Title of the Work: Apprentice to Bernini’s Ghost: A Story with a Palace, a Pandemic, and a Paradigm Shift

Type of Work: Creative Scholarship

Abstract

A PALACE
Our story begins 30 km outside of Rome, Italy, in a 13th Century fortress renovated in the 17th Century by Bernini. The upper levels are a museum; lower levels are a study abroad campus. Our 12-person team was tasked to transform the dungeon (250sm/2700sf) into dormitories with shared living, kitchen, dining, sleeping quarters, bathrooms, and office space. The dungeon is cut into bedrock, exposed only on the Northwest façade that faces a steep drop.

Study abroad is transformative; awareness of the ordinary becomes extraordinary through the lens of the student. Intimate bonds form between peers, the local people, and culture. The ordinary in history becomes extraordinary when its physicality is experienced in person, as the students spend the semester living in the bowels of Bernini’s work.

A PANDEMIC
We worked across languages, standards of measurement, time zones, disciplines, and almost exclusively via flat, time-lagged video chat sessions. Only once, in late 2019, did we all meet in person to explore the dark, vast chambers and their contents with cell phone flashlights as guide. Our American team members had only a few days to visit the site, take measurements and photographs, meet Italian team members, and get a taste for the site and context. We were unaware, as we boarded our return flight, of the rising global pandemic. The rest of the project would be developed under quarantine, a bizarre parallel to study abroad – far from family and friends, living a “new normal” in an unfamiliar landscape.

Working on the project in isolation was its own practice in mindfulness and the source of a paradigm shift. In this era of social distancing, it is hard to imagine how design can be taught effectively through remote instruction. But, every day, design firms are doing just that: working remotely in a virtual studio to create outcomes that need to feel handmade, soft, and personal. It isn’t easy. It isn’t ideal. It is, though, the reality of our work and our lives.

A PARADIGM SHIFT
Our design concept for this renovation is “awareness” through the apposition of form, weight, and material. A bird’s nest of lightweight scaffolding floats within a cavern of solid bedrock. The curated interior of clean lines and simple materials integrates, at an appropriate scale, meticulously salvaged historical furnishings and decorative arts from the site.

Where the dungeon is naturally heavy and restrictive the interior additions must draw in light and give agency to movement through space. The design utilizes space, furnishings, and objects to give students agency to engage in intimate moments – with each other, the structure and landscape, the people and culture, and Bernini’s work.

In serving as apprentice to Bernini’s ghost – to see through the lens of his work – we acknowledge an intimate relationship with something sacred and fragile. But isn’t all of life sacred and fragile? In our short visit to Italy we took meandering walks, enjoyed long meals, and lived by the local rhythm. What might we have missed – the extraordinary in ordinary Italian life and space – if we had only cataloged the remnants of Bernini’s original vision? How much richer is this design because we chose to be mindful of the precedent set by each sacred and fragile moment we had?

In quarantine, we have devoted countless hours to teach, mentor, support, encourage, critique, and ground students in reality. We have been mindful to express gratitude, but kept asking: when can we get back to normal? Are we missing the extraordinary learning that can be carried out amid this pandemic – across languages, standards of measurement, time zones, disciplines, via flat, time-lagged video chat sessions? Perhaps we should not be apprentice exclusively to the ghosts of the past, waiting in limbo for permission to get “back to normal”, but looking forward – to the extraordinary possibilities for interior design education.