudio. Sure enough, such results are not necessarily achieved thanks to particularly gifted tutors. More likely, they have to do with the daily stimuli to intellectual curiosity and cultural engagement that students can (and should) receive during their semester abroad. Usually, questions are more important than answers. I don't know if students are intellectually curious before going abroad (and if that is the reason why they make such a decision) or if they become so once here, because of a remarkably challenging and demanding environment. Whatever the case, I'm convinced that as students ponder the importance of studying abroad during their semester at ISI Florence they see their own intellectual curiosity increase.

The first three years of partnership with the UMD School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation have been fruitful and successful above expectations. Below is a series of thank-you notes that I received from UMD students who studied with me in the last years.

Franco Pisani, *MARYStudio Coordinator*

On my last day in Firenze, somehow now two years ago, I visited La Specola for the first time. The museum was filled with anatomic human models and rooms with walls covered in taxidermized birds, insects and reptiles. It was a fascinatingly uncomfortable experience, which I now see as fitting to have ended my semester abroad.

I was privileged to have experienced discomfort on so many occasions that semester, pulling myself whenever possible from routines and the culture I knew well. During a trip through Verona, Vicenza and the Veneto region to visit works of architecture by Carlo Scarpa, I was struck by compositions Scarpa created through many small elements — my professor commented that “sometimes arbitrariness becomes rationality.” I think this is true not only for architecture, but also for the places, cities and cultures that they divulge. In order to get a glimpse of the rational, you need to be willing to step into the arbitrary.

Learning to look for uncomfortable experiences has made me a more aware, curious and confident person. As I now get some sense of comfort from traveling in Europe, having lived there for four months and understanding pieces of its cultures, I have been able to push myself to travel to places that make me more nervous. Between the time I returned from Florence and the end of this year, I will have traveled to one Central and three South American countries. I will have placed myself in four countries that I know little about, with cultures that feel even farther from my own despite geographic proximity. My willingness to step outside of what I know can be attributed so much to what I learned and whom I learned from when I was most uncomfortable in Firenze.

Alicia Moreira, Spring 18

Spring 2019

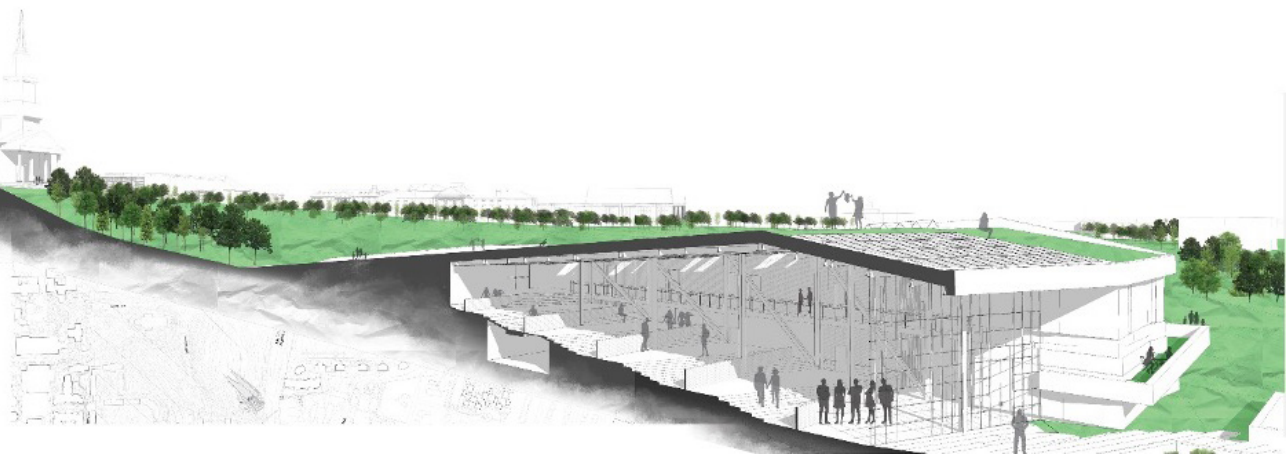
If you compiled a ‘supercut’ of our trip to Italy it would go something like this...

Stomach lurches at touchdown... Immediate wonder... Sea of languages... Cupola, Ponte, Piazzale... Uneven cobblestone... Ruins and Towers... Prosecco atop the Bastillion... Unimaginable places... Extraordinary people.

Our opportunity was staggeringly extraordinary. Roughly one third of our Junior class (19 students) packed up our studio desks in December. We made preparations to spend the next four months studying architecture in the Renaissance City. Then, suddenly, we were surrounded by terracotta and travertine, living it.

As a testament to everything we absorbed while abroad, $\frac{1}{5}$ of our Florentine cohort became award recipients upon our return to Maryland. As competitors in the Senior Intra-Studio Design Competition, we have all agreed that subconsciously or not, we each drew upon our experiences abroad. Earning second prize, Mafe Farieta created Greenscape, taking third place was Node by Ben Ripley, and honorable mention was awarded to Ryan Muir's for creating a sanctuary-like space that he called Ripple. Rounding out the Florentine contestants was Alex Hall who won first prize for her project, re-CAPTURE. Five out of the six award recipients of the competition had participated in the study abroad experience in Florence, a clear depiction of the program's influence. However, the program's renowned Renaissance gravitas was overlaid with thousands of ordinary discoveries.

The Spring'19 crew



The ISI Florence study abroad experience allowed me to grow both personally and professionally. Living in Florence as an international student and experiencing the city for the first time, taught me the value of the historical layers that make up its essence. It developed a curiosity in me to look beyond the surface and question why things are the way they are and where they came from. My project while abroad took place in the Baluardo della Ginevra, where the characteristic color, texture, and pattern of the remains of the Roman walls played a major role on the uniqueness of the site and the project as a whole. With the guidance of professor Franco Pisani, Stefano Corazzini and Simone Barbi, our team designed a three-artist residence focused on enhancing the artists' experience in relation to the importance of the context where each "villa" was oriented and designed to frame a specific landmark visible from the site to inspire the artists.

As an architecture major, the opportunity to take a studio abroad has had a tremendous impact on my design sensitivity to truly understand, value, and experience the context of a project with attention to the smallest details. Coming back to the University of Maryland, the fourth-year studio competition culminated with the highest recognitions for stu-



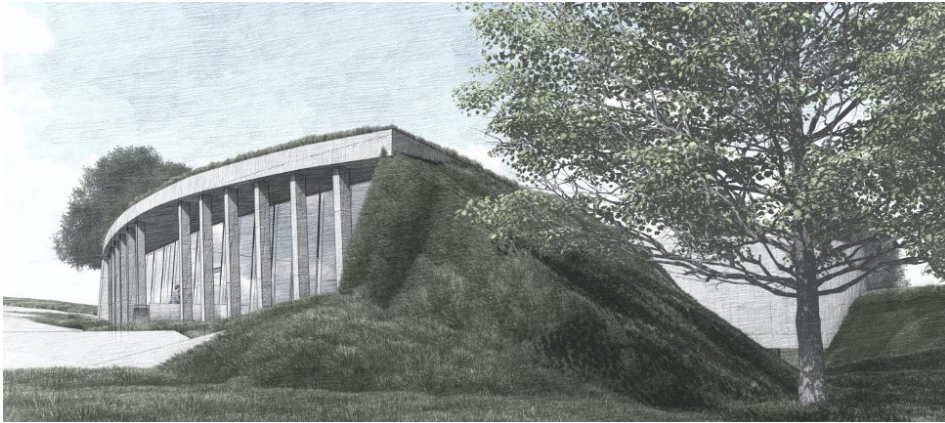
dents that participated in the Florence studio. Personally, I have been able to approach my studio projects with a different perspective that takes special consideration of the context of a site. Not to mention, practicing the use of the metric system and getting accustomed to Italian proportions pushed me to explore new possibilities. My most recent studio project at UMD was a sustainable building that imposes a minimal impact on the characteristics and importance of the context as a green field.

Overall, I am extremely grateful for the opportunity I had to study in Florence and even more so to see the positive impact it continues to have on my academic career and beyond.

Maria Fernanda Farieta, *Spring 19*

My rain jacket flapped in the wind as I carefully stepped around the coastal brush; with each step, orange clay clung to my sneakers. The teal waves of the Mediterranean Sea swayed in my eyes as the tower came into view. As I approached the Torre di Cala Domestica, a sense of surrealism ensued. The mystique of the stone structure captivated my imagination. I could imagine Spanish soldiers guarding the island from pirates, the nearby port teeming with mineral exports, and World War II soldiers climbing up the wrought iron ladder dangling from the facade. The tower's grandeur is in part due to its being atop a hill, surrounded by low-lying ground cover. This absence of built context allows the tower to rise up from the crashing waves below, its edifice distinctly outlined. In this way, the tower has a powerful approach, while remaining sympathetic to the natural material palette of the coastline.

To define this structure only as a stone fortress would be dishonest to the emotional impact of the Torre di Cala Domestica. As one of hundreds of homogeneous war forts dotting the coast of Sardinia, this particular tower inhales its significance from its settings. To ignore this sensory quality would steal the unique convergence of time, place, and material from the tower, and this particular Sardinian 'Torre' would cease to stand out.



That is the type of experience that inspires one to become an architect; it is a balance between the discovery of history, the inspiration of nature and a passion to shape the future. One of the most enthralling architectural illusions to me is the suspension of time and place when experiencing a space. The emotional conditions at the Torre were irrefutably significant, even though the structure itself was of systematic form. Design allows an architect to place its occupants into any given moment in history. This is a poetic power, one that is not easily attainable.

The simple, yet extraordinary perception of that coastal tower was a unique byproduct of studying in Florence for four months. The educational collaboration with the University of Maryland and the faculty at ISI allowed my peers and me to experience European architecture in a raw way. It was untainted by textbook jargon and allowed each one of us to place our own judgments upon every space we stumbled across. The tower upon the sea wasn't something I had ever learned about in class, nor was it even detailed on the internet without sufficient digging; that experience was completely our own. We were the only ones climbing the orange tinged cliffs that dreary morning, but somehow it felt like my mind had been flooded by the history it represented. By participating in the Florence study abroad experience, ordinary moments became surreal,

and that type of exhilaration is what compels me to pursue architecture.

Alex Hall, *Spring 19*

Studying architecture and theory in Florence definitely influenced my perception of architecture, but more so living in Florence for four months, partaking in the culture, influenced my perception of life and how to best live it. There are many things that I appreciate about how Americans live life, but it required me to live in another country to realize my appreciation for things that had never occurred to me at home. You will learn to love your lack of dependency on a vehicle. You will learn to love 'piazze' and the effect they have on the urban fabric. You will learn to love the night life, which is not just bars and clubs, but secret bakeries and 'focaccia.' You will learn to love stopping at the market, right down the street from your apartment to pick up fresh food for dinner that night.... And, of course, you will learn to love the architecture.

Since coming back home, I have tried to hold on to some of these things. The way the US is built makes it difficult, but the best way to bring a part of Italy home is in theory and practice. As architects, try to focus on the intentionality of Italian life and architectural design and implement that in your own practice.

Ryan Muir, *Spring 19*



It's hard to express just how much studying abroad in Florence impacted my growth as a person and a designer. Living in the city, and being able to fully immerse myself into the culture, has impacted me in so many unexpected ways. In fact, it's so challenging to hone in and define specific ways in which this experience helped me, because it didn't have just a small change or impact, but rather completely altered who I am as a person.

I learned so much about myself and my friends, and was able to forge strong, lasting relationships throughout my time in Florence. Also, through this experience, I gained a wonderful new lens with which to view and envision architecture.

The design studio was an especially unique and valuable experience for me, as we worked in pairs for the entirety of the semester on our design projects. This forced both me and my partner to work on our ability to communicate design ideas to each other at every stage of the project, which I've found to be an incredibly valuable skill to have. This studio experience, combined with the opportunity to visit and study numerous significant historical landmarks, provided an opportunity and experience that I fully recommend for every student.

Ben Ripley, Spring 19