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RESEARCHING AT CAL POLY: MY ACADEMIC AND PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

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The CRP Department has an international exchange agreement with the School of Architecture and Urbanism at the Federal University of Brazil, Rio de Janeiro, in which students and faculty participate. In 2009, Patricia Cavalcanti, a PhD candidate, came to Cal Poly to develop part of her research on environmental perception and the design of health care facilities. After six months of very hard work and just before returning to Brazil, she wrote about her experience.

From August 8, 2009 to February 8, 2010 I was a visiting research fellow at the CRP department, as a participant of the exchange program with the School of Architecture, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. Just before coming I had started my third year in PhD in Architecture program and part of my field research and case studies on the health care design, specifically on “day hospitals” and infusion centers – units where patients spend some hours or a day on a recurrent basis. My dissertation is focused on understanding patients’ and companions’ perception and behavior in order to identify features of their environment that could contribute to their well being physically and psychologically. My methodology is based on environmental perception and post-occupancy evaluation (POE).

The opportunity to participate in this exchange program and to spend some time at Cal Poly was an amazing experience and I would like to briefly describe it, writing a little about both my research and personal accomplishments. I hope that in doing this I can encourage others to do the same, participating in this or other exchange programs; besides this program the CRP department has links with Switzerland, Mexico, and Honduras, and Cal Poly has so many others. Living and studying abroad is an incredible opportunity that adds immensely to our growth both as a person and a professional.

Academic Experience

My main goal in spending some time at Cal Poly was to deepen the studies that I had already started developing in Brazil. I was finished with all my classes, had done a lot of reading, and had developed several parts of my field research including a case study of a major day hospital’s infusion center. However, in order have a broader understanding of my theme I wanted to know a little bit more about the North American state-of-the-art design in Day Hospitals and Infusion Centers (for chemotherapy, arthritis, HIV, etc). I was also planning to try to do the second case study for my dissertation here, although I was not sure if it would be possible given the privacy concerns that usually overwhelm healthcare facilities all over the world. In Cal Poly, my local supervisor was professor Vicente del Rio, coordinator of the Brazil exchange program at CRP, and Daniel Levi, professor at the Psychology and Child Development Department.

As soon as I arrived, I started planning exploratory visits to infusion centers, one of the phases of my methodology. I completed these visits to 17 infusion centers –most of them for chemotherapy– located in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Long Beach, San Diego, and in the San Luis Obispo area. These short visits allowed me to better understand US infusion centers, their users, physical settings and activities, and they also helped me discussing my research with healthcare professionals and hearing their opinions. These visits allowed me to register direct observations of the environments, draw their lay-out and register all objects, take photographs (without featuring patients or personnel), and also to interview one staff member in each.

During my visits to all these infusion centers I discussed the possibility of doing an in-depth case study there. I was authorized to do so by one of these institutions, and went back to spend 7 days there, applying the same research methods that I had used in the case study in Brazil, with no significant adjustments: walkthrough analysis, direct and systematic observations, wish poems, visual mapping, survey and visual cues. At this unit, I was fortunate to count on the collaboration of the staff who not only agreed in participating in the study and respond to my survey questionnaires, but also encouraged the patients and their companions to do the same.

In addition to the exploratory visits and the case study, I interviewed several healthcare architects and health care professionals, including from Kaiser Permanente in San Francisco, who shared with me some of their knowledge on day hospitals and infusion centers. Apart from the travels to other cities, I dedicated most of my time here to my literature review, studying books and on-line journals at Cal Poly's Kennedy Library. I should add that I also took classes that added a lot to my training: Environmental Psychology with professor Daniel Levy, and Computer Graphic Skills with Vangeli Evangelopoulos from the Landscape Architecture Department.

Without any fear of overstating, visiting all these hospitals and health facilities, talking to all these professionals, and doing a lot of reading widened immensely my understanding of healthcare architecture, enriched a lot my research, and contributed to a significant part of my dissertation which I expect to be able to defend by mid 2010. Needless to say that all this had an incredibly positive impact in my professional practice as an architect.

Personal Experience

I would also like to write some lines about my personal experience while here. This was a wonderful time for me that fulfilled my academic needs and overcame all my expectations. I had always wanted to experience living abroad and I certainly intend to do it again in the future.



Figure 2
One of the infusion centers studied by Patricia while at Cal Poly.



Figure 1
Patricia in Morro Bay.

Living abroad means opening yourself to other cultures, it means trying to understand and experience life and life styles through other perspectives, and this was awesome. So many things are just different –like the meaning of lunch or having dinner so early– while others are just the same, like friendship, studies and leisure. Unfortunately, I am aware that I missed a lot of things, because it takes one time to get used to all the novelties. But I really think the most important and essential things do not vary that much between the Brazilian and the American cultures, we are just the same –perhaps the big difference being we can dance the “samba”... There are also a lot of things from here that I will miss as soon as I arrive in my hometown.

I will certainly miss a lot the new friends I have made here. Everybody at Cal Poly was so welcoming and nice, and they definitely created a wonderful atmosphere for me and other international students. I would like to take this opportunity and thank all the attention that I received from students, faculty, staff, and friends in general. I would like to thank specially professors Vicente del Rio and Daniel Levi, and Kathy Lehmkuhl at the CRP office, for helping me in the most varied ways and solving all difficulties that showed up during my short stay. Thank you also to professors William Siembieda and Hemalata Dandekar, respectively former and present department heads.

I will miss San Luis Obispo a lot, it’s gorgeous landscape, the hikings, the beaches, the downtown, and the strong sense of community that seems to exist; all these impressed me profoundly and in a very positive way. I will miss travelling to other Californian towns too –although done for my research these travels were no sacrifice at all. Visiting these places was fun and an opportunity to learn architecture and urbanism by experiencing it. And mind you that all my commuting and my travelling to other cities was done in public transportation –bus and train– since I did not have a car while living here!

I did spend a really good time here and I believe I have learned and grown with this experience. I think that being far from home makes you think a lot about your life, your values... It is like a retreat that you do without realizing. You look at a lot of new things outside, and reconstruct a lot of things inside of you. After a while, what was new just becomes familiar, and the new town becomes a new home and a part of your background.



Figure 3
Patricia with CRP’s international crowd: department head Hemalata Dandekar, and faculty members Vicente del Rio, Umut Toker, Cornelius Nuworsoo, and Zeljka Howard.