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Early-stage visiting scholars: spaces, roles and issues

Mario Paris

As pointed out by Olesen (2018), many authors in planning literature discussed the pedagogical aspects of study abroad. The debate happened in special issues and dedicated sections in Journal of Planning Education and Research (1995), Planning Theory & Practice (2004), European Journal of Spatial Development (2005), and Planning Theory (2016–2017) or in institutional conferences as the AESOP Annual of Heads of Schools Meetings. However, very few authors reflected on a contemporary condition in which scholars and students are both involved in transcultural experiences at the same time, engaging unfamiliar environments, dealing with unaccustomed cultural, disciplinary and socio-economic contexts. This aspect, habitual in the UK and overseas universities, is a novelty for Southern Europe and especially for Italy, where the process of internationalization of higher education is only at an early stage. In this phase, several universities experimented with the attraction of international students, but the amount of non-Italian or not Italian-educated professors and lecturers is still limited. In parallel, the current competition in planning schools imposes, especially to early-stage scholars, to going international. This process requires a higher availability to move abroad, fast and often not-completely conscious encounters with foreign literature and planning cultures, and problematic – but enriching – adaptations of personal knowledge to stranger contexts and issues.

This paper discusses the role of young visiting scholars engaged as teachers in planning fields, starting from a set of personal experiences where I was involved as an instructor or supporting other colleagues in their academic activity. In my opinion, this issue requires a careful discussion about spaces, practices, and issues related to the condition of ‘playing outside’. How does the visiting professor build up an effective learning environment in an unknown context? Are tasks and activities different when teaching out of the comfort zone, in an unknown space with disoriented non-local students? In parallel, as members of the academic community, we should reflect on the added value of hosting visiting scholars for planning schools. However, which is the impact of these experiences in the development of scholar profile and career? In order to answer these questions, the paper is structured in three parts. The first part discusses the context of global planning education and the not-easy situation in which scholars are expected to define a common ground with students, focusing on the spatial dimension of their action. The second part presents a tentative taxonomy for those roles that

During their international residencies, young scholars in the field of urban planning, act as critical readers and contamination enablers among disciplinary cultures. When students stay abroad, they feel like strangers, not sharing the same planning approach and/or cultural roots with their classmates or teachers. This distance is due to their different origins or the specific imprinting of their education. Also, scholars deal with these feeling, especially when they are at early-carrier stage. In this light, international experience is more than a translation process. It requires taking an adaptive approach to the hosting academic community, to its cultural environment and institutional patterns. Starting from his experiences as a researcher and lecturer abroad, the author explores issues related to the influence of space and the roles he played during his stays.

Keywords: early-stage scholars; studies abroad; adaptive approach

L’esperienza del giovane ‘visiting’: spazi, ruoli, temi
Durante i loro soggiorni internazionali, i giovani accademici nel campo della pianificazione urbanistica divennero veicolo di letture critiche e contaminazioni tra culture. Quando uno studente decide di provare un’esperienza all’estero può sentirsi estraneo al contesto in cui approda, poiché non condivide lo stesso approccio progettuale e/o le radici culturali con i compagni e gli insegnanti. Questa distanza può essere dovuta al fatto che proviene da un contesto profondamente diverso o all’impronta specifica della sua educazione. Ma anche gli accademici possono sperimentare queste sensazioni, specialmente quando sono allo stadio iniziale della loro carriera. A partire dalle sue esperienze di ricercatore e docente all’estero, l’autore esplora temi legati all’influenza dello spazio e ai ruoli che ha interpretato durante i suoi soggiorni nel suo processo di formazione.

Parole chiave: giovani ricercatori; formazione all’estero; adattamento

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scholars abroad play with international students and hosting institutions. Later, the paper reflects on issues for early-stage scholars engaged in transnational teaching activities, focusing on risks and challenges related to these experiences. The conclusions focus on those enrichments that a young scholar achieves through abroad stays and their impact on his career development.

**Spaces**

A stay as visiting teacher in a foreign architecture or planning program represents an immersion in a cultural environment, an opportunity of interdisciplinary exchange and direct experience with diverse research agendas and approaches to research as developed elsewhere in the world (Hall, Tarrow, 1998). Pushed by a foreign educator, students should learn to «understand world linkages not as a separate subject on which students should be instructed but, rather, as a context within which many of the current social, economic, environmental, and political issues should be analyzed and understood» (Auffrey, Romanos, 2001: 353)

The ability to move between mainstream concepts and local realities is a strong task for those who decide to experience a trans-national teaching or research stay. In the peculiar condition of ‘being abroad,’ the space in which the early-stage visiting scholar, the hosting institution, students and professors interact becomes the mediator of these multifaceted relationships. The term ‘space’ is in this paper intended as a buzzword, which gathers together different meanings. The first is the space intended as the venues of the university – as a container, as an institution, as a hub of networks – that is the physical support of this encounter, but also the subject that defines management strategies oriented to the internationalization and the attraction of foreign talents. The second is the space as an urban system in which the university is located. Marked by specific historical, spatial, and socio-economic conditions, it became the habitat of students and, sometimes, of scholars for a variable amount of time. At the same time, it is a testing ground that allows easy-and-fast empirical observations of phenomena and dynamics and the side-by-side comparison and, at the same time, the trait d’union of a set of stimuli, events, and opportunities. The third meaning is the space as an area regulated by a specific normative approach, shaped by a recognizable planning culture with references, schoolmasters and relevant – but sometimes not immediately understandable – contradictions. The fourth meaning intends space as trading-zone. ‘Trading zone’ is a concept introduced by Peter Galison in his social scientific research on how scientists representing different sub-cultures and paradigms have been able to coordinate their interaction locally. Galison, as pointed out by Balducci and Mäntysalo (2013: 2), noticed that innovation and paradigm change occur «through interaction between groups belonging to different disciplinary fields which, although they have different objectives and viewpoints, use forms of exchange.»

In the experience of studies abroad, the use, the analysis, and the reflection about physical space is the form in which visiting scholars establish contact with students. Even working with foreign people that have no experience or previous knowledge about a place, the space as a collection of living practices, uses, and interactions, is a rich container of phenomena to study. As a lecturer in MSc and Ph.D. programs in Spain and teacher of international students of architecture in BSc and MSc levels in Italy, I worked in deep on this explorative dimension, and I pushed students focusing on specific singularities of contexts and registering practices and ongoing forms of inhabit spaces. This point allowed me to introduce a set of methodologies of data collection, and to present tools and techniques. Through these tasks, I showed students what they could learn, avoiding the need for starting from shared references, and partially exceeding cultural diversities. Amongst different activities related to this first tasks, common surveys and macro-group reflections about the ‘first encounters’ of space are two key elements of my contributions in abroad teaching programs. Experiencing a space together with students is a way to define a common ground, where who do not know anything about an area has a basic and fast introduction of a site and who is already familiar with a place can share personal perspectives about it. During the preparation of survey activities, students should understand that a site visit is a way in which they produce an original material about their area, that will integrate the information they can extract from existing literature and official data about a place. This point is useful even because through this personal and original production, students do not depend exclusively from existing official documents, that are often not easily accessible to foreign people or, as happened with many planning documents in Italy and Spain, not translated in non-native languages. Moreover, the comparative approach is quite common, and students frequently identify similarities and differences between proposed areas and places that they already know. This process increases the sample of cases and situations that students and teacher can work with, sharing new cases and examples.

**Roles**

In a recent editorial of *Journal of Planning Education and Research* (Aa.Vv., 2018), authors identified four recurring steps (inventing, producing, reproducing, deconstructing) that define a learning process in emerging nations, in which foreign scholars and return-ing students are drivers for the interaction between local cultures (key references, authors, examples) and global concepts (accepted good practices, shared concepts, mainstream paradigms). According to the authors, this contamination could produce productively bounded academic communities (Grinnell, 1992).

When a visiting scholar takes an abroad experience, moves between these steps, and plays different roles at the same time becoming more than a foreign teacher. He is an active agent between different cultures. This contamination contributes to the academic community of the visited institution, but also the original environment of the scholar.

For different reasons, the universities (Universidad de Valladolid and Politecnico di Milano) where I had the opportunity to teach, had a strong push in their internationalization programs, and I have been called to interact with classes composed by students coming from several different countries at the same time. In this case, the scholar must take into account different attitudes and sensibilities to the planning issues, acting as a link between his approach and the ones of the class. In parallel, as said, often,
class groups are composed of students with different cultural backgrounds. Moreover, acting as a bonding device, the visiting scholar interacts with the individual sensitiveness and attitudes of students. Diversities represent a work field where the teacher plays a challenging role. In these cases, the scholar should act as a balancing factor, stimulating those students that adopt a passive approach in being involved, pushing them out of their 'comfort zone.' In this light, I reflected with several colleagues if the work in a smaller group can be an opportunity. This option represents a possible solution for those intimidated by the crowd and public-speaking but involves a serious question about which kind of groups to set-up in a multi-cultural class working on planning issues. On the one hand, the formation of mixed groups could be an enriching experience for the students but, on the other hand, the presence of fellows that share specific roots, languages skills or background seems to strengthen the confidence of the most reluctant students. Often, the solution consists in the definition of trans-national groups, where components belong to different countries and where are allowed only a few compresences. Therefore, issues with groups, selection of case-studies or field of work impose to the visiting scholar to be a sort of referee, that sets up few, but clear rules and ensures that students respect these norms as in normal classes but paying specific attention to cultural sensitiveness and plurality.

Tacking part to the Contemporary City program and Milan International Architectural design Workshop in Polimi, I noticed that along with the different editions, this double role of connector and referee challenged the idea of the teaching teams about the course and the expected results. This pressure imposed continuous adjustments on how we communicate with students, and explain issues and tasks, to improve the exchange of knowledge with different students and between students and teachers. Therefore, this changing framework with mobile borders imposes a strong need for receiving feedback from the student groups, a benchmark that the exchange is fruitful. In some cases, we provided notification forms or specific moments in which we discussed with groups, or their representants, in order to refine our pedagogic strategies.

The interaction with students produces a fertile base for exploring current issues of planning studies debates, but the work of the visiting comprehends several different duties, not all of them related to teaching tasks. The definition of a syllabus, the preparation of lectures, conferences, and appointments, the research collaborations with local colleagues are demanding responsibilities where he casts its background, dealing with an uneasy 'translation' process. As recognized by Torselli (2004) and Curi (2010), the term traduzione (translation) in Italian is a derivation from the Latin trádere (to carry, to transmit, to lead). This root originated other words that are key concepts in the experience of a visiting scholar, as tradizione (tradition) and tradimento (treason). This labile border has also been discussed in other events, as a plenary session of Annual SIU (Società Italiana degli Urbanisti) conference in 2014, coordinated by Attilio Belli, and remarks that in translation processes there is a strong accent in the transition (other terms with the same root) of a specific corpus of ideas, a precise knowledge. However, this passage is not a neutral movement, and often, the process enriches these concepts. While presenting ideas and methodologies to foreign audiences, the scholar is forced to synthesize and simplify notions that belong to his background and that he is used to working with, in order to make them understandable for an international public. At the same time, through the filter of a new language, ideas achieve new meanings, thanks to a new perspective provided by a different distance from the scholar, and the issue that he is discussing. In this process, a smart visiting scholar should also involve a set of knowledge and concepts that he discovers in the local context that is dealing with or provided by the discussion with its students, and colleagues. This continuous influence between the consolidated background and new lessons learned by the scholars represent an added – needed, from my point of view – value for his experience as a researcher. After a stay abroad, he carries on several new reflections developed in a fertile context and, also, he achieved a fresh and original impression about his cultural environment from an external point of view.

Therefore, the role of contaminator played by the visiting scholar continues over time, not only during his stay but also when he goes back to his native context. In my personal experience as a Ph.D. in Spain, or as a Visiting Ph.D. in the UK, I stayed in research centers where I had the opportunity to interact and work with several researchers and colleagues. In these experiences, I shared my approach, and local interlocutors generously discussed my work, suggesting references, case studies, and literature that I would never discover staying only in a place, and their feedbacks enriched my research.

**Issues**

Abroad teaching and research experiences have a role in the approach of early-carrier scholars, pushing them to focus on several issues that in the home-based situation, normally should get unnoticed. In this light, I will propose three issues related to abroad stays, focusing on those key elements of this kind of experiences.

**Early-stage scholars: a peculiar profile**

This contribution reflects about early-stage scholars as privileged subjects for abroad stays, for three main reasons. At first, the current generation of young scholars is the first that had the opportunity to be educated in a more and more interconnected academic system, experimenting mobility (Erasmus and Erasmus+ or MSCA programs) and internationalization within institutional frameworks and not as personal choices. On the other hand, the increasing competitiveness of the academic world and the growing networks of academic institutions pushed young lecturers and researchers to explore international opportunities, and many universities – according to us practices – are promoting a more structured hiring system, where the development of an international educational and research path is an added value and not a limit. This innovative approach will push more colleagues to experiment these abroad activities, and I think that a summary of a set of experiences in this field, could be of interest. The third reason is related to the approach that a young scholar should involve in those stays. Universities and institutions that provide opportunities for early-stage academics are looking for specific profiles, with
solid backgrounds but still flexible and open to the interaction with local realities. Therefore, one of the most recognized criteria within the selection process is that hosting institutions prefer well educated and competitive scholars, already used to stay abroad, in order to involve in those experiences top-ranking profiles that are adaptable, even if not expert or worldwide recognized.

In these situations, scholars should show a strong engagement, underlining that they can adapt and re-shape their methodologies and teaching strategies, interacting with local conditions, colleagues and students but, at the same time, they bring a concrete knowledge, based in their profiles and works. Moreover, they are expected to contribute to the local academic community with their teaching methodologies, pushing students to deal with innovative topics and through different approaches. From the scholars' point of view, the balance between flexibility and adaptation, curiosity for the local and ability to present a concrete and definite personal research track represents the key to making this experience fertile and fruitful.

Fixed-term experience
Stays related to academic activities are fixed-term experiences, developed within agreements or under-addressed invitations, that include a definite timetable. Luckily, those arrangements are flexible enough to be adjusted to the evolution of the relationship between the scholar and the hosting institution or the students, but limits exist and then, the ‘abroad condition’ which is the core of this contribution, is temporary. Therefore, during all the experience the scholar should take into account in parallel his two different affiliations (the original one and the hosting one) maintaining contacts and improving their interaction, but also identifying and taking advantage of the peculiarities of each one of them. At the same time, he should understand the potential of his position as a threshold between two cultures and be able to enhance their exchange. Several times those stays ended up with a new phase of the carrier of the visiting, involving personal living choices and new challenges for the scholar, that choose to move in the hosting institution. Even is a quite typical situation, this option changes the perspective of this article, and for this reason, I will keep it on the background, focusing more on returning scholars.

The risk is that during the stay, the scholar experiments a sort of ‘loneliness’. He is eradicated from its environment and immersed in a closed community where local institutions, colleagues, or students could be unable to identify a visiting scholar as a resource and not as a competitor. Moreover, the interaction with the visitor is seen sometimes as a time-consuming but politically-correct task and not a mutual enrichment. This condition as a ‘stranger in a stranger land’ (Heinlein, 1961) can be frustrating and even if the interaction is a challenging duty, visiting scholar should maximize his exchange activities with the hosting scientific community. Therefore, interviews, dialogues, meetings, and social events are a relevant part of the mission of the young scholar during a stay, that he should solve moving between institutional hierarchies and personal relationships, setting up his network. During this kind of experiences, there is a personal enrichment that exceeds the ‘pure’ research opportunity, and he should enjoy the immersion as much as possible.

Links need effort
Previous sections underline that studies abroad are a field in which personal relationships, existing and growing networks, and interactions are key elements for fertile contamination among planning cultures, teaching approaches, and international research. Therefore, the network – as a structure based on people and links – is the dimension in which young scholars should focus, in order to identify specific groups of interests and references that could support the development of their profile. In this light, the exploration of the opportunities, the definition of a set of figures, institutions and actors that could support the activities of young scholars, and the experience of planned stays are three tasks that require intense efforts, often with a certain degree of uncertainty in the results. This point is even more relevant if we take into account that the network formed during an abroad activity needs even more energy once the stay finishes, and from the original institution the young scholar should keep alive and updated the links with his hosts.

The definition of a medium-long term strategy based on appointments with abroad colleagues, or a scouting activity in which the young scholar could intersect founds and opportunities to reinforce the created link, are two key duties for transforming the ‘visiting scholar’ figure in a more solid reference for the host institution. At the same time, playing with different spatial dimensions and its potential roles, a young visiting scholar reinforce its own profile, becoming another node of a growing network that will involve more and more universities, research centres and other institutions that are used to practice the international dimension and the opportunities provided by the knowledge exchange based on abroad stays.

Conclusions and open questions
The aim of this paper is reflecting on the figure of young scholars in planning fields involved it short-medium stays abroad and interacting with international students, framing these experiences and exceeding the anecdotal reports. Practicing and teaching as an expert in an unknown context, require an adaptive behavior to the young academic. This adaptation tests his background, challenges his sensibility, and stresses his enthusiasm. At the same time, these experiences are drivers for personal and cultural enrichment where the immersion provides stimulating contact with other approaches and cultures in the field of planning. Through abroad stays, the teacher achieves the ability to investigate new teaching methods as pointed out by Tolstoj (1967: 34). «Above all, not blind adherence to one method but the conviction that all methods are one-sided, and the best method would be the one which would answer to all the possible difficulties incurred to his students, that is not a method but art and talent.»

In this context, the scholar develops a personal approach to teaching: a real reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983) where the attitude is the key factor. Therefore, a generous investment in terms of time and interest, continuous communication with colleagues, students and coordinators and a strong commitment to getting involved in new activities are three elements that the visiting professor should use to break the barriers and establish a real exchange with the academic community and students. However, can universities as institutions, support this process of integration? The formality of current administrative protocols
slows down the spontaneous involvement of visiting scholars and sets rigid limits, imposing them a set of organizational obligations and bureaucratic requirements difficult to fulfill even for locals. Nevertheless, the exchange between scholars and students is easier when it takes place in a ‘fluid’ way, where the visiting professor can improve his teaching contribution in creative and tentative forms. In this light, universities should be prepared to alternative forms of teaching and innovative academic activities (open debates, split or flipped classrooms, jigsaws, problem-based learning) that foreign scholars could involve in their everyday life with students. Usually, these activities reduce distances and exceed filters between professor and students, and the visiting teacher can use them to engage the class and create interactions with students.

Fitting those stays in a traditional academic calendar is another trigger point that reduces the proficiency of these experiences for both scholars and students. Often, the adaptation of visiting scholars takes time, and they have limited opportunities to implement the exchanges that cultivated over the stay, due to the traditional succession of duties and tasks. One opportunity could be the definition of a different timetable for those academic activities, and extended involvement of visiting scholars over the semesters or academic years, that support their engagement and insertion in a local academic community and with students. Therefore, the definition of a set of alternative activities (workshops, alternative academic activities, research-in-action programs) could stimulate this engagement and create a long-term relationship with the network of scholars that visited a university over the years.

In conclusion, abroad stays for young scholars are stimulating experiences because they engage them in challenging teaching and research practices, but they need different adaptive approaches. Visiting professors must adapt to local circumstances, dealing with spatial, temporal, and administrative constraints. At the same time, I think that hosting institutions should take advantage of those contributions, improving their ability to accommodate those abroad experts with their personal, innovative, and non-traditional approaches. Due to this double adaptation, abroad stays represent a key innovation factor for both universities and scholars. They can positively impact on the engagement and interest of students and colleagues, when local academic community and the university – as institution – show a real interest in the presence of those foreign experts, allow visiting professors/researchers to take part to ongoing debates, creating the conditions for an intense immersion and a fruitful exchange.

**Notes**

1. Over the last decade, I had the opportunity to spend my education and training years over several international institutions. After an academic year (2004-2005) spent as Erasmus student in Acalà de Henares (Spain) during my MSc in Architecture (Politecnico di Milano), I had my PhD in urban and regional planning (2010-2014) in the Universidad de Valladolid, while I collaborated with the iui-Instituto Universitario de Urbanistica (2009-2014). In 2012, I was invited as visiting Ph.D. at the Centre for Advanced Spatial Analysis of UCL-Bartlett (UK), and once I completed my Ph.D., I could return to PoliMI as invited Post-Doc researcher in 2014. Therefore, during my Post-Doc PoliMI International Fellowship, I was involved in several activities to support international guests and visiting professors (MIAW 2015 and 2016 editions, Contemporary City course since 2015). I also supported teaching activities (contract professor of urban planning and urban design studios within the international courses of PoliMI since 2014/2015, visiting professor within the PhD Program: European Joint Doctorate ‘UrbanHIST’, 2017/2018 and Máster en Investigación e Innovación en Arquitectura – ETTSA Valladolid, 2018/2019) and research activities (an expert in many different international partnerships related with Horizon2020, UrbACT and Cost actions).

**References**


