As the 11th group of CapAsia participants plan for their studies in Thailand, Nepal, and Russia this spring, we look back at past trips with students, faculty, and special guests from every trip since Prof. Nihal Perera began the program in 1999. Turn the page for moving stories and adventures, colorful photographs, and lots of memories. Students, you'll also find info inside about joining the spring trip and creating friendships and memories to last a lifetime.
Welcome!

I am very excited to share our third edition of Alumni Voices with you today. In this issue we celebrate the 20-year history of CapAsia, one of the best immersive learning experiences ever developed at Ball State. You will find these stories by alumni of the program heartfelt and challenging. Each has a different perspective but with a common theme of gratitude for the experiences. Experiences that have made imprints for life.

The evolution of the program is a true credit to the director, Nihal Perera, the founder and champion of CapAsia for the last two decades. Please join us in celebrating this amazing accomplishment.

Thank you, Nihal for your persistence and dedication to the students and the communities that you have partnered with around the world! And while we celebrate those past experiences, we are also excited to look forward and begin to think about CapAsia 2.0. How can we better transfer these experiences to more people and partner this approach with others around the world who are focused on listening and empowering people who have been marginalized and exploited? They have the knowledge to share and words to empower others.

Also special thanks to Christine Rhine who edits this publication and pours over each detail of the process. Thanks to Lohren Deeg for his graphic expertise as well.

Enjoy!

Scott Truex
Chair, Department of Urban Planning

Enjoy our previous editions of Alumni Voices newsletters by clicking the photos above. Neat!
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Alumni Voices editors: Christine Rhine, Lohren Deeg  
Cover photos: (top) Grace Bogdan; (bottom) Alkeyna Aldridge.
Re-worlding students: the CapAsia program

By NIHAL PERERA, PhD
DIRECTOR of CAPASIA

Many universities in America have foreign field trips, study abroad programs, collaborative studios, foreign internships, service-learning programs, student and faculty exchanges, visiting scholar programs, foreign consultancy projects, volunteering efforts, and some, especially doctoral students, do fieldwork. Many of these programs are of excellent quality. Ball State University too is known for its study abroad programs and its Estopinal College of Architecture and Planning (CAP) has a long tradition of field-based hands-on education and community-based projects. Built upon a combination of select strengths of these programs, CapAsia is a guided, collaborative, immersive field-semester that no other university offers. With over two decades behind it, it certainly stands out.

CapAsia focuses on critical thinking and reflective learning based on cultural immersion gained through lived-in experience and learning by doing. Directed towards learning from bottom-up interventions, it is organized to learn from ordinary people, local communities, their creations, and the resulting emergences, paying special attention to the ways in which the locals view these within their own worldviews. The participants first observe communities, spaces, and action, from small to large, paying special attention to their local interpretations, so figuring out the larger structures and processes. It is carried out by doing “projects” in collaboration with local students, with the help of local educators and professionals; homestays and community interactions enable students to get a glimpse into people’s life-journeys.

Instead of exposing the world to students, CapAsia exposes the students to the world, so worlding them. The participants are directed to pay special attention to local interpretations of their own lives, daily activities, and cultural practices. The students are also directed to pay attention to the differences between the local realities and their own assumptions (stereotypes), including those learned in classrooms. Reversing this observation, the

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Re-worlding ... continued

participants begin to pay attention to the interpretations of their own lives, daily activities, and cultural practices. Reflectively, the participants develop an ability to not only contextualize (reworld) themselves in this new world and unlearn privilege but also to view the world from specific communities, respecting their own worldviews and viewpoints. The key goal is, therefore, to enable the participants to develop themselves into critical thinkers and reflective practitioners through critiquing their own action and selves.

Begun in 1999 for CAP undergraduates, this program was opened in 2001 to upper-level undergraduates and graduate students from any discipline interested in society, culture, and space. It has been participated by students from many universities including MIT and Berkeley and by majors such as art, English, and geography. Participants have made great achievements including one winning the national award for the best planning thesis. While the larger majority of the alumni have resorted to highly innovative design and development practices, about a fifth are completing their PhDs. A large majority of foreign-student participants have research publications, and several domestic participants have received Fulbright awards.

The program runs on a network of practitioners, scholars, and schools in Asia. The eleven-week field program is based on a seven-week immersive component. with homestays: “Planning to Learn.” The experience is diversified by a three-week component elsewhere in Asia called "Building to Learn."

These are complemented by local excursions that take students deep into local cultures and a few stopovers made as they travel. Most significantly, they meet and learn from important local people.

Its multifaceted teaching and learning strategy is nationally and internationally recognized as transformative, life-changing, and, as a result, has received three nationally-competited, Fulbright-Hays awards. According to a Fulbright-Hays reviewer:

"The [CapAsia] project provides creative focus that is built on integrating Asian worldviews into participant’s education; the focus on “learning from” rather than “learning about” as well as on learning from doing projects with host country peers rather than doing projects for them is refreshingly honest about where knowledge resides; it also models and reinforces a respectful intercultural attitude and global stance that is sorely needed."

We have this unique program at BSU, and CAP in particular.
Has it really been 20 years since I traveled to Asia? This was the first thought that went through my head after reading an email from Nihal asking for some reflections. In those days, flip-phones were a luxury item, and the iPhone wouldn’t be released for another seven years. We were lucky if we could find an internet café with a stable dial-up connection. I spent a week or so looking over pictures and considering the impact CapAsia I had on my life. I think I can condense most of my thoughts into three topics. My time in Asia gave me a heightened cultural awareness (I am less self-centered), permanently changed my diet, and taught me the importance of learning to understand other people’s needs and wants.

First, CapAsia changed my cultural awareness. There is a stereotype about Americans abroad. I was not familiar with it until later in life, many years after CapAsia. To put it nicely, as Americans we can sometimes think we have things figured out. Or at least, that we know a little bit more than other cultures about “how things work.” Nihal has literally written books on this topic of colonialism and how a western view of the world shapes this tendency from birth. Our history classes further reinforce these tendencies.

After spending an extended amount of time in Asia, I realized that other cultures function perfectly fine according to their own practices and heritage. They do not necessarily need our ideas, our capital, or our economic growth models. In fact, even today both India and Sri Lanka have ongoing internal cultural identity conflict within their borders. These conflicts are natural and not that different than the ongoing political discourse in the United States.

But what I’ve learned from all this is: I don’t think we have many answers for them. Part of the answer may be to simply allow other cultures their own time and space to develop home-grown solutions.

Second, let me say that I don’t know why exactly I fell in love with Indian and Nepali food, but I did. Still today I regularly eat Indian, Nepali, Thai, and Persian. As you can imagine depending on where you live, it can be difficult to locate authentic Asian food. Yet my wife and I find we prefer it. In fact, we determined to learn how to make some of these dishes ourselves. And so we often cook a pot of dal bhat at home, which lasts about a week. We also
Life lessons ... continued

make pad thai, Pakistani kima, and beef masala. We know which local grocery store carries the best naan. We even break out a curried turkey recipe every Thanksgiving. It seems such a small thing really, but I can remember traveling from Delhi to Agra to Jaipur and then to Kathmandu and going for weeks (even months) without any comfort foods. At the time, it was difficult for many of us. But now, I purposely seek out interesting food, usually looking for something new, or at least something Asian.

Perhaps the most important life lesson I learned in CapAsia was about studying the users of a space before beginning the design process. The western approach to the built environment did not (and does not) work in Asia. Great designs, instead, are more likely the result of an architect or planner first having an intimate knowledge of the user. With that knowledge, spaces are designed and built to meet the regular processes and flow of the people who will inhabit them.

This lesson remains a guiding principle in my life despite my transition away from design and into a career in education, business, and research. I try not to focus on always bringing my own ideas to the table. Instead, I hope to understand what other people in the room are seeking to accomplish and then look for ways to help make that happen.
When Dr. Perera asked me to write this piece I was excited and intimidated. Recalling the experiences of a spectacular journey that still impacts my life today is a rollercoaster of emotions. And how do you capture the complexities of a life-changing and course-altering experience in 500 words? The journey was so nuanced and personal that I still struggle to process the full meaning 23 years later. And the experiences and memories take on different meanings as I continue to grow and evolve as a person.

I am from upstate Indiana. I was (and in many ways still am) a Hoosier with all the good and bad Hoosier proclivities: I am nice to a fault and sheltered from the rest of the world’s tribulations. 2020 proved that we are all connected in more ways than are known prima facie.

From the start, I knew very little about South Asia or how it would change me as a person. Dr. Perera said, “You should come to India, meet interesting people, make lifelong friends, and study planning and development.” Sure, that is the stuff of dreams! But I would not fully appreciate the fleeting experience until later in life. I joined the CapAsia tour as an undergraduate in Urban Planning. I knew that leaving the safety of the familiar would give me a much-needed push out of my comfort zone, moving me off-center and to a place of personal and professional growth.

At its core, the collaborative nature of CapAsia added layers of new ideas, principles, and perspectives to my life that I would not have gained by simply completing my degree on campus. Immersion into coursework designed to engage with CapAsia peers and host students greatly impacted my worldview. Dr. Perera carefully crafted the coursework to allow each student to make the experience their own. For me, that meant...
The CapAsia journey was much deeper than interesting economic theories and academics. If not for the intent to genuinely learn about people and their experiences, then travel is reduced to exploring “exotic” cultures for bragging rights.

For me, it was about immersing myself in the unplanned entanglements that happen to vulnerable humans placed in a different context. It was about the bonds formed from an unvarnished and shared lived experience, the unexpected lifelong friendships, the ephemeral and vulnerable moments, the enlightenment and discovery within mundane activities, the bonding during late-night conversations, the growth from miscalculations, the challenge of independence, and the pleasure of living in the moment.

Through these experiences, I became a deeper and more-enriched person. I became a more compassionate and empathetic person: I gained a new frame through which to view the world, life, and relationships.
Diversity ... and similarities stand out for CapAsia II alumna

BY MEENA BYERS, CAPASIA II

As an alumna of CapAsia II, it’s amazing to think back over 20 years of my experience on the journey and how it has shaped – and continues to make an impression – on so many aspects of my life.

CapAsia was an immersive experience to see incredible diversity and similarity at the same time. Visiting Hong Kong, India, Sri Lanka, and Singapore, we experienced just a sliver of the breadth of cultural diversity in the Asian subcontinent—like traditions, religions and customs—while feeling the threads that connected us all along—like a cup of tea with a stranger, who then became the friend you smiled and waved to each morning.

Visiting these places from a place of understanding their significance in the context of people and spaces is what made CapAsia such a unique and transformative experience for me. From Fatehpur Sikri to Chandigarh to Kandalama, I still revel today... CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE
in the memories of the awesomeness of these built environments and how they shaped generations.

One of the best memories I have from the trip is our hike up Sigiriya, the Lion Rock, in Sri Lanka (see photo above). This was one of the most advanced planned communities from 5th century AD, including expansive gardens and irrigation systems. Through the fog and the heat of the climb, you couldn’t help but to marvel at this piece of history that showed how the community valued art, nature and progress—some of the very elements that are the landmarks of a successful planned community today.

As a first generation American of Indian descent, I had the unique experience of being immersed in and learning an unknown culture while in some ways, defending it as my own. So when a classmate would question a local custom or tradition, I immediately tried to understand, instead of question. That is a lesson that has stayed with me throughout my life.

CapAsia also taught me that the world we see around us every day—built communities that shape our perspective and outlook on life—are different for everyone. But, in all of these places and spaces, the things that get us up every morning are fundamentally similar: a desire for opportunity, a drive to contribute, and hope for better for the next generation.

I have the good fortune of having experienced CapAsia with my husband of now 15 years, and we plan to retrace some of these steps of history and wonder with our two sons. At times when I think about the predictability and stability of life that comforts me every day, it surprises me that I was once a part of this adventure. My memories of CapAsia remind me to stay flexible, to take what may come in stride, and to once in a while take an unfamiliar path.
Twenty years ago, I was returning from a truly transformative experience that I knew inside had caused a change in me on a mental and emotional level. But if someone asked me then what that change was, I could not find the words to express how I had changed. In some ways, I still struggle to explain the impact of studying abroad as part of CapAsia has had on my life. The reason may simply be because it was personal, an important part of this journey - my life, and how I responded, or wish I had responded, to those experiences.

Perhaps when trying to find meaning in something, I try to make it too existential and need to refocus and simplify. That simplification can be that I came home grateful. Grateful for the opportunity to travel, experience new cultures, to be placed into positions that were beyond my comfort zone, and to learn. Those experiences brought about a shift in my perspective, a widening in some areas and a sharpening in others. Beliefs were challenged and changed. Others were strengthened.

What comes to my memory the most was the distinct contrasts of humanity experienced in India. The slum settlement of Yamuna Pushta contrasted to Lutyens’ New Delhi Plan. The abject poverty of beggars on the streets of Mumbai with opulent high rises as a backdrop. The historical traditions and architecture in relation to the impacts of British colonialism and a shifting to a modern world economy. Riding a crammed train from Andheri Station to the main central station, Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus, with all the accompanying smells of human bodies, food, and trash heaps along the way. An ox drawn cart, goats, donkeys, dogs, bicycles, rickshaws, motorcycles, tut-tuts, taxis, cars, buses, people, and elephants – all in the street. The finely dressed walking by those in rags. The sick, the lame, the blind, the hungry babies..."food for baby"...seeing a dying man taking what could have been his last breaths...right there, in your face, not hidden, the beauty of life and also its darkness. The extreme contrasts and all the grey parts between. So many memories flooding through my mind as I type with tears of joy and sadness streaming down my face. Yes, my CapAsia experience had changed me and is still with me to this very day. I am grateful.
Indian host student joined CapAsia before earning his master’s at BSU

BY NISHIT SOMAIYA CAPASIA II

The CapAsia III program in 2001 in was held primarily in Mumbai, India, where the students and faculty from the College of Architecture and Planning (CAP) at Ball State University engaged with their counterparts from Kamla Raheja Vidyanidhi Institute for Architecture and Environmental Studies (KRVIA) for a collaborative project based on the eastern-waterfront of Mumbai. I was completing my final year of the Bachelor of Architecture program at KRVIA at that time.

The city of Mumbai is a linear island connected with the mainland at its north and its east. Historically, the Central Business District (CBD) was located in the southernmost tip of the city where the entire local railway network converged and transported the working populace of the city and its surrounding regions to and from the CBD each day. Over time, the unprecedented urbanisation and population explosion exerted immense pressure on the city’s infrastructure, forcing the government to adopt several measures for decongesting Mumbai, including the creation of the satellite city of Navi Mumbai, developing additional business districts elsewhere, and upgrading the transportation infrastructure of the city. Also, the port activities existing on the eastern waterfront of Mumbai were relocated to the mainland, thus, freeing up a significantly large landmass owned by the Mumbai Port Trust (MPT) which could possibly be used for the benefit of the city in future.

The collaborative project between the students of CAP and KRVIA involved visiting and analysing the land owned by the MPT, studying the existing land records, interviewing officers from the MPT, the Urban Development authorities of Mumbai...
and other related agencies, and understanding the dynamics between the various agencies and authorities involved. The study was to culminate in an urban planning proposal by the participating students for the usage of the MPT-land for the benefit of Mumbai, and which was to be jointly reviewed by the faculty members from both the colleges.

Apart from the cultural differences, there was, also, a stark contrast between the academic structures of both the colleges. The various fields at CAP were more specialised with Urban Planning, Architecture, Landscape Architecture and Historic Preservation being distinct from each other with little overlap, whereas, the undergraduate program at KRVIA was more generalised with the core Architecture program including coursework from the other fields as well. This led to differing methodologies and approaches employed by the students of both the colleges towards our collaborative project. Although the contrasts seemed overwhelming for some, initially, such cultural and academic differences faded away quickly as the students began working on the project together as a team, and especially when the students of KRVIA were required to be the interpreters between the CAP students and the local authorities related to the MPT-land.

Also, as hosts, the students of KRVIA took it upon themselves to assist the students and faculty from CAP in settling down and feeling at home in Mumbai. Such interactions provided innumerable opportunities for members from both colleges to interact with each other on a daily basis beyond our academic requirements, and which allowed strong bonds and friendships to be forged between us that exist even today.

Some of the CAP students also stayed at our homes for a few days which allowed us to learn about each others’ cultures, lifestyles and social structures, which would not have been possible to understand, otherwise.

The final proposals presented by the different groups were greatly appreciated by the faculty members of both colleges to be highly professional, comprehensive and detailed, showing a high degree of sensitivity towards the context and dynamics of the site, and positively contributing to the body of knowledge related to the use of the land owned by the Mumbai Port Trust for the betterment of the city.

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Apart from the students, I was extremely fortunate to form strong bonds with the faculty members from CAP. When they learned about my plans to pursue a higher education in the USA, they offered me an admission into the graduate program at Ball State University for a Masters in Architecture degree along with a research assistantship, beginning the next academic year.

If I consider my participation in the CapAsia III program as highly rewarding and enriching, I would consider my education at BSU to be life-changing. Not only did my time at BSU enhance my professional knowledge within the walls of CAP, it opened my mind and allowed me to perceive the world and life, in general, with a wider perspective that would not have been possible had I completed my studies only in India. Also, the relationships I shared with people there have been some of the strongest in my life and exist even today.

As destiny would have it, the CapAsia program was conducted again in Mumbai in March 2008, which was also the time when I was getting married, and the students and faculty members from CAP were kind enough to grace my wedding celebrations. More than being my professors, I consider Drs. Nihal Perera, Wes Janz and Olon Dotson to be my mentors and close friends, and I consider it most befitting to have them stand amongst my closest and bless me on one of the most significant days of my life.

Although CapAsia is primarily an educational program enhancing the technical knowledge of each of its participants, the cultural exchange, personality development and the relationship-building amongst its participants are far more enriching than its academic contribution, and since it was a stepping stone for me for my education at BSU, I consider CapAsia as a doorway to unimaginable possibilities in life.
The CapAsia experience is a diverse immersion into history, culture and opportunities to learn about oneself and others in a space supported by robust academic direction. The CapAsia experience, for me, was life altering, allowed me to learn about architecture and planning through a very different lens, and shaped me into the professional I am today.

During CapAsia I traveled throughout Southeast Asia. This journey as a college student helped me to critically question my academic experiences – which is a good thing. With the cultural dynamics happening in the US today, we are starting to question the US narrative and its controversial history. I began to think differently about this narrative as a student in India when I observed US history from another lens. The educational program made me step back and take a critical view of my education and what I wanted to learn in a very healthy way. I became an engaged critical thinker about my “world” in general.

The Ball State experience gave me an appreciation for learning about “other” cultures, stories and traditions. As a child from the south suburbs of Chicago, I grew up around people who looked like me and had similar traditions as me. When I arrived...
Lessons ... continued

at Ball State University, not much was
different about the people I attended college
with outside of some being from more rural
or urban areas of the Midwest. Studying
abroad in Southeast Asia was a very
different landscape. I met young people who
saw and experienced the world differently.
As I traveled more and studied at
universities with a more international
community, I was comfortable engaging and
connecting with students of different
backgrounds.

Lastly, CapAsia allowed me to take a
different perspective of how I understand
space, experience space and plan for others.
It was in India, while participating in an
urban design exercise with other South
Asian students, that I begin to think about
how we design spaces for people, and more
importantly, people with different
experiences. While I, as a student, valued
waterfronts as destination spaces for dining
and entertainment, my colleagues from
India viewed the waterfront as
transportation thoroughfares to move
goods. I begin to re-examine Western norms
of how people use, interact and explore
spaces. Just traveling outside the US and
experiencing other environments without
heavy imprints of Western influence is an
eye opener to be celebrated.

As chief operating officer for Baltimore City
Public Schools, today I use tools I developed
in CapAsia to guide my career thinking—
whether I am working in a predominate
community of a particular demographic or
engaging with an international community
on a topic of advocacy—I give attention to
individuals who may be different from the
majority community.

While Baltimore City is majority African
American, we have international
representation in many of our
neighborhoods, so I am pushing my team to
engage, design and understand educational
spaces from different perspectives. I
encourage them to critically think about
their assumptions of the “right way” to do
things that may not fit all users. The
richness of the CapAsia experience has
empowered me to be an inclusive and self-
aware leader.

A ship breaking yard in
Mumbai, India.
When I received a message from Nihal to write few words for a newsletter dedicated to CapAsia, it threw me back in the memory lane. I realised it has been more than two decades since I first met Nihal in early 2001. I had joined the Department of Physical Planning at the School of Planning and Architecture about four years earlier, and Prof. Ansari there asked me to coordinate the collaboration between our program and CapAsia. I was developing an interest in participatory planning, so we visited a self-organised settlement, Yamuna Pushta, close to our institute on the banks of river Yamuna for a participatory planning exercise.

I remember vividly the energy and enthusiasm amongst students. It was a diverse group, and the experience of designing an exercise for all groups still remains as a learning point for me. I often recall that experience as it remains a reminder about how, despite theoretical understanding, it is important to continuously reflect on unconscious and unexamined practices in action. And I still remember with some amusement when I recall the signed rocks that were presented at the end of about three days of workshops.

I also remember my initial skepticism of faculty coming from the US, however, as I became more familiar with faculty accompanying students and their professional work, I developed a genuine appreciation for the idea that CapAsia represents. Since then, I have been a part of...
other CapAsia programs. Some were brief half-day interactions whereas some were longer joint studio exercises like CapAsia VII in Bhubaneshwar. It was mostly Nihal’s initiative that kept the connection going with the institute as well as me, and I have been enriched by various discussions over so many years.

The experience was enriching for me and our students in many ways. In addition to informal friendships and connections that developed, difference in pedagogy, the experience of being thrown into vastly different contexts, and exposure of our students to a different culture, led to many intellectually stimulating discussions. It was the fluid nature of program which could take any shape based on how students took ownership of their learning that made this a very powerful program. This fluidity also was helpful for me as we could work together without getting into the highly structured ways of institutional formalities. There was a sense of comfort and flow of ideas that was highly enriching.

It is very easy to think up an idea, and as we all know, we all are bubbling with such ideas. However, it is a completely different ball game to put it to execution and sustain it for such a long period of time. It is mostly because of Nihal’s conviction, commitment and meticulous planning and organisation that CapAsia has taken the shape it has today. I have been greatly enriched by being part of the CapAsia program. For students, too, it had been a great learning experience both in terms of pedagogy as well as thinking process. I remember in 2002, when the idea of CapAsia was getting crystallised, he asked something like, what if we have something where there is no centre or the centre is decentred.

Today CapAsia moves to a different location and is responsive to the context in a variety of ways. Secondly, during one of our studio interactions, Nihal asked what if we reversed the sequence and experience the community through a field visit prior to developing a knowledge of the subject through secondary data. That set me thinking about the ways we design our studio programs. These are just a few of such ideas that have emerged from our association with CapAsia.

Immersive learning requires facilitating and focusing on individual learnings through an experience as well as keeping the balance of overall formal objectives of curriculum. It is not an easy balance to achieve, as many of us know. From what I know from my experience, I saw students developing a certain sensitivity to a very different environment and thereby starting their journey in developing a more empathetic rather than paternalistic orientation to issues. I am quite sure that it must have been a transformative experience for many of them.
MIT grad garners awards, launches career based on CapAsia III experience in India

BY CLAUDIA CANEPA, CAPASIA III

I was in my first year of a Masters in City Planning Program at MIT when I first heard of CapAsia. I remember receiving an email from our department head, Lawrence Vale, informing students about the opportunity to join CapAsia with Professor Nihal Perera from Ball State University. Nihal’s message about CapAsia caught my attention because he spoke about the insights that planners in the developed world can gain from the developing world. Having just arrived at MIT after working at the District of Colombia Office of Planning on implementing a participatory budgeting process based on the methodology developed in Porto Alegre, Brazil, I knew full well the extent of the possibilities of this type of knowledge sharing. I immediately applied for the program. Looking back on the program now, CapAsia did much more than just offer me the opportunity to study vernacular architecture and planning practices in Thailand, India and Sri Lanka. It was an experience that influenced my thinking and world view for years to come.

During the field study component in India in January 2003, we visited Dr. Renu Khosla at the National Institute of Urban Affairs to learn about her efforts to improve basic services provision in squatter settlements in Delhi. She had combined the use of Participatory Action Learning techniques with the development of a community-based GIS (CBIS) to empower some of the city’s poorest residents to use local knowledge to advocate for improved services. I found her project inspiring, so I asked if I could stay and work with her for a semester. She agreed, so I returned to Delhi after completing the CapAsia program in February. I worked with Renu until June, during which time we initiated a partnership with the Delhi Water Board (DJB) to integrate NIUA’s CBIS into the DJB’s GIS to inform decision-making on water provision.

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After returning to MIT in September of that year, I decided to base my master thesis on the CBIS project, so I returned to India during the summer of 2004 to continue to work with Renu and the DJB. The process of writing my thesis under the supervision of my advisors at MIT, Professors Bish Sanyal and Lorlene Hoyt, before, during and after my second visit to India led me to question many of my assumptions about why government agencies do not provide adequate services to residents. I became much more savvy about the political economy issues that influence planning and policy outcomes.

I reflected these changes in my thinking in my thesis, which resulted in me winning two awards: 1) Outstanding Master Thesis in 2005, a departmental award at MIT given to the best master thesis written each year, and 2) Donald Schön Award for Excellence in Learning from Practice, an international award presented by the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning (2005) for research papers that demonstrate excellence in the writer’s learning from practice.

CapAsia and my subsequent work with Renu jump-started my 20-year career as a reflective practice and learning expert in the planning and international development realm where I have worked at the Inter-American Development Bank, CARE International, and Oxfam. Currently, I work at the Global Institute for Innovation Districts where I lead on a learning network strategy for innovation districts worldwide.

While many CapAsia experiences happen in ordinary neighborhoods, the lure of the world famous Taj Mahal in Agra, India, often necessitates a day trip.
CapAsia III alumnus uses lessons learned to inform his own teaching at Earlham

BY ANTHONY NOBLE
CAPASIA III, IV

Experiential learning: is there any better way to learn besides immersing oneself in the knowledge, culture and beauty of a strong leading that has taken hold? The CapAsia (III & IV) experiences took me on journeys that tested my assumptions and intellectual frameworks while asking questions and posing challenges that drive my thirst for knowledge to this day. My model of teaching is directly influenced by Professor Nihal Perera’s way of teaching and his setting up the experiential learning journey.

My first “A-ha!” moment was the validation and requirement that I analyze my own experiential framework that I brought to grad school. Before I could understand the culture of others, I had to understand my own. As a mixed-race man of Jamaican and European roots raised Quaker, with an engineering degree and a strong love of food and nature, I brought a complex cultural and experiential framework to begin my understanding of urban planning in the US and far abroad. At some point, I realized that I had to de-colonize myself, before I could think about how others might respond to any colonial hegemony that so shapes their cultures. Many pieces of me, which I thought to be unimportant, became crucial to my understanding and success in the CapAsia experience.

I came away with the understanding that everyone has a complex background that can

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be built upon. The power of acknowledging repressed stories and feelings offers a rich validation to tap into rich material that no one else owns. I now use that acknowledgement in teaching, conflict resolution and in the everyday conversations of my daily life. Today, I see students in my work really thrive when they can make the critical connection from their past frameworks to the subjects, techniques and dreams they are working on today.

Today I am currently an agricultural educator at Earlham College in Indiana. I manage the student-run farm and do it in a way that fosters student ingenuity, leadership and ownership. I seek to discover new techniques to better harness the intelligence, creativity and passion that students bring to the farm. I set up my “classroom” with several projects ready to be enhanced by student projects.

Some of the activities include: high tunnel greenhouse, heated greenhouse for plant starts, compost worm farm, campus food scrap composting, food forest, production garden, farmers market sales, bee keeping, compost tea operation, construction projects, community garden, small scale grain production, prairie installation, food preservation, volunteer coordination, outreach and communications, tractor training, tool building, flower production, permaculture and “LEAN” farming.

The crux of my teaching is student ownership. Students are encouraged to take on an aspect of the farm to leave a legacy in the physical and/or systemic structure of the farm. Every year the farm grows. Fostering student intelligence puts those building blocks in place.

During CapAsia, we had to work with what we had. We had to analyze the landscape and inquire into many social spheres to understand the tools we had to work with.

My backgrounds in industrial engineering and permaculture saw the beneficial efficiency of making the best of scarce resources. We were constantly surrounded by ingenuity of resource re-use. I love being able to share the culture of re-use as we repurpose pallets for fencing and structures, food barrels for irrigation and food scraps and animal waste for soil fertility. We even turn agricultural tourism into labor for food production. I show students the complex system that the farm is and is a part of. Wherever students go after college, they will take understanding of complex systems with them.

I have adapted my Quaker upbringing full circle, gathering skills along my way to end up at a Quaker Institution teaching a synthesis of what I’ve learned while thoroughly enjoying it. I want to help students integrate meaning into their careers, neighborhoods and families. I believe deeper understandings of culture, especially around the intimacy of food, helps bring people closer together in a world where scarcity and fear is projected all about. We can find and create abundance. Sometimes it is rotting right under our noses, and we only need to know how to organize and share it efficiently.
After a long flight, crossing the Pacific Ocean, I slept like a typical student who spent a few nights completing projects. The sound of locals setting up the market in the morning was exciting enough to make me get up and go out to see. I saw fruits I have never seen before, which made me realize that I was in Bangkok. Riding in a boat along Choapraya River and seeing the outskirts of Bangkok convinced us that it is a water city.

We visited Chulalongkorn University, perhaps the leading university in Thailand. It was great to meet landscape architecture students and to see their work. I found we had similar concerns and issues about the profession.

We arrived India at night. The fog, darkness, and spice smells welcomed us when we exited the Delhi International Airport. It was a cultural shock. The next morning, it hit me harder, when I looked outside from the local hotel. Buildings looked like arranged slender bookshelves and the street was filled with roaming cows and people wearing saris. I could not forget trying to cross a 6-lane road without a crossing light. I stood right behind

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some random people and followed them across the road. The roads were busy and filled with people, cars, bikes, auto rickshaws, and a few cows. However, I saw no car accidents for the entire six weeks in India. A couple of weeks later, my friends and I got used to all the unique surroundings and had no issues riding rickshaws or crossing roads. communities in Delhi. I wish I could visit them to see whether those design concepts were implemented for the communities. Nevertheless, the project changed me and later drove me to become a landscape architect who focuses on public space and simplicity.

Getting close to leaving India, I was in tears and asking Professor Dr. Nihal to extend the study trip in India. I fell in love with India’s cultural diversity and friendly people. I had to say, “Bye and see you later to India.” We were on the bus, leaving Colombo, capital of Sri Lanka, and heading to Mihintale, where Buddhism originated in that country. My eyes were busy enjoying the vibrant blue sky and the mountains covered with a dark green. We bought fresh pineapple slices with sprinkled red chili pepper from a street vendor, and the flavor was interesting.

Visiting a Buddhist monastery in Bangkok.

We visited Sigiriya, a 200 meters tall rock-fortress built in late 400 AD, which is a very important archaeological site and ancient urban form in Sri Lanka. We stayed in the Kandalama and Serendib Hotels designed by Geoffrey Bawa. The hotels proved that the building should be designed to provide experiences of the climate and be a part of the surroundings, rather than being segregated from them. His work inspired many of us with his creative approach, influenced by the climate and natural terrain.

Students from University of Moratuwa and CapAsia worked together to build a wood pavilion with scavenged leftover materials, called the build-design-build project. After completion of the pavilion, the Moratuwa students had a tea ceremony. I never knew the tea could be so delicious. We become friends, but it was time for us to say goodbye.

There is no doubt that CapAsia III has affected my life and career. Nearly 18 years have passed since the CapAsia III, but I still talk about the experiences with my kids and husband from time to time. CapAsia III is proudly one of my best life experiences.
Eight years after my CapAsia experience ended, I found myself competing to work at the U.S. government’s international development agency, USAID. The agency’s workforce is made up of a highly-educated population with approximately 50 percent of staff holding masters degrees and 25 percent holding a PhD. Many of the staff have attended one or more of the top-tier DC universities with global affairs and foreign service programs, and most of the ones that have not, are former Peace Corps volunteers. I had none of those things when I applied to and was offered a job to work at USAID, however, I am convinced that CapAsia gave me a similar set of knowledge and skills that helped me to secure the job, and work there for six years from 2011 to 2017 while also attending graduate school.

At the low cost of in-state tuition, CapAsia gave me an experience comparable to those available at more prestigious universities and/or those with programs in international affairs. One semester with an international focus balanced the rest of my domestically-focused planning curriculum and set the stage for a career of work in, with, and for a variety of US and international communities.

I recall Nihal explaining to leadership and faculty members at CAP, when the program was still relatively new and underappreciated, that the central idea of CapAsia is to train Western planners and architects in the “third world.” Not surprisingly, several people he shared that statement with could not comprehend the value of experiential learning in Asia. They could not imagine that I could be a better partner in US communities because of what I had experienced and analyzed during the semester spent primarily in India and Sri Lanka. For me, the exposure to extreme poverty while on CapAsia was preparation for my early career working with homeless shelters across Indiana and with neighborhood businesses and residents on Chicago’s southeast side.

When I began to seek work in an overseas setting after seven years of working only in the Midwest, I once again drew confidence that my experience in one setting could be relevant and valuable in another. I also leveraged CapAsia as a credential on my resume, and coupled this with a professional CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE
Planning grad ... continued

certificate in global affairs from NYU that I gained in 2010. Not long after landing the job at USAID in Washington, D.C. I started traveling to countries for multi-week assignments. Oftentimes, these were places that I had never been to before but I discovered that I could quickly find my way around, learn local practices through observation, examine my observations against other information sources and begin to make recommendations for new project designs or evaluate current programming.

Feeling like I could navigate these new environments—without knowing the language or every custom—was only possible after studying and experiencing another key concept of CapAsia, cultural disorientation.

On my first overseas trip for USAID to Sub-Saharan Africa, I quickly spotted colonial influences thanks to my CapAsia training. Identifying the manifestations of colonialism made it easier for me to conduct deeper levels of observation and evaluation in countries that I had never visited before. I quickly saw that like their commonwealth sibling India, Kenyan local governments also have town and country planning offices, which was relevant to the governance project I was working on at the time. And I witnessed in the birthplace of coffee—never colonized by the Italians, only occupied by them—that a person is never far away from the sound of an espresso machine pulling a shot of espresso and steaming milk for a macchiato. I have found that even making a small reference to a cultural observation, like the one I just gave, can be an essential element of effective diplomacy at a UN agency or during a community meeting.

What I did not expect on my career path was that each time I moved between U.S. and international work (a total of three times so far), the immediate past experience always proved to be incredibly relevant to my new work setting in ways that surprised and even shocked me. When I joined the Detroit city government in 2018 I leaned heavily on my overseas experience strengthening the capacity of local institutions through systems building and technical training. Similarly, I rely on the workforce development concepts and career coaching I was exposed to in Detroit in my current role as a program director at an international NGO focused on land rights, where I manage a team of specialists located on five continents.

Currently I am global program director for Cadasta Foundation in Washington, D.C. I do not know what location or which context is next in my career, but I already feel prepared with the tools and skills needed. Unlike any of my other semesters at Ball State, CapAsia had an extraordinary capacity to prepare program participants for global and local challenges in the world that came long after 2003, instead of delivering an education for the world as it existed at the time. Primary program readings and discussions were preparing us to identify and examine issues like income inequality, climate change, global dominance and conflict, and social justice in ways that were revolutionary at the time. Because it was so radical and severed from our normal and comfortable context, these ways of thinking made a lasting impact—one that has stayed with me for 18 years and will continue to influence my career until I stop working.
When I started work on the main project for our graduate studio on CapAsia III in spring of 2003, I had precious little real-world experience in municipal planning. My teammate Jody Phillips, an architecture major, and I were thrust into a situation in Delhi, India, where a large (estimated 25,000 - 40,000) informal settlement, dubbed New Sanjay Amar Colony (NSAC), was lacking in basic services, and we were asked to use informal data collected and integrated into GIS by the National Institute of Urban Affairs. While our studio classes back in the states dealt with the premise of real world scenarios, this was very real, and potentially had real-life consequences.

The meaning of privilege becomes clear

BY GARDNER SMITH, CAPASIA III

A synopsis of our work there could take a very long time, but suffice it to say that our time there encompassed data collection, meetings with the residents, and meetings with public officials. What was very obvious to me in all of these meetings was that, presumably as white American students, we had a certain status that was elevated compared to the very capable activists and professionals we were working with. This status afforded us access to people and agencies whose doors may have been closed to locals.

One particular interaction was with an engineer at the Delhi Jal Board (DJB), the
local water company responsible for the sector our project area was in.

Our interaction wasn't particularly remarkable - we asked him about his work, what the limitations were for providing water NSAC, what technology they used (at that time they still used paper maps for their record keeping), and whether the GIS data we had available to us was useful to them.

We walked away from the meeting unsure if we had made any progress, but soon it became clear that we had, as DJB officials soon showed up at NSAC and started installing more water taps. While the assumption at the time was that the project - the GIS data - was responsible for the activity, I believe it had more to do with our personal interaction than any technological solution.

Fast forward to how CapAsia has informed my career long term: I now find myself as a staff planner at the City of Elkhart, Indiana. I can't say that I think of that trip on a daily basis, but I do think about it frequently. The subject matter of the graduate project - water provision and GIS - is something I deal with frequently - GIS and utilities are an important part of the working life of a public planner. But there were a few life lessons learned that continue to cause me to reflect on my time in CapAsia, and continue to influence my approach to personal interactions at work. The two most important include:

Everyone matters - the concept of the public interest and giving special consideration to those less empowered in society is integral to the ethos of a working planner, but the divided strata of society was exceptionally visible during the CapAsia. Providing public services to informal settlements is a notoriously complex project - just one factor, land tenure, makes infrastructure provision questionable - but it was obvious that the public officials weren't doing all that they could to help those in need.

I have privilege I was unaware of - in the context of the U.S., I'm not from a particularly wealthy or powerful family, so I had never considered myself particularly privileged. In India, though, my citizenship, race, and gender made things possible that would not have been for someone from a different demographic. Reflecting on that has made me more aware that, while it's not as obvious, things like race and gender afford me a status that is not shared with others.

While the explicit content of the coursework in CapAsia contributed to my knowledge base that has been applied to my career, it's the less obvious lessons I learned that have contributed to a habit of reflective practice.
Trauma therapist finds life's work influenced by learning from the Dalit in India in 2005

BY LU ROCHA CAPASIA IV

I am a bilingual trauma therapist, living and practicing in the city of Chicago, in the state of Illinois. Prior to starting my private group practice, I advocated at the local and national level for survivors and victims of gender-based violence. Most of my advocacy was for underserved and marginalized communities of color living within the states. The way I currently address gender-based violence has been very much influenced by my experiences with CapAsia.

In 2005, I was fortunate enough to find out about CapAsia and be part of the CapAsia’s South-Asia program in India. Quite frankly, I had little knowledge about urban planning and did not think it could contribute to my professional aspirations, but that quickly changed by the second week of my stay in India. Now, after my experience with the CapAsia program, I am convinced that urban planning must be part of all anti-violence work. Not only did my time in CapAsia enhance my awareness of violence against women from a global perspective, but it also enabled me to understand how gendered urban planning is and how it often limits women and girls’ movement and involvement in their communities.

These limitations not only decrease a female’s connection with her community and ability to establish a support network but it also contributes to the isolation and marginalization of women and girls, which perpetuates gender-based violence.

Prior to going to India, I had done a lot of research on how some communities in India address violence against women and young girls, specifically within the Dalit community (formerly known as the untouchables). This community’s method in tackling this issue is often done from a cultural lens approach that incorporates and embraces the Dalit’s values and beliefs and circumstances. For example, I was told by some community organizers, who work with...
Trauma ... continued

the Dalits, that within some of the Dalit compounds violence against a woman is discouraged by the entire group for fear of attracting unwanted attention from the police, who often discriminate and harass the Dalit community. Therefore, if there is a person in the compound who is harassing or beating a female in their community, the aggressor is threatened with being expelled from the community if the behavior does not seize. Because some Dalits travel from rural areas to the cities for work opportunities, the compound is often the only community they have, therefore, they are highly motivated to stop their violent behavior in order not to lose their community.

This example of a community addressing a harmful behavior without involving the police is another form of what some may refer to as community justice. Community justice is defined as policies that confront crime and delinquency through proactive, problem-solving practices aimed at prevention, control, and reduction. The Dalit’s policy of preventing violence is a good example on how communities, when allowed and perceived as experts of their own situation, are very capable of finding a solution to their problems.

The above is only one example of so many lessons I learned from my experience while in the CapAsia’s South-Asia program. The opportunity to learn from urban planners in India and see examples of ways urban planning is often gendered has influenced how I now address gender-based violence.

My current advocacy work now includes the critique of urban planning and its limitations on females’ ability to navigate and connect with their communities. Learning more about the Dalit’s model of community justice has influenced how I teach about violence prevention. My current anti-violence work includes the voices of community members and their knowledge of what works best for them. I do not think that my work would have included these methods if it had not been for my experience while in the CapAsia program.

For me, CapAsia did meet its objective for their students to learn from people from the host country with the aim of learning about themselves. My experience in India has allowed me to be a better advocate for women and girls and for that I am forever grateful.
Class votes to assist after tsunami damage

BY PAUL ANGELONE CAPASIA IV

The day after Christmas in 2004 an earthquake occurred off the coast of Indonesia that triggered a tsunami that rolled across the Indian and Pacific Oceans killing more than 225,000 people in 14 counties. That January, I, along with other fellow classmates at Ball State and other universities traveled to Asia to participate in one of the most powerful and important experiences that has shaped my career and personal life.

This study trip enabled me to grow and expand my understanding of how global forces shape communities. This is especially relevant as renewed efforts to address racial injustice within the United States become more embedded in both the public and private sectors. Much of international development theory—a core part of the CapAsia program—is rooted in ensuring that economic investments create new freedoms, opportunity for mobility, and improved quality-of-life.

Today, I work for the Urban Land Institute where I work with communities globally to build capacity for cities and the private sector to make smart infrastructure investments and create long-term community value. But since graduating from Ball State, I have had many experiences both within the land use industry and outside of it. I have lived and worked in Hanoi, Vietnam on market studies for the Asian Development Bank, worked on improving lifelong learning for a nonprofit in Chicago, and even had the opportunity to serve in the White House during the Obama Administration.

Helping with recovery efforts after a tsunami struck Sri Lanka was not part of our original plans, but we decided mid-semester by a class vote to skip southern India and fly.

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Class votes ... continued

to Sri Lanka to help a small fishing village emerge after the disaster. This was after spending several months in Ahmedabad and Veraval, India helping to develop a plan to make that community more resilient as their economy was changing. We also toured other communities in India such as Mumbai and Hyderabad as well as Bangkok, Thailand and Taipei, Taiwan.

Every step of the journey was impacted by that global disaster a few months earlier and shows the importance of the need for United States global leadership in recovering from our ongoing global pandemic. We visited Hambantota, Sri Lanka which was devastated by that 2004 tsunami that had a 150-foot radio tower crumpled into a small mass around destroyed Volkswagens.

This town was a major center where many Muslims were left homeless and all around there were aid trucks from Middle Eastern countries like Saudi Arabia but not an American aid group in sight. We missed an opportunity to show American leadership in an area of need where today China has filled that void by building and leasing a port for the next 99 years. Let us not make the same mistake with exporting excess Covid-19 vaccines.

Lessons learned, concepts discovered, friends made along the way, and lingering memories are used by me daily through my work on local land use challenges and infrastructure issues globally. I would not trade this experience for any other at Ball State and hope you join to gain a better sense of your own perceptions even if you only want to focus on domestic issues.
Journal catalogs his memories of CapAsia

BY ROBERT HORNER CAPASIA IV

As I unwind the leather strap of my journal, it’s as though I’m transported back in time. Suddenly I can smell the market spice and I can almost feel the dust on my face, and I haven’t even opened the small hand-sized leather book. The pages are stained yellow and curled on the edges from the countless times I shoved it in my back pocket. On the first page is a cartoon map of the world with one red benchmark symbol on Indiana and another on India. There are also smaller red dots on the what appear to be Thailand, Sri Lanka and Taipei.

There are several words in the map that read; “Action & Reaction,” “Cause & Effect” and “Finding Place.” As I turn the crisp page that feels more like folding a dried maple leaf, I find half a sticker to an airport security stamp with Indian writing, it is bright green. I’m instantly transported to the night I arrived in Ahmedabad.

After what seemed like days of traveling, our CapAsia group landed and were herded along the tarmac and directed to an adjacent airport building. Once inside, an arm sticking through some plastic flaps covering a large hole in the wall started dropping various pieces of luggage onto the floor. We gathered our belongings, exited the building and found ourselves in a frenzy of activity. It seemed as though there were thousands of humans in a thick dust that was glowing orange in the night lights of what appeared as a war-zone atmosphere. Our bags were tossed atop of a bus-truck hybridized vehicle that speed off to traversed the off-road terrain. My thoughts were selfishly on my possessions, yet I had no idea where we were heading. There was talk that we were destined for our housing accommodations, but at the time I only hoped that it offered some sort of normality.

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Journal ... continued

I was intensely focused on the images that passed by the bus window; faces of small children, random cows, darting cars, bikes and buggies. People were everywhere, absolutely everywhere, and the dust in the air created a thick haze. Buildings appeared half-built, or collapsing. There were families with their belongings lining the edge of the road and people covered in blankets sleeping next to passing cars.

As the bus whipped by pedestrians, all eyes were on us, as we were clearly foreigners. It was an uncomfortable reality that felt more as though I was on some sort of guided safari tour. Suddenly, I was confronted with the reality that I was very far from my normal.

It was as though I had landed on another planet, I had landed in another world, and my world-view had just completely and utterly collapsed. I was in a state of shock. The following weeks in India felt like a physical rehabilitation after some sort of bodily trauma, although it was a mental rehabilitation.

The next page of my journal reads, “Exploration leads to discovery, personal experience leads to exploration, and personal experience begins outside the box.” In order to sustain myself in this foreign environment I had to adapt. This meant evolving and adapting my world-view. Days became weeks and my perception of my surroundings started to shift. What at first appeared to be dirty, chaotic and disheveled became massively complex, organized and beautiful. It wasn’t a “light-switch” change in perspective, rather a gradual metamorphosis.

Each day of our immersion provided a new educational aspect to our experience. We reviewed readings and had group discussions as we shared our personal experiences. A majority of our days were spent just trying to adapt to our surrounding. Life on this immersive trip was not catered, and finding daily essentials such as food occupied much of our time. It was through these essential-finding explorations that we engaged the life and culture of India. I banded together with other members of our group along with other Indian students, to share local knowledge as we collectively assembled a perceptual map of the City. Eventually these images contributed to my mental redrawing and understanding of the city, and started to piece together a more comprehensive understanding of “PLACE.”

My journal reads, “I attempt to become a blank page, to remove the socially imprinted and become that which can absorb and reflect- to become a filter, a listener and a prism.” As the trip progressed, the group
ventured out of Ahmedabad to the surround cities more often, and my personal state of being shifted away from a someone looking for normalizing comforts, to that of a hiker traversing a mountain pass.

What I had with me was less important than the impressions I was discovering. My sketchbooks and camera flash drives were filling up from my perpetual state of exploration and documentation. I spent a lot of time contemplating the difference between being a traveler or a tourist. I realized I wanted to contribute something more positive to the culture and communities that I was exploring and recognized how my Western upbringing was constantly influencing my perception of place. I was internally fighting to overcome the years of filters that shaped my understanding of the East, which ultimately came to a head when we arrived in Sri Lanka.

**Tsunami damage in Sri Lanka stuns**

Sri Lanka had been devastated by the Tsunami that hit the Indian Ocean in December of 2004. Our entire trip had been re-routed in order to participate in the rebuilding of a small fishing village in Southern Sri Lanka.

Large swatches of the country were ravaged by the natural disaster. Basic infrastructure was destroyed and houses and buildings were demolished. Along the vast shoreline there was a desperation in the air that only arrives through life-altering trauma. The country was in a state of shock, and rebuilding was sporadic and irregular.

Despite the devastation we were able to experience the beauty of ancient monuments and temples that scattered the countryside, all the while we were still scrouring for food, bottles of water, ginger beer and spices. the work was difficult. When not digging in the dirt I recall helping a young boy build a desk out of used pallets, participating in a community cricket match, and shaping a small paintbrush out of peacock feathers to facilitate an improv watercolor session. I recall watching a Sri Lankan mason place a stone foundation utilizing building techniques that only centuries of collective knowledge could inform.

I left Sri Lanka knowing that architects and planners could indeed better communities and the planet, but it isn’t through building structures of steel and stones as much as it is recognizing the root of people and place, altering individual perception, participating in community and craftsmanship.

The entire CapAsia experience was an evolution and reconstruction of my worldview. Each place we traveled served as a new calibration tool to readjust and create a more comprehensive understanding of the global collective.

I closed my journal on the page that reads, “In the overlapping of two different circles there is a shared state where the energy is greater.”
Comparing a walk down Jackson Street in Muncie to a lively street in Ahmedabad

BY CHELSEA WAIT, CAPASIA IV

CapAsia IV (2005) marked the beginning of my academic interests. With little understanding of anthropology and world history, I was suddenly treading water in postcolonial theory and transnational politics. Our cohort undertook planning surveys with classmates in the Centre for Environmental Planning and Technology (CEPT) in Ahmedabad employing ethnographic methods. These lessons were exciting, revealing how power structures the world from the scale of the city to the scale of the body.

This led me to my current work: a dissertation about the spatial practice of care as resistance to injustice. Thick description and grounded theory are large components of my research; skills inherited from Nihal, Arijit, Wes, Mansee, Madhu, Ansari, and Tim. My travel partner, Robert Horner, prompted me to keep a multimedia sketchbook, poetry journal, and photographs. We challenged each other to elicit the details of sensory perception during routines such as cooking, walking, and porch sitting. After this trip through Thailand, India, Sri Lanka, and Taiwan; my interest shifted toward the everyday, away from elite design. The field of architecture expanded for me, enfolding spatial practices.

In the ensuing years, I have drawn most upon memories of walking and public space, distinct characteristics of CapAsia pedagogy. Before leaving Muncie, we attempted ethnographic mapping of Jackson Street. Robert and I grabbed our sketchbooks and documented a gas station, liquor store, bungalows, and student duplexes. I created a cognitive map of the amusing ordinariness, leaving out banalities but also conspicuous patterns I hadn’t perceived, like the lifelessness of the streets. A few weeks later, we had a daily trek from our four-room flat in Ahmedabad to class at CEPT, along Wireless Road. Early mornings, vegetable hawkers would greet us with songs and laughter. Before noon, a light vendor hung chandeliers in a dusty tree for display. Opposite, a small crew were in the trees, taking down branches as if

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Comparing ... continued
disassembling a kit of parts, in preparation for widening the street. Mechanical engines sped by in the middle of the road while organic engines were at the margins. Children followed us, curious about our clothing and our skin color. In mapping this, I recalled Jackson Street, and the striking differences contextualized my own cultural spatial practices.

The projects, readings, events, and discussions we had during CapAsia brought my cultural and racial identity into clear focus. I wrestled with my whiteness, as I had never been the minority in the crowd. I was deeply skeptical about American individualism, consumerism, and militarism, especially during the Iraq War. I didn’t want to be seen as American, much less see myself as American. Yet, as we traveled, I found that some cultural ethics I had rejected was actually comfortable to me. I wanted to collapse the divisions between myself and the “other,” but it was more responsible to be aware of my privileges and acknowledge them. These lessons are long-term processes in understanding my cultural identity within a multi-scalar constellation of transnational histories, spatialities, and power relationships, which is the long program of CapAsia.
CapAsia guide finds lifelong BSU friends

BY MANSEE BAL BHARGAVA, CAPASIA IV

OMG! Sixteen years have gone and yet it feels as if it was just the other day when I received a bunch of youth and a gentleman (called Nihal) at the courtyard of the CEPT (formerly the Centre for Environmental Planning and Technology, now a University) campus in January 2005. The international exchange between BSU and CEPT was designed to assess and plan the lives and livelihoods of the fisherfolks at Veraval-Somnath Municipality. The implicit part of the program was to let the youth understand the vivid culture and landscape.

For the students at CEPT, it was an invigorating experience to learn and share with the newly found BSU pals. For me, it was second international exchange program after coordinating the University of Cambridge students a year before. So, yes, I too was learning, loving, and living the moments right from assisting them with everyday living requirements to moving around the city, and further to travelling with them in Gujarat besides the teaching and learning.

Being an avid traveller, let me share the trips we took of south-western Gujarat including the coastal area and the final project presentation at the Veraval Municipality. We travelled to Rajkot, Dwarka, Porbandar, Junagarh, Diu, Bhavnagar, Palitana besides spending days at Veraval-Somnath. The BSUites had pretty much developed the taste of Gujarat with the help of the CEPTians in the near month of stay and travels, they were truly living the moment. Since, they became close friends while co-living the time. The trips were exciting for them and easy on me and Nihal. Wherever they had opportunity to mingle with the local people, they would just grab it. I recall some of the guys even

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even made friends with tailors in Veraval and got three-piece suits made for them to bring to the U.S. Then, some found special cafes and restaurants to eat special foods that would not upset the tummies. An interesting one was the boat ride to Bet-Dwarka when some local people were narrating the life of Lord Krishna to them in Hinglish and were overwhelmed with applause.

The teaching-learning experience of CapAsia has a deep impact on what/how I do things. The accommodation and appreciation of the different cultures and thought processes is for life now. The bonds developed with the students are forever, with some of them still in regular contact. I meet the CEPTians in one or the other events in the country.

I met a few BSUites during my Ostrom Scholarship in 2011 and Fulbright Fellowship in 2016-17. Lindsay Bacurin returned to CEPT as a Fulbright scholar when we met again. Chelsea Wait and John Scheiber are like family now. Chelsea came to see me in Phoenix, and we visited Frank Lloyd Wright’s Taliesin. John visited me in Bloomington with the family both the times I was there.

Nihal, indeed, met with me a few times on his return to Ahmedabad. He continues to inspire with his CapAsia trips, often tempting me to re-join. Hopefully soon when CapAsia is resumed after the pandemic, I shall join to relearn the basics with the youth and unlearn a lot that went into these years!
Some decisions can change the entire course of your life; for me participating in CapAsia IV was one of those decisions. Not only did it change my religious and political beliefs, making me more open to new ideas and cultures, but it also inspired me to apply for a Fulbright grant.

While many study abroad programs are simply sightseeing tours, the CapAsia experience offered much more than that. It gave us the historical and cultural context crucial to understanding the places we were visiting, as well as opportunities to learn from local professionals. Some highlights were collaborating with a class of Indian planning students to conduct housing studies and helping Sri Lankans rebuild homes destroyed by the 2004 tsunami.

After CapAsia, I wanted to return to India to learn more, so in 2009 I applied for and received a Fulbright grant to conduct an urban planning study there. During CapAsia, we learned about Chandigarh, designed by renowned architects Albert Mayer and Le Corbusier. While other cities we visited in India had more organic street patterns, mixed land use, and were more pedestrian oriented, Chandigarh was very different.

The city is laid out on a hierarchical grid of streets with segregated residential, commercial, and business functions with a prominent complex of government buildings. The city’s plan later influenced the design for Gandhinagar, another new Indian city.

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Student ... continued

few entrances. As a solution, residents made large openings in the fences that allowed for more natural pedestrian traffic.

One of the most unexpected outcomes of my Fulbright experience was meeting my husband, Haider. We met when we both enrolled in the same Hindi class. He had been in India for a few years working on his master’s in engineering. We began dating and after a year and a half, he was able to come to the US. This year we will celebrate our tenth wedding anniversary.

My CapAsia experience made all of this possible. It was truly the highlight of my time at Ball State, and I still keep in touch with other CapAsia participants, as well as some of the Indian students we worked with. While many study abroad programs take place in Europe, far fewer take students to Asia while also immersing them in the culture and people like CapAsia does. The College of Architecture and Planning is fortunate to have this unique program, and I would encourage any student to consider participating in CapAsia.
Thoughts of India persist, says alumnus

BY MATHEW HART, CAPASIA IV

During five years of undergraduate architecture, I tried to align my studies and research with how technology was changing the design, fabrication, and construction process. While I longed to be on the cutting-edge, I always found myself running into technological road-blocks. Upon graduation, I was given an opportunity to continue graduate studies. Starting my graduate studies, I endeavored to investigate less about technology and more about the craft of building. A big part of that study was to learn how non-architects designed and built spaces for living, learning, and working.

Before Ball State, my cultural knowledge of India came from the summer interactions I had with my best friend’s cousins (other teenagers). That was limited to say the least. Ball State didn’t quite prepare me either.

Preparing to leave was a semester-long set of meetings, readings, discussions, and shared experiences from past CapAsia participants. So the months leading up to our departure the readings of colonialism, religion, gender, and the caste system really shocked me. I didn’t understand the gravity of how this really played out in India, but it all came rushing at me once we landed.

The first week felt like a time to get acquainted with a new place. Somewhat like it didn’t matter that I was India, because chores like getting keys, finding restaurants or food, and getting my bearings in a new neighborhood kept my mind from engaging in this new experience.

If normalcy was a distraction the first week, it captured my attention from then on.

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Thoughts ... continued

During my daily walk to class in the morning, I saw a family living along the backside of a fence. The walk home, that family was playing along the street and preparing food. For weeks I watched the family go through the cycle each day. I was always wondering if they had joy, contentment, or hardship from day to day. I hoped for joy, but to me, it always seemed hard.

Morning wake-up calls consisted of the woman pushing the fruit and vegetable cart down our side street and announcing the day's fare. Selecting a fruit snack by pointing, and paying however many rupees she deemed necessary, was something I never thought I would experience. At times it even seemed cinematic.

One evening a big truck came chugging through our neighborhood. Something about the braking, shifting, and grind of the engine reminded of garbage trucks doing their weekly suburban pick-ups. Was the truck out of place, or was I? It's obvious, but I found it interesting to be in two places at once.

Living in India was regularly uneasy and wonderful. I spent a lot of time questioning what I knew, what I saw, and what I would do with this new perspective.

After all the cultural exposure and life experiences of India, I was in for an overwhelming and eye-opening experience as we traveled to Sri Lanka following the December 2004 tsunami. The majority of our time was spent in Kalametiya starting one of the first rebuilding projects in the country. Kalametiya was a small village of about 110 people that lost eleven friends and family. Everything they owned or lived in was gone.

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Thoughts ... continued

We saw scenes of loss and devastation that left so many people in a state of shock. Before visiting Sri Lanka, I assumed people in need wanted help. We shared stories, meals, and games with everyone in between digging trenches and laying foundation stones. We provided labor to help with rebuilding and tailoring the temporary shelters, but it never seemed like enough.

Why I chose CapAsia

CapAsia IV has constantly been on my mind since 2005. Making the decision to embark on CapAsia was easy and exciting. Hoping and waiting for it to change me was sometimes agonizing, but when I returned from CapAsia everything started to sink in. Over the first couple years, as I explained my journey to any that would listen, I realized I was changed forever.

Growing up in the Chicago suburbs, it always felt like I lived in a diverse neighborhood. My best friend was Canadian, whose parents emigrated from Uganda to Canada. And their families lived in Gujarat and England. Meeting proper English-speaking cousins, and Gujarati-speaking aunties was normal during the summer. It was always interesting to hear how their families made the travels around the world to see each other and it piqued my interest for travel.

Like many Midwesterners, I also had the desire to get away from where I grew up. Studying Architecture at Ball State was the start of that move towards another place. When the opportunity to study in India with CapAsia was presented, I knew I had to go and start connecting the dots of my childhood with what I was learning in my architecture classes.

A large part of my undergraduate studies revolved around digital design tools, the use of new technology in architecture, and frequent fits with said technology. My graduate studies shifted that focus to look more at the architecture of non-architects. My hope was to come out the other side of these studies with a better understanding of two extremes in architecture; digital design and working with found materials.

Wes Janz’s graduate studio “Leftovers” was the start of this new study, designing for leftover people, in leftover places, with leftover materials was the immersive studio experience that helped me evaluate my connection to different scales of architecture. I always knew I wanted to do architecture of significance, and this studio helped me realize that significance is a matter of scale and personal connection. Downtown redevelopments may have small significance to tens of thousands of people, and small housing solutions may have huge significance to a few people. Both are important to me today, but I don’t know if I would feel the same without taking this path.
Seeing Western "recovery" efforts in Sri Lanka resets student’s career path and ideals

BY FRANCESCA FURY, CAPASIA V

When I signed on to the CapAsia program in 2008, it was with the expectation of an opportunity to revisit parts of the world I had already been to and to explore some new ones—with the ultimate goal of laying a pathway to my career in the international development world. In short: I expected it to be a stepping stone to the life I imagined I wanted. What ended up happening was more complex.

I hoped, through our travel and study, to gain valuable insight into how NGOs had met the needs of a post-tsunami SE Asia. Instead, our encounters with the ravaged areas and the varied organizational responses were a masterclass in what not to do. Time and time again, we saw examples of projects—hailed on nonprofit websites as “great success stories”—where academics and high-paid foreign professionals had come into communities, paid lip service to cooperative efforts, and then essentially told the people what they needed, then patted themselves on the back, said, “You’re welcome,” and left without ever looking back.

The end result of these interventions were shoddily-constructed communities that were structurally inadequate, culturally-inappropriate, and often used as political bargaining chips by corrupt local politicians. The only organizations that had lasting, positive impacts on the communities they served were grassroots operations staffed by local stakeholders. It was a jarring, but illuminating experience.

Between my crumbling illusions around the efficacy (and morality) of international aid organizations and the constant reminders of my Western privilege, a seed of doubt was planted. I no longer felt certain of my life trajectory. My dream of working for the United Nations was fading, and I had no idea what to replace it with.

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Meanwhile, there were excursions, presentations, projects. The people we encountered in each location brought new lessons in love, life, heartbreak, unspeakable grief, and recovery. Several classmates and I endeavored to climb every peak and swim every body of water that came our way. In Sri Lanka, we ascended Adam’s Peak at dawn alongside scores of pilgrims vying to see the Buddah’s footprint. We sang karaoke in Thailand under the long shadow of sex tourism. We wove through Mumbai on terrifying rickshaws and sardine-packed trains, observing caste discrimination in real time. We marveled at the affluence and advanced technology of Singapore. We gaped at the ruins still lining the coastlines of Aceh Province in Indonesia. I taught myself the Sinhalese alphabet and made friends with Sri Lankan children—who unabashedly critiqued my poor pronunciation of their beautiful language.

There were juxtapositions around every corner: people were politically empowered and socially disenfranchised; the poverty was extreme but the culture was rich. It boggled the mind, and I returned home forever changed. I graduated in the fall of 2008, as the economy was in freefall and the future I had been promised was all but a memory.

I found work in my hometown, Austin, Texas, as an urban planner. Then I founded a small design/build firm, and after several years I considered applying for graduate school to pursue international development. I decided to pursue another dream instead, and bought a parcel of land that I transformed over five years into a thriving organic farm. In 2017, I reconnected with an old flame from England, got pregnant, married, sold the farm, and moved to France in 2018.

When I announced to my family that I was going to begin a career as a writer, everyone was silent—but probably concerned for my destitute, far-flung future. Harkening back to college, I offered my services as a grant writer to nonprofit organizations. It has been a fantastic couple of years. Because I have steady work that compensates me well, I can be selective about the organizations I choose to work with. I know that nonprofits, like NGOs, are sometimes vanity projects and money making engines that do little to serve their causes, but that’s not who I work with.

Last year, I won half a million in grants and partnerships for my clients. My work is helping to uplift Black communities, the caretakers of America, and is contributing to policy change.

My time in CapAsia taught me well: that the people best equipped to make change are those who are native to a place, who understand it and are stakeholders in the outcome. It took moving across an ocean for me to find my way home—to caring for and supporting change in my community. I’m grateful for the lesson.
Alumnus uses CapAsia lessons to construct 60 homes in Nepal after field studies end

BY GAURAB K.C., CAPASIA V

The path to my journey at Ball State University during the Masters program was a very unconventional one, CapAsia being part of that turning point. My masters study program started with a semester at the university in Muncie back in 2005, but because of my personal issues I had to revert back home at the end of the semester.

After finding about the CapAsia program while in Muncie I opted to go back home and join the program from my home in Nepal, South Asia. The pre-CapAsia journey started in Muncie as I learnt more about the program from the presentations given at the CAP building at Ball State and through Professor Nihal Perera and Lindsay Bacurin, who had just come back from the tour.

The overall picture of CapAsia was to build a new perspective and ultimately build a consciousness, one that looked at understanding people with empathy. We were taken to historical sites, carried out hands-on projects, visited architectural works of local architects, visited local leaders etc. On the one hand we made these visits; on the other hand we had the readings, which helped us view our tour through questions and carry out in-depth discussions. We tried to give meaning through our visits and theoretical content.

The readings mostly ran parallel to our visits and consisted of both local and global content. Our visits to local leaders be it local architects, or heads of bodies or

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Alumnus ... continued

authorities, also helped give meaning to our perspective.

We learned to look at the ordinary, look at the victims of disasters, the urban poor, review poverty, in other words the margins of society. Our tour consisted of visiting sites and housing created during the post-tsunami recovery process. We also visited the largest slum in Mumbai, Dharavi, and tried to comprehend how people live there and the contestation of spaces.

Having travelled through the tsunami recovery process in Sri Lanka in 2008, when the earthquake hit Nepal in 2015, I could not but help be part of the recovery process. It felt like as if I had already known about it theoretically. All of my travel experience got me prepared for the big earthquake in my hometown. I lead a team of school alumni to build temporary shelters, then as the government announced $3,000 per damaged household, I got to design and build a permanent shelter for the same amount, for mostly people in the rural areas. We finally built 60 houses altogether. The project was successful technically, but financially we had to face a lot of set-backs. The personal success was in the satisfaction we received when we saw people move into these shelters.

This long journey had come to a conclusion after the shelter project was over. With it, I’d like to pour my sincere gratitude towards Profs. Nihal Perera, Wes Janz and Olon Dotson for showing me the direction I needed to move into. The biggest impact of CapAsia on my life was that the consciousness I had built inside me led me to act on a crisis in my hometown.
Professor reflects on trips to Sri Lanka, India

BY OLON DOTSON, PhD.

With the insistence and assistance of Dr. Nihal Perera, I was able to charter my first experience in Southeast Asia as part of the CapAsia program during Spring 2008. Upon arriving at the Bandaranaike International Airport in Colombo, and being blasted by the heat and humidity of the late Summer (March) Sri Lankan afternoon, I felt “down-home” – a term used by expatriates from the Jim Crow American South to describe their periodic Great Migration reversal treks home to revisit family, friends, and community.

Mississippi ain’t got nothin’ on the humidity that laid its heaviness on my body and soul when I began strolling in equatorial space. My clothing was drenched, and a slow blues penetrated my musical frame of reference as I immediately came to realize that my dear friend and colleague Nihal was far more to me than an honorary “brotha.”

Prior to embarking on CapAsia programs, Dr. Perera engages the prospective students and faculty in various activities designed to prepare the participants for cultural immersion in the respective nations scheduled to be visited. In addition to a range of events held at CAP and voluntarily at his residence, Nihal very thoughtfully and personally offered the book, *The Way of the Buddha* to me. I was truly honored and moved by his sincerity, generosity, and willingness to share in accordance with Buddhist principles, particularly with respect to enlightenment.

While traveling along the southwestern coast Sri Lanka coast from Colombo to Galle, I was captivated by periodic glances at the spectacular coastline. We visited a compound designed by the late renown Sri Lankan architect, Geoffery Bawa where I bore witness to visually stunning

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architecture inspired by a fusion of indigenous and western traditions beautifully designed to be one with the environment. Less than a day later, we were in towns and villages engaged in discourse with survivors of the tragic 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami that devastated societies throughout Southeast Asian regions resulting in more than a quarter of a million instantaneous deaths. More than a half million citizens were displaced in Sri Lanka alone. We observed the failures of savior-complex-driven, un-empathetic design work that is unfortunately commonplace when tragedy strikes. Through the CapAsia program, we developed an understanding of the critical importance of employing our skills not as masters or contemporary colonizers, but as facilitators of the people’s process.

Although measures of “success” can never be guaranteed, being facilitators of the people’s process dramatically increases the likelihood that the community, through self-determination, can have agency in its future. It should also be noted that conventional measures of “success” are not universally applicable. This was at the foundation of the CapAsia “Build to Learn Program” and was fundamental to our efforts in Sri Lanka, and later in Mumbai, India.

Our multiple visits to Dharavi demonstrated how self-determination can be an engine at levels of vitality and energy, that is undefinable by western definitions of physical, social, and economic development. Nevertheless, the level of extreme poverty and general lack of infrastructure to deal with sanitation is remarkable and surrealistic at best. The two-kilometer district with a population exceeding one million residents, lies under the shadows of opulent high-rise development and constant redevelopment and displacement pressures. We were able to engage in conversations with individuals from every side of Dharavi’s spectrum from activist Jockin Arputham of Slum Dwellers International, to Mukesh Mehta and his proposed Dharavi Redevelopment Project, to Kalpana Sharma, author of Rediscovering Dharavi: Stories From Asia’s Largest Slum. The collective CapAsia experience inherently results in intensive self-reflection and is tremendously rewarding. I will never forget my CapAsia experiences for as long as I live on this earth.
Learners need a chance to react to the world outside of classroom walls

BY HIKOYAT SALIMOVA, CAPASIA V, IX

Universities focus on giving broad knowledge and skills, which might be useful in profession, or not. However, the most important task of universities should be to prepare the students for the world outside as it is in reality: to react to unusual situations, to deal with different people, and to find solutions in given time and space.

The study abroad “CapAsia” program gave me a unique experience of “learning by doing,” the technique of exploring the world of planning and development on a local scale in different communities throughout South and Southeast Asia. I was lucky to attend this program twice, as a student and as a program advisor/assistant.

In the first case - CapAsia V - I had to learn not only how to cooperate with local communities in Kalametiya and Hambantota (Sri Lanka), in Mumbai (India) and in Phuket (Thailand), as well as with local university students and American students. In these Asian countries I found myself in the middle position of being with the Westerner, but not really a Westerner. In some situation this worked as advantage, as I could understand both Americans and locals, and in the beginning was serving as a mediator between two groups. Later this skill helped me in many situations, as I continued to be a foreigner wherever I go, including my home country.

A planner’s position often requires him or her to act as mediator between the community and the developers. But only in CapAsia I had the advantage of spending enough time with the local communities, and realize that professional planners do not have this luxury and might not always serve to the best interests of the community.

The latter experience in CapAsia IX was different, yet still enriching in terms of
Learners ... continued

becoming an advisor, an external consultant, as I was not the part of the BSU group from the very beginning. Yet, I came in the critical moment when the group needed an outsider’s review. Sometimes we get caught in our own beliefs too strongly that it becomes quite difficult to give up the old knowledge and thus not giving the room for the new knowledge. As professional planner’s job requires to help to improve the communities in need, planners must always remember that the locals know their territories better, and they should cooperate with the local communities throughout the entire process, not simply at 1- or 2-days workshops.

Participatory planning needs to be present not only on the reports, but also traced in the activities conducted within the participant communities. These insights were revealed to me during my CapAsia trips – going with the best intentions and following the heart in order to bring the benefits for the local communities. This, I believe, should be the main guidelines for any planner.

Above, a vendor at a pola, a farmer’s market in Sri Lanka. Below, taking advantage of wait time at the airport.
Students learn Sri Lankans were hit twice: once by tsunami, and once by 'recovery' effort

BY BRUCE CHAN, CAPASIA V

Do you remember where you were on December 26, 2004? I was halfway through my third year of architecture school at the University of Southern California, and back home for the holiday break. I first saw the videos on television, personal footage of a brown wall of water crashing into Thai beachfront resorts. European tourists, on their holiday vacations in Thailand, frantically running away while cabanas, beach chairs, palm trees, humans were swept away. Later, we would learn that this was not an isolated tsunami, but a regional disaster which indiscriminately killed 227,898 people in 14 countries. And while damaged beach resorts became the poster child for the disaster, destroyed coastal towns and villages throughout south and southeast Asia were getting less press coverage, and thus less resources, investment, and aid.

The images that did manage to make it onto the mainstream news media showed a scale of devastation which, from a wide-eyed architecture student’s perspective, could only be rebuilt and solved by the western practices of urban planning and architecture. From a curriculum focused on the idealism of the Modernism movement and Le Corbusier, to speculative studio project sites centered on homelessness, flooding, or any number of societal woes, American students were taught that architecture could save the world. And the

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victims of the Indian Ocean tsunami from these “third-world” nations needed - and deserved - our help.

So as I graduated from architecture school in 2007, disillusioned with the corporate path I was expected to start my professional career in, my interest in pursuing a self-less, altruistic practice brought me back to the region hit by the tsunami. While three years had passed since the disaster, and rebuilding efforts were either completed or underway, there was very little information about these projects other than those designed pro bono by starchitects, such as Shigeru Ban’s rebuilt fishing village getting a small mention in trade publications.

Interested in how these architects and urban planners had selflessly uplifted these victims, I started to research academic programs which focused in these areas as a way to ultimately inform myself on how I too could serve humanity with my knowledge. Which is how I came upon Ball State’s CapAsia program, which immersed students and researchers into Eastern societies and cities with a focus on planning and development.

My CapAsia journey started in January of 2008 and brought 18 undergrad and graduate students of various backgrounds to the heart of the tsunami reconstruction efforts. Facilitated by Prof. Nihal Perera, our cohort connected with a variety of local organizations and international NGOs in Indonesia, Thailand, Sri Lanka, and India to gain an understanding of not only the tradition and heritage of town planning, but also the successes (or failures) of reconstruction efforts in the tsunami affected regions through an Asian lens.

Through our travels and field study work in a fishing village in southern Sri Lanka, my...
established notion of the architect and planner as a savior was flipped on its head. International agencies and non-governmental organizations which swooped into the region after the disastrous tsunami brought not only an immense amount of cash, but also a western perspective on aid and support. These organizations used both to quickly build new villages and housing, claiming victory and quickly leaving upon completion. However, three years later, my classmates and I were able to witness first-hand the long-term effects and dangers of this top-down approach to architecture and planning.

These new villages were largely planned without public input or involvement, and did not include any long-term economic vitality for the new residents. Compounding these problems, this dependency culture and pattern of “giveaway” international aid disempowered and disincentivized the residents from taking agency over their own rebuilding efforts. In effect, the residents’ situation was made worse by western architects and planners, the opposite of what I had anticipated learning.

The lessons I learned

My CapAsia experience helped me realize that effective and sustainable urban planners need to approach projects from the bottom up, instilling long lasting ownership, empowerment, and pride in the community they are serving. This lesson has stayed with me as I continue my work as an urban designer, architect, and planner in Pittsburgh. While post-industrial America seemingly has little in common with post-tsunami South Asia, all our cities face similar trauma, inequities, and planning mistakes. The need for a more inclusive and effective community planning model, one which centers on vulnerable and marginalized voices rather than on professional planning opinions, is universal and the key to more sustainable and people-focused future cities as we face climate change, economic uncertainty, and pandemic concerns.

There will certainly be more disasters in my lifetime. CapAsia taught me that even in the face of tragedy, there is always an opportunity to learn from architects and planners’ faults, and embrace a more humble and inclusive approach to city design. And sometimes that lesson can only be found by journeying straight into the heart of a disaster – even if that is on the other side of the world.
First, seek to understand the community

BY GRACE BOGDAN, CAPASIA VI

It is difficult to emphasize what a life changing experience CapAsia has been for me. A decade ago, I embarked on a three-month study abroad with a group of college students and professor I had previously never met. Dr. Nihal, our wise leader, gave us plenty of reading material in preparation, but one could never truly be prepared for the journey to completely immerse ourselves into a strange country, culture, language, FOOD, and way of life.

As we entered our new reality, Dr. Nihal encouraged us to be present and allow time for reflection. This lesson proved most valuable as the more time we spent taking pictures of the beautiful places, the less time we had to embrace our surroundings and observe the environment and interactions of those and the culture that is so deeply embedded in their daily lives. This critical lesson has guided me through life as I venture to new parts of the country and world, I now observe and experience more, and later reflect.

Specifically, our time in India was spent in the City of Ahmedabad as we focused on the community of Charranagar and getting to know the Charras. This is a tribal community with a rich history of learning to live without the benefit of government support of any kind. It was overwhelming to learn how this community has been depicted as criminals and discriminated on by the government and surrounding society. How could this be? We spent many days just wandering the streets, with the help of the local Budhan Theatre, meeting the Charras and listening to their stories of daily life, rituals, suffering, and needs. I constantly wondered what exactly was our purpose? What was the assignment?

Dr. Nihal explained that with the traditional planning approach, the goal or desirable outcome is already set in mind before planners enter a community. This preset goal hinders any insight planners may gain from the community, which ultimately undermines the outreach process and unfavorably affects the community in future development. Conversely in the CapAsia process, we learn about the community first, and then decide how we can help based on their needs and values.

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Only after we had developed this understanding of who the Charras are did we begin to reflect - how can we assist the community? Never did I ever expect that by the end of our time in Ahmedabad, we would be meeting with the municipal government as champions of the Charras, presenting a plan to acknowledge Charranagar community and provide basic infrastructure needs without tearing their neighborhood apart.

As a current government employee working as a planner in the DC area, this was an invaluable lesson. When faced with a new proposal, my immediate questions focus on the community, what is the surrounding neighborhood, what do they want and need, how will this affect them?

In my opinion, the CapAsia program is so successful because it is a multifaceted, holistic experience that will impact each person differently. It provides an unparalleled education beyond the classroom and teaches lessons that redefine perspective; I now seek to understand and then be understood. In today’s current climate, isn’t that what we all need?
Empathy grows after living as a foreigner

BY CATHERINE REYNOLDS, CAPASIA VI, IX

I had the good fortune to join CapAsia twice, once in 2011 and again in 2017. Most know that getting the chance to visit Asia is a big opportunity, but it is also an intimidating one. For those who enjoy their small comfort zones, this is not a trip for you. For those of you who are seeking to expand your understanding of what development truly is, this is an experience that will serve as a guide for the rest of your life.

There are specific memories that stick with me. I can’t smell cilantro now without thinking of dinners in Thailand or looking out over the Kathmandu Valley before the fog had cleared on a sunny morning. These new, faraway places are dictated by unfamiliar climates. Food has a much older story. Holidays are more interesting because they are unknown. Social customs seem to have a richer background. People, however, are people no matter where you go. This was (and still is) deeply comforting to me. Our class mainly stayed with very kind, considerate, and tolerant locals. I say, kind and considerate, because we often didn’t speak the same language. Yet, these kind-hearted, tolerant individuals welcomed 2-3 students into their home for several weeks. Can you imagine?

The most important thing any student should consider is that CapAsia is an experience that continues to teach long after it is over. Not all of the lessons are fun. Not all of the experiences are magical. And most of it cannot be properly absorbed in the moment, but it will still manage to bring happy tears to your eyes years later. For instance, a lot of assumptions went to the wayside about who I thought I was and who I thought a “foreigner” was. I was the "foreigner" for several weeks. This has enabled me to develop empathy that I still possess and continue to build upon. This has also enabled less attachment to my comfort zone and better listening skills, especially from "other" points of view. CapAsia has taught me to be excited about the “other” instead of overlooking it or being made uncomfortable by it. It seems as if we all house an inner “other”.

It took meeting strangers on the other side of the world to appreciate some latent and beautiful inner perspectives. For instance, some of the people we worked with didn’t have access to running water or electricity. Every "bad" day is pretty hard to complain about after sharing that experience. I also

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Empathy ... continued

learned to value the deep, transformative power of getting to know your neighbors. Who knew?

The first group of people that our class had the opportunity to work with lived in a place called, Chharanagar. This was in Gujarat, India, but more specifically, Ahmedabad. These people refer to themselves as the Chharas and they shared their story. They had been unfairly branded as criminals and thieves by their local culture and government. Originally, they had started out as a nomadic tribe, but due being considered uncivilized, the Chharas' ancestors were housed by the government while serving as a source of cheap labor. The following dependence upon this system subsequently turned them into thieves and criminals.

The Chharas were so heavily discriminated against by their local government and fellow neighbors that they were almost wiped out. Through several days and many conversations of walking around the community to ask questions ... The resilience, creativity, and adaptiveness of the Chharas changed our own little worlds forever. We were learning from them what we were capable of doing. Our class had difficulty believing that developing something as simple as a map would be a sufficient enough project.

It turns out that listening was sufficient. For some reason, even trying to listen, was very hard to do at first. After listening through several rough drafts of maps, we then made a final map and scheduled several meetings with local officials. We then established a dialogue about what was happening to Chharanagar with the Chharas' neighbors.

One small, informal collaborative project of a map later, some local papers picked up the story and publicized what was going on. A group of former strangers on the other side of the world taught us what maps were for and the value of engaging your neighbor. It took a bold escape away from the formal environment of the classroom to learn this.

Cultures, nations, and states grow out of informal development much like, Chharanagar. This small change then shows up on formal maps—not the other way around. I've never forgotten that. This lesson has guided much of my interest in the development of small-scale sustainable food systems in Indiana.

These days, I listen to local food business owners. These people also used to be strangers, but live in my own community. It took meeting the Chharas to even know how to look for and listen to my own neighbors. The informal is not to be underestimated and continues to do great things off of the formal record.
Living overseas gave her a freedom she never felt in America

BY CHLOE DOTSON, CAPASIA VI

CapAsia changed my life. How ignorant was I to reject Dr. Nihal’s initial suggestion regarding my participation in CapAsia. Upon the ending of a combined 16-hour flight and sickening jetlag the moment my skin felt the sun and lungs took a breath I knew I was home or at least closer to where my ancestors are from.

Although heavily involved in studies with Dr. Nihal and CapAsia students, I broke free from the group and truly experienced India every chance I had. I lived this new world in a new light for the first time outside of the burden of conforming to the norms I had been groomed to live by. Quickly I learned key words for travel and thought I was in heaven when I transitioned from jeans to traditional clothing.

Breaking away from the group also prevented price gouging – which typically happens when you are surrounded by white people speaking English. I learned to shop separately and silently, nodding and gesturing for prices. Within several days I had a cell phone and became friends with a rickshaw driver. Never in my life had I been so friendly with a stranger. I even met his wife and child named Krishna. It was a freedom and safety I had never experienced as a black woman born in America.

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Living ... continued

Dr. Nihal’s first task was to complete a community development project in a community that has experienced unfathomable oppression, Chharanagar. As a gateway into the community I agreed to teach English in a local community library. After a few days Dr. Nihal presented me with a book written by Gandhi stated that to teach English was to enslave. I was immediately devastated. How dare me as a black woman (within the discourse of American slavery, Jim Crow, mass incarceration and persistence unlawful assignation of unarmed people of color) teach English – how dare I continue to colonize the oppressed - becoming the oppressor. I cried uncontrollably at the Gandhi Ashram which depicted black leaders such as Malcom X and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and their philosophy for equality and positive change.

It was only then halfway across the world I understood the struggle and our collective power as people of color. Gandhi continued to teach that English should only be learned as a means to fight the oppressor. I continued to teach and gain trust within the community. Our group of students and community members even met with the local government and listened while government officials continuously regarded the Chharanagar people as thieves, miscreants and criminals in need of punishment and banishment from “civilized” populations. After many nights talking and eating with community members it became clear to me that there was nothing I could do. I could not build anything, design anything, create anything that would be of any real use to the community. None of the skills taught through my formal education could help this community.

Traveling to teach every day I would often pass by the library (their community center) due to monolithic colors and architectural styles. The eagerly awaiting children would chase after me – “Cali!” (Chloe) they would scream and grab my arms leading me back to building. It hit me then - our project would be to build upon the aspirations of the community within the local community where activities for liberation, self-determination, education, and community empowerment already existed.

The community event to paint the library with the aspirations of the children, activists and leaders turned into an all-out community celebration with food, music, dancing and painting all in one. The self-empowerment and self-determination shared within the library that day spread into the streets. This event was more than I could ever build, design or develop.

Nepal was Dr. Nihal’s next challenge to our hearts and minds. The community in Nepal wanted to preserve the village square and protect it from vehicles. The community decided that a moveable fence system made from bricks and bamboo would be best. Walking around with a brick in my hand pointing to it and gesturing eventually lead to a young man approaching, nodding and pointing at the brick. I followed the young man accompanied by another male on a journey to another land. Walking down into a valley I felt the dirt beneath my feet turn to sand and saw a huge brick smokestack chimney pumping black smoke into the air. I looked to my right and in the distance I saw people with dark brown skin walking back.
and forth up and down a massive hill made of sand. Looking to the left I saw a sea of 10x10 square structures made of uncured grey bricks. I eventually spoke with lighter brown skin men in a small building further down the path and was able to secure a truck load of bricks. As I walked out – I watched mostly children and some older adults (dark brown skin) stack bricks up a piece of wood placed on the lower back tied with cloth to their foreheads. With each drop of bricks into the truck, a single coin was placed into their hands. I hitched a ride with the truck of bricks back to the community and as we drove out of the valley looking into the side passenger mirror – the sky was lined with hundreds of brick smoke-stack chimneys. My heart sank.

After heavy chopping and harvesting of extremely hard and heavy bamboo, backbreaking digging into dry, rocky and hard soil and building over 20 brick columns to hold bamboo pieces in place – the project was complete. The community sent photos a year later of a space completely overgrown with lush grass and vegetation. The fencing system still intact and utilized to protect a sacred space.

Personally I learned that everything I have been taught from birth is a social construction; race, class, privilege, power, gender, capacity, ability, etc. Who I am as a woman of color drastically changes with my placement in this world and simultaneously so does the narrative associated with that social construction. CapAsia freed my mind from bondage and captivity that had existed as a means of survival and progress back at home in America; almost hereditarily passed down from my ancestors who were enslaved and or lived free in fear within the oppressive white supremacy regime in America. A mental captivity that has existed for me - which was only visible for self-examination upon my escape from the states.

Professionally I learned that as an urban planner I cannot go into a community as a predetermined educated expert capable of saving and helping poor communities of
color; how foolish to think so. Despite education, planners are not experts – although our American Exceptionalism based education may teach us we are. Many of our educational platforms are founded in the very same structures of oppression that have led to the disparities we are trying to mitigate. Inevitably if you do not question traditional planning principles and methodology for the development of solutions, you will inevitably fail as a planner and fail those whom you serve – resulting in further deterioration of generational family stability and health.

The combined personal and professional transformation that took place is indescribable. I thank Dr. Nihal for opening my mind and heart. I thank Dr. Nihal for pushing and encouraging a young black girl born in New York to see beyond the constraints of America and to see beyond the constraints within myself. CapAsia is the foundation to my understanding and my work throughout the country and has essentially made me the planner, activist, advocate, citizen and public servant I am today.
Tornado alley benefits from CapAsia lessons

BY TIM LITTLE, CAPASIA VI

There is not a week that goes by, sometimes even a day, that I do not think about CapAsia in 2011. Even though it was 10 years ago, I still draw upon the experiences and lessons that I learned while studying in India and Nepal. Whether it was the experience of living and working with a family in Banepa, Nepal, learning about the Indian healthcare system as a patient in a hospital, or discovering what advocacy planning was in a cross-cultural setting in the informal settlements of Ahmedabad, India, CapAsia was a life-changing event. I would recommend it to anyone who wants to step outside of their paradigm, culture, or comfort-zone.

I constantly think about how CapAsia challenged me outside of what I knew about my life, the lives of other people, and what planning is. It took going to the other side of the world to realize all the planning opportunities that exist here back in the States. You can study the local economy, the history, and the existing plans with ease and little threat to your own comfort, yet when you are confronted with real living people that are flesh and blood, you must recognize that people are people and plans are plans.

Before CapAsia, communities and their residents were to be studied, but in CapAsia we were WITH people in their communities. I could not read an article or look at a chart to fully comprehend the complexities of the communities where we were living and working. Unfortunately, in most forms of community planning, at least in my professional career, planners do not kick the tires, see the significant places, listen to the stories, eat in the restaurants, or visit the

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Tornado ... continued

civic and religious organizations. It is incredibly easy to not regard the people that live in the community that you are working. We studied the history and context of this specific neighborhood, but we did not know the people in the neighborhood, CapAsia changed that. Yet even still, Dr. Perera took this one step further by continuing to challenge us to recognize that what we were doing in India and Nepal was just as easily applicable to any community in Indiana or even the United States. This was our opportunity to grow and learn, I know this seems a trivial thing, but this is one of the most important things I learned in CapAsia.

After getting over my initial and unfounded fears and realizing that I’m not in Indiana anymore, I begin to interact with people on their terms, or at least try. It was not the smoothest interactions and there were considerable gaps in language. Fortunately, goodwill and a willingness to put yourself into a posture of humility and learning went farther than anything else we did. We spent weeks and weeks learning about their history, culture, and lives; we listened to their stories and kicked the tires. Eventually this culminated into presentations to government leaders, community rallies, and even into a few physical structures.

I took the learning experiences of CapAsia and directly poured them into the community where I did my MURP internship: Joplin, Missouri. A few weeks after returning from CapAsia, Joplin was hit by an EF-5 tornado. I was able to apply the lessons of CapAsia to my work as the community faced adversity and devastation, but eventual triumph after the disaster struck. I earnestly listened to survivors’ stories full of grief and frustration, then worked to connect them with local, state, and federal assistance they could use to help make their lives whole again. CapAsia started me on this journey and I bring this to where I am now, at the intersection of emergency management and community planning. All planning is with real people in real communities filled with hopes, dreams, and even fears, for their future and the future of their communities. Planning does not happen in a vacuum, it happens where people are, and I am still there, kicking the tires, listening to their stories, and learning their communities; CapAsia changed my life.

The bus stop and bench in Duakot, Nepal, were constructed by students and locals working together, reports one participant. “I have yet to meet better brick masons,” she says of the Nepalis who were eager to reclaim this space but uncertain what they wanted until the collaborative project began.
Nepal's Prof. Treese enjoys CapAsia

BY DONN TREESE, PhD
CAPASIA I, VI, VII

CapAsia has been a great benefit to students of architecture in Asia as well the participants from Ball State University. Particularly the trips to Nepal have been especially helpful to our Nepali architecture students involved with the CapAsia team during their time in the country. Nepal has been included in several CapAsia trips from the 1990’s and some very long-term friendship relationships have developed between CapAsia students and Nepal architecture students carried on across the miles and through the years. One thing that helped develop these deeper friendships is that on some trips, the CapAsia students were able to stay as house guests with their counterpart Nepali architecture students.

As a result of the contacts developed during CapAsia trips to Nepal, several architecture students from Nepal have studied at Ball State University either for a semester as undergraduate students or for graduate degrees after completing their BArch degrees in Nepal. There have also been faculty exchanges which have been enlightening to our architecture students in Nepal.

The hands-on design-build projects worked on jointly with CAP students and Nepal architecture students were an especially useful educational tool for the Nepali students. The educational administrators in Nepal were hesitant to give academic credit for hands-on practical work with bamboo, mud, or sun-dried bricks, and rarely even for projects using cement and wood. (Technical courses like engineering and architecture were to be primarily theoretical content and not hands-on with construction materials; work that should be for construction laborers.) The practical experience the students gained working with these materials helped them to better understand how different materials fit and worked together; what you could do and what you could not do with different building materials. (Many of my former students contacted me after graduation asking where they can learn more about using materials like bamboo, rammed earth, and sun-dried brick because they were working with non-profit organizations to develop low-cost building prototypes in different climatic zones in Nepal.)

The CAP students liked to ask questions and answering those questions about Nepali urban planning has forced Nepali students to think deeper and more critically about their own cultural and building history and explaining this to the CAP students helped our students to better understand their own history and cultural development.

Though I feel as an observer that the CapAsia experiences in Nepal have been beneficial for BSU students, the opportunities have been extremely helpful for the architecture students in Nepal. I hope the CapAsia trips to Nepal continue.
Artist draws upon CapAsia skills

BY ELENA MAZZI, CAPASIA VI

When I met Wes Janz in Venice University in 2010, I was dreaming through his words. He was telling us students about CapAsia, this incredible program he was co-directing with Nihal Perera in several parts of Asia.

His words were reflecting everything I was exploring through my work, my studies: how to deeply get to know a place, how to work in collaboration with other people, other cultures, learning by doing, changing perspective. I asked if I could apply as an external student and he said there were two positions available: I immediately started writing, and I got accepted. I joined CapAsia only for one month, but I wish I could have done the entire program!

CapAsia has been an important turning point in my life: I learned about other cultures from the inside, having the opportunity to spend time in a local family; I learned about questioning myself in a context that was not familiar for me; I learned a lot about collaboration, empathy, strength, and also fear. I learned about facing the world. CapAsia is not just traveling and experiencing. CapAsia gives you tools to understand what interdisciplinarity means by doing. You have to try, and while you are trying and experimenting, you have the opportunity to discuss it in an open and at the same time intimate context.

I am not an urban planner, I am a visual artist working a lot in the public sphere with local communities and specific territories. The environmental and social context for me are of extreme importance. After more than 10 years, I still remember and use some of the tools and strategies I learned during CapAsia program. Because that experience represented for me a turning point in my life where I really learned all problematics of working in a difficult place, working with people of different cultures, and putting into practice what it means to work from the bottom up.

In my work as an artist I always create final artworks that travel to museums, institutions and public places. But for me the process is the strongest part of the work; it is what shapes me as a human being and what allows me to cross a path, that is at the same time personal and collective. It is sometimes difficult to explain, but when I remember that period of my life, that experience, images are clear and strong in my mind, and I always see it as a treasure I both keep with me as well as try to share through my work.

The author redesigned a chautara (a podium-like structure) at the foot of a tree in Nepal. Here, her design is being constructed.
Experience is meaningful for Sri Lanka native

BY NIRMANI LIYANAGE, CAPASIA VI, VII, VIII

An excerpt from my diary:

I woke up sweating like a pig! The power cut just after mid-night has stopped the ceiling fan which was the only relief amidst the unwavering heat in Penang Island of Malaysia. These power cuts are common, frustrating but humbling... they make you realize that you are part of the whole; a small non-significant user of a municipal power grid. You can neither forecast nor change the glitches of the system you are in even though such glitches take away precious moments from your short life time. This is someone’s inescapable reality since birth... It is not my city nor where I study; but it is someone else’s home. It is true that life in Penang is much easier than the houses I saw in Panuwati (Nepal) or around Gahirmatha forest (India) during CapAsia 2013, which have no electricity at all. But, at large, the instability of the supply of utilities continues to challenge everyday life of the ordinary people. Planners and decision makers who operate with minimal or no knowledge of those everyday struggles are highly unlikely to empathize with ordinary citizens whose livelihood and quality of life is affected by such glitches. How can I respectfully acknowledge everyday struggles of ordinary citizens in my work as an urban planner? How can I build on this and become a part of a grounded solution that is probably already out there among those who are living with the problem(s). Maybe it is an art... an art of listening deeply and building on what is heard!”
(2/3/2015 George Town, Malaysia)
Experience ... continued

The previous page contains an excerpt from my 2015 CapAsia journal. Being a fulltime participant (once) and two-time visitor of the program, I have plenty of insights from my CapAsia immersive experiences in ordinary cities of India, Nepal, Malaysia, China, Thailand and Singapore.

These memories, insights and exposure still make my opinion and strategic input relevant in numerous forums of decision makers/change seekers simply because this experience has made my opinion, approach and solutions much closer to reality. After 8 years from my first CapAsia experience, now I can gratefully say that thanks to the self-discovering and transforming immersion I had through this program, my work as a practitioner (in urban development and urban inclusion) has been recognized for its originality and social-justice focused empathy.

I was born and brought up in Sri Lanka and I grew up amidst harsh realities of poverty and injustice. However, it was the CapAsia training that made it possible for me to see through those because it made me develop a critical and analytical way of thinking supported by a strong theoretical framework that further sharpens my reading of any situation.

It is equally important for those who come from Asia and the rest of the world as CapAsia never stops from touching the surface but allows the students to immerse in realities only guarded by a critical distance developed through critical knowledge on the subject they engage. I thank CapAsia and Professor Nihal Perera who directs the program for bringing in this unique opportunity for young practitioners in multiple disciplines because even after years of the first immersion, CapAsia continues to be a dear friend who guides us in both personal and professional life.
Adventures continue after CapAsia ends

BY JUSTIN BAKER, CAPASIA VII

When I look back at my college experience, the part of it that had the biggest influence (by far!) was CapAsia. This study abroad program deeply affected not only my profession and education, but also my personal growth and the person I am today.

When we first arrived in India all those years ago, I certainly felt overwhelmed with culture shock, but I was surprised by how quickly I was able to adapt. The experience of living in another culture that was so different from the one I grew up in had a profound impact on the way I looked at the world. Every day presented new challenges, but also new ideas and ways of thinking. Those three months felt like an eternity, but in the best way possible. By the end of the program I felt as though I could overcome any challenge. The bonds I made with my fellow classmates on the trip has endured almost a decade later, as the experiences you share and the impact of this program will be something that very few can relate to.

During this study abroad, I not only fell in love with the woman who is now my wife (our wedding also functioned as a CapAsia reunion!) but I also fell in love with Asia. After CapAsia I spent a year backpacking around various countries and even pursued further education in Singapore (and loved every minute of it!)

If you are even remotely considering participating in CapAsia, I would encourage you do take the leap with the strongest recommendation possible! It will truly be a life-changing experience that you will treasure forever!
CapAsia marks the start of adulthood

BY CHIDO MOYO-BAKER, CAPASIA VII

Looking back, I would say that the CapAsia Study Abroad Program was definitely one of the most transformative experiences of my life. I participated in the program in spring of 2013. During the 2013 program we spent two months in Bhubaneshwar, Orissa, India, and one month in Kathmandu, Nepal.

Having come from the home of an immigrant single mother whose main goal was to get her kids through school so they can have a better life, I had mostly spent my college career focused on getting through school and graduating. It had never crossed my mind to try for a study abroad experience. At least not until I was convinced to seek out more information about the program after hearing about a former participant’s experience over a very long drive to Atlanta during field trip week.

Discovering that I could use my student loans as well as a scholarship to pay for the trip and still get all my credits to graduate on time solidified my decision to go.

In CapAsia I saw a chance to get out of my bubble and see the world beyond my limited view. For most people going to college away from home is enough to set them on the path to self-discovery but for me that didn’t happen until CapAsia. CapAsia gave me the freedom to explorer a version of myself outside of my usual everyday life which was still largely influenced by my family’s ideal about life. Personally, my experience on during CapAsia taught me who I was as an individual and how to live life on my own terms.

In other terms CapAsia set me on the path to adulting. As a student, I learned that effective learning doesn’t and shouldn’t always come from a structured class with rigid syllabi and textbook. As an experience-based learner, I thoroughly enjoyed that class was held anywhere on the go and that knowledge was exchanged through discussion of experiences, thoughts and ideas. As a planner in training, I discovered the bottom-up approach to planning for communities. I can honestly say that the lessons learned from practicing this approach have come in handy in my planning career, especially during community engagement and neighborhood planning processes.

I walked away from the CapAsia with the love of my life, lifelong friends, new ideas of approaching planning and, a thrust to travel and learn from the world around me.
Trust is key

BY BIBHU KALYAN NAYAK, CAPASIA VII

Few experiences are eternal, but some do remain within and shape our identity. CapAsia is one such program, driven by a pure sense of faith and mutual trust. Those who have experienced it may call it a transformative experience of their lives. I met Nihal in CEPT, Ahmedabad, where he was teaching for a semester in 2010. I was a student in his class.

I briefly become a part of his CapAsia team in Ahmedabad. It was a different perspective towards the teaching and learning process that I have been a part of for several years. So, I decided to partner with CapAsia program after I graduated from CEPT. I spoke to Nihal about it and as usual, he was excited about it. That is something I always appreciate about him, he is never afraid to take chance. His strong belief in the concept of CapAsia makes it unique. I must admit here, that my association with CapAsia was primarily due to the friendship and trust that we both have built over time.

In January 2013, we started the CapAsia program in Bhubaneswar, India. At that time, I was running my practice and teaching part-time in a local architecture school. For a lot of my friends and family, it wasn’t logical. But for me, it was an opportunity to see the world around me through a different lens. It wasn’t easy. There were times we have reconsidered the plan. But it was Nihal’s strong motivation and support that made it possible.

I also asked some of my local students to join the group. It turned out to be an amazing learning experience for all of us in the process. It wasn’t pleasant and smooth all the time. But we managed, as the base of this program was mutual trust. After about eight years since we did this together, I am still in touch with most of the participants. I am sure the American students must have a similar experience to share.

While looking back, I feel such program are very critical for nations like India and the United States. As both nations have thriving democratic systems and celebrate the diversity of their population. Neither nation is perfect. But their inherent spirit to strive against the odds and embrace people despite difference make them natural collaborators. As people from two different worlds, we have a lot to offer each other. Programs like CapAsia may pave the path for such learnings to take place. Especially in the present context, where the world is divided; such a program may help to strengthen the cultural ties between two great democracies of the world. It may help to instil shared values like tolerance and equity among the future citizens of these two nations.

As an individual, it was a process of self-discovery for me. It made me realize, if we have the determination to do something, then the whole universe will conspire to make it possible for us. And remember if you are doing it in India, you need to have patience.

“Things happen in India, but it takes time.”
(Once told by my Dean Prof. Utpal Sharma)
'I found my niche'

BY ALKEYNA ALDRIDGE, CAPASIA VII

I currently serve as the director of engagement and empowerment for the City of South Bend. Our team’s role is to serve as the “people-centered” arm of our City’s economic and community development department. It was the Buttigieg administrations’ effort to address the historic systemic, racialized place-based poverty in our city’s neighborhoods that still get left behind or completely out of traditional planning and development processes. Our mission is to connect the city’s most vulnerable residents to resources that promote economic mobility and improved neighborhood quality of life.

When I applied for CapAsia I had no idea the personal and professional impact it would have on my life. Of course, I was excited to visit the Taj Mahal, stand atop the most awe-inspiring Himalayan vistas, and to be honest get out of Indiana! What I didn’t expect was the beautiful diversity of our CapAsia team and how we remain extended family to this day. Admittedly, Dr. Nihal’s design approach was a bit off putting in the beginning to the entire cohort of mostly 3rd/4th year undergrads, and to the graduate students too! “Just go talk to people...see what they are already doing,” Dr. Nihal would often say casually. As classmates, we often commiserated together about not understanding if we were “doing it right” and if we would get the planning outcome and grade.

In retrospect, Dr. Nihal’s design approach is simple and humanistic. Neither people nor place are static objects awaiting a design

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consultants’, planners, or architect vision to save them. Rather, people and the spaces and communities they create are dynamic and transforming in place. The role of the planner is engage deeply and meaningfully enough that the community trust, accepts, and shares with them as if they were new neighbor, a new friend, a committed member of the community. As a fellow community member your skillset becomes an asset to move forward the shared community vision- not your design.

Because of CapAsia, I’ve found my niche a planner. Planners must commit to understanding that our work is firstly relational and must affirm the fact that all people have the agency and wherewithal to transform their communities. This lesson was further driven home in a 2018 public meeting when a resident proclaimed “I see that the calvary ain’t coming so we just gone do it ourselves.” And she did! She organized residents to small scale home repairs in the city’s one of the city’s most distressed neighborhoods. It bothered me that we had no institutional response to this neighborhood’s plight. It was the neighborhood that I grew up in.

The neighborhood had an active plan, but years of population decline, aging housing stock and abandoned properties all contribute a level of market failure that not even the best planner can solve. We must have the humility to engage meaningfully in a bottom-up planning process that allows communities members to lead and sustain community change, rather than continuing a process that ends in beautiful (and expensive) designs sitting on shelf.
Trip changed the way she sees her home

BY KAUSHALYA HERATH, 
CAPASIA VIII

When I joined the MURP program, Prof. Perera asked me if I want to do the second-year research on my native village in Sri Lanka. I said, “there is nothing to study about it. It is normal.”

However, even before we completed our CapAsia trip in 2015, I decided to study my village for my research project because CapAsia did not only allow me to see the places we went and communities with whom we interacted during CapAsia but also myself and from where I came.

It has been six years since CapAsia VIII and I still learn new things from our experiences during the trip. I realized the difference between learning and studying while we were working with the communities. How people in Clan jetties in Malaysia and the Danwei community in Changsha, China embraced us to be a part of their daily lives taught us a lot more about their communities than any survey could have done.

I still have smell memories of each community in which we engaged. I miss tasting homemade food at our local friends' homes. Some community members are still on my social media and we communicate with each other once in a while.

The connections we developed with communities, and the freedom we had to do that in the CapAsia program are amazing. I dream of going back to those communities again one day. The first thing I will miss when I go back is my colleagues, the pop-up tribe, as they called us in Penang, Malaysia.
People first, says student from Changsha

BY RENEE YIN, CAPASIA VII

CapAsia not only got me offers from multiple graduate schools, but also brought me a people-based view in life. I took part in CapAsia VIII as a local student in Changsha. At the beginning, I thought I was supposed to do some information gathering work or give some local guidance. However, it turned out I knew nothing about the local community, let alone guidance. To find stories behind the community, CapAsia students and I spent one week mingling with local residents. We played mahjong, sang karaoke, did square-dancing, and so on.

Gradually, each student found out his/her research focus. Christine and I were interested in the difference between designed space and transformed space. We found that the designed space does not satisfy the changing needs of residents, which forced people to transform the designed spaces into what they need. For instance, residents wanted more room to grow vegetables after their retirement, so they changed the sidewalk into garden.

Through this small story, we learned that circumstances alter cases. As planners, we have to walk in other’s shoes, or our planning would become an empty talk.

Though, I am working as a real estate investment associate, I still found that people-based view is the key to success. A business model is doomed to failure if it does not put customer needs in the first place.
On not taking the rules for granted

BY CHRISTINE MITCHELL, CAPASIA IX

Hello! My name is Christine and I participated in CapAsia six years ago during the final semester of my senior year of architecture school. After returning to Ball State for a few weeks for graduation, I traveled for two years through Europe and Oceania. Currently, I find myself living in a converted school bus in the high desert mesa of northern New Mexico. The last couple of years of my life having been spent in various types of conventional and non-conventional informal communities outside a small town called Taos.

I could go on and on about how CapAsia changed my life and perception of the world. The interactions, experiences, conversations and discussions we had affect all of the the interactions I have on any given day at least to some degree, and continue to be tool in which I process my own related problems.

On the CapAsia journey, we learned to not take rules and regulations for granted; to not blindly believe that they exist for the “common” good. These rules have been put into place to create perpetrate a certain way of life, based in the Western set ideals, not taking into consideration what a diverse set of humans with different cultural traditions might need or want. Through the understanding of this concept, we began to shift our perception; when you understand that a fact is not really a fact at all but a point of view, you can then finally take a step back and harness all your powers of observation and reason to ascertain what you truly do believe.

We were given the chance to learn in a new way, from people and communities in which these “western” standards and ideals have not already been enforced. We found, as countless other CapAsia trips also had, that

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the void in regulation was filled vastly by human necessity and desire into a mishmash of both crazy creativity and the utmost utilitarianism; into an ever-evolving organism that self-fulfilled its own needs and desires rather than being told what its needs and desires should be.

At the end of the three months, I was beyond excited to continue my journey in some type of academic sense. I felt like it was the only way; my duty to continue the quest for understanding. Instead, through a complicated web of life, I find myself smack dab in the midst of a cultural, zoning, and regulatory saga in my own country regarding my own community and home.

Instead of studying it, I am living it- with all of the emotions and struggles that accompany. This situation has brought up so many questions about my own culture and what I can do to both be a part of a healthy community whilst pushing to make it better and more inclusive to the creative needs and desires of real people and real lives.

Although it is still a struggle- one that I am at this moment fully entrenched in- I am ever grateful for my experiences with Nihal and our CapAsia group, as well as all the people, homes and communities we were able to be a part of even for a second. The thought of their very existence and perseverance gives me the power to move forward sometimes, even when I feel like a tiny speck in a sea of those who do not see the possibility of another reality.

As someone who has experienced a vast range of existences, I know there is not a “one size” solution for how to create diverse human environments that are conducive to safety and growth, and I will probably spend the rest of my life pondering, participating, searching, and gradually understanding how to best help myself and my fellow humans create the most vibrant and dynamic spaces that support our comfort and growth. The human experience is so vast, and our built and lived-in environment supports our physical and emotional wellbeing and in turn, all that grows and is created from there.
Homestay, Hindi wedding most memorable

BY AMBER JANZEN, CAPASIA IX

In my last semester in the Urban Planning Graduate Program at Ball State, I participated in the 2017 CapAsia Study Abroad Program, where I traveled to Thailand and Nepal. The time I spent in Thailand and Nepal is undoubtedly the most impactful experience of my life. The profoundly immersive nature of the CapAsia program exposed me to ideas, cultures, and experiences that have forever shaped my perspective on the world. The primary intent of the CapAsia program aims to expand students’ worldviews beyond the western worldview of development, policy, and decision making.

In Thailand, we grouped up with university students from Bangkok to understand localized tourism development across Sukhothai and Kamphaeng Phet. During this time, we lived in homestays with local leaders of the community. Our homestay families chauffeured us around to see for ourselves their community’s efforts to develop a robust eco-tourism system. Not only was this a fantastic academic learning experience, but it was also a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity where I was truly immersed in a culture so vastly different from my own.

What makes CapAsia stand out from other studies abroad programs is how immersive it is. Instead of dorm rooms, we had homestays. Instead of classrooms, our lessons occupied our host families’ homes, local community markets, and old-world heritage sites. Yet, this program was truly remarkable because it prioritized experiences and building relationships over a traditional learning structure.

Some of my best experiences include attending a traditional Hindi wedding in Nepal, seeing the Himalayas with my own eyes, and watching Buddhist Monks bless the new home of my homestay mother’s friend. These are the experiences that will stick with me for the rest of my life. Because of CapAsia, I have gained life-long friendships, once-in-a-lifetime experiences, and a greater sense of empathy and openness to the unknown. If you are open to vastly new experiences that will forever shape the way you view the world, then this is the program for you.
CapAsia meet-up leads to study at BSU

BY LANYANG ZHOU, CAPASIA IX, X

CapAsia is one of the most wonderful adventures I had in my life. It was a great journey for me to see the world and explore the possibility of my life. The best experience that CapAsia brought to me was not only doing something that I would not do in my normal life but also how I gradually understand myself during this journey.

Life in CapAsia was always out of expectation. The experience in CapAsia would never happen if I came to those places as a tourist. It gave me the chance to see and experience something that I may never know, which has largely broadened my mind. During CapAsia, I tried different kinds of transportation, lived in various places that I would never imagine, saw different ways of life. I was so glad I experienced these; it is the memory I will keep for life. This experience also has taught me how to deal with the surprise and challenges that appear in my life and help me to became more mind-open to respect the diversity in the world.

Living closely with the locals gave me a chance to immerse in local life. My identity as an outsider in the local place gave me a good position to look both from the inside and the outside. Observing local people’s lives provided me with a mirror to look at my own life and understand the city and country I lived in. Those reflections gave me a deeper understanding of my major and the world.

Moreover, CapAsia provided a vibe to be critical and keep thinking when we had daily life in the local place. It gave me a moment to jump out of my life and be critical about everything I used to take for granted. This experience was the most interesting part for me. It was like re-understanding things that I thought I was extremely familiar with. This

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critical thinking showed me the other side of things that I thought I knew well. It helped me to generate more of my understanding of the world and help me to realize who I am.

One of the great things in CapAsia was I had a chance to discuss with others some topics I care about, including culture, heritage, modernization, tradition, and development. With the help of Prof. Perera, I not only had the chance to share with others about my understanding but also learned more ideas from others that challenged my previous understanding.

I had my first CapAsia experience when I was an undergraduate in China, and it made me come to the US to continue my exploration of urban studies after graduation. It was a great change in my life, but its influence on me was way more than that.

It showed me there are some people cared about similar topics with me, which largely encouraged me to continue my intellectual journey. It also impacted my understanding and attitude towards the world and my own life. The CapAsia trip has ended, but it has enabled me to launch a new journey and equipped me with courage, curiosity, and capability to go on my life journey.
Asian traffic inspires transportation planner

BY ANTON SCHAUERTE, CAPASIA X

One reason I wanted to go on CapAsia X was because I’d previously watched a YouTube video called “How to Cross the Street in Hanoi (Vietnam) Traffic.” Obviously, the video was about crossing the street in Hanoi and it showed a pedestrian’s point-of-view as they crossed a divided highway; it looked both horrifying and thrilling. In case you didn’t know, there are very few intersections in Vietnam and in other Asian countries that have stop signs or stop lights. Even if they do, they’re often ignored.

Aside from sounding like a really wild and scary experience (which it was at first!), I was also very curious to see how roadway and sidewalk space was utilized. In regards to the transportation system as a whole, I also wanted to know whether Asia should be more like the U.S., whether the U.S. should be more like Asia, a combination of the two, or neither.

Upon landing, the first thing I noticed on my ride from the airport to the hotel, was that drivers were constantly honking at each other. Though this is common in large cities across the world, in Asia, it sounded like everyone’s horn was permanently blaring. During my late-night drive through the city, I also focused on the pattern of vehicle movements. I couldn’t help thinking that the streets there were just pure chaos.

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Asia traffic ... continued

Motorbike drivers would constantly veer between the left and right side of the road, cars were parked on the sidewalk, and if I wanted to reach out my arm out the car window, I was close enough to other vehicles that I could easily pat a motorbike driver on the back. Doing so actually seemed appropriate given how nerve-racking driving on a little scooter must be in a city of 4.8 million people, all while a semi-truck is driving five feet behind you and a pedestrian is standing five feet in front of you.

These observations, the excessive honking and seeming lack or disregard of traffic laws, became two particular areas of interest during CapAsia. Over the course of the semester, I eventually realized that the reason for the constant honking was simply to alert other people of the presence of the driver who was honking. In Asia, sounding one’s horn seems to have much more of a practical purpose than the U.S., where honking is usually done when one driver is angry at another. Throughout the trip, I also noticed how closely vehicles drove behind other vehicles, even at higher speeds. Though slightly scary to experience at first, it felt relatively normal after the first month. Similar to honking one’s horn, nobody seemed irritated when the vehicle behind them was 10 feet away while traveling 50 miles per hour. Of course, in the U.S., this is known as “tailgating.” But, if driving extremely close to each other is normal and doesn’t cause frustration in Asia, is there even a word in their languages for tailgating? I imagine there’s probably no reason why there would be.

It has now been two years since I went on CapAsia in early 2019. Between that time and now, I’ve been working as a transportation planner in Florida and Michigan and while I’m at work, I often reflect back to my time in Asia. Even though part of the reason I went was to figure out which transportation system was better, I still haven’t figured it out. There’s a lot to consider and research in order to answer the question, but perhaps it’s simply a question that doesn’t have an answer.

However, I at least have a better understanding than before I traveled abroad. On one hand, spending three months in Asia has made me appreciate the relative calmness of walking down even a busy city street in the States. That’s a nice thing. But on the other hand, it has made me realize that overall, the U.S. is much less creative and resourceful when it comes to transporting people and stuff, particularly given the amount of existing infrastructure.

Now, whenever I see plans to widen either a highway or even a small two-lane road, I think back to being in Asia and seeing a three-wheeled motorbike driver cruising by with 25 wicker chairs attached to the back of his bike (see image). It makes me wonder if we should be pouring more concrete or just getting better at using our Tetris skills.
It's your world: Go find it!

BY ELLIE MORINVILLE, CAPASIA X

“This is your world, go find it” was repeated to me every night as my father would take me outside to gaze at the stars. I wanted to “go find it” but living in the Midwest and being a first-generation student, I was not sure how to “go find it”. Ball State was my first choice University because of the College of Architecture and Planning. At the end of my second year at Ball State I heard about that CapAsia was taking a group of students to South East Asia in Spring semester for three months to visit Thailand, Malaysia, and Myanmar. I thought this is how I could “go find it,” so I signed up.

We only visited Malaysia for a week, but we experienced exciting aspects of their culture and architecture such as the Clan Jetties, a small Chinese fishing community in Penang, Malaysia, with five communities of homes built out over the coast. We stayed in a Chinese Shophouse which is a building that allows commercial use on the first floor and shop owner residences on the second. Each day we explored temples and parks.

At last, we ventured to a country I had never heard of, Myanmar. It was different than anywhere I had been. Built on the sad past of a brutal military regime, Myanmar transformed to a democracy in 2011. During the dark years of military rule, Myanmar was a closed society that had few visitors which insulated their culture. We learned about the culture by observing, and talking...
It’s your world ... continued

to the Myanmar people. One interesting aspect is a “longyi” which is a skirt wore by both males and females.

In Yangon, Myanmar’s largest city, we met Doh Eain, a social enterprise restoring heritage buildings and creating community spaces. Their work was interesting, and I volunteered with a other classmates to help with community engagement work. A few days later, I asked if they had any internships. To my delight, they made an offer!

In August I was on another plane to Myanmar for an internship. This experience helped me find my direction in architecture. I helped to design renovations and restorations of heritage buildings, helped to examine whether renovating heritage buildings was more economically and environmentally friendly than new builds, and even helped to plan the deconstruction of a historic teak wood home that we then transported 200 miles south and rebuilt as a school.

On another project, I helped “Save the Children” to create safe play spaces for children. We met with communities and worked with young members to design an alley garden park. I met people from all over the world – France, Australia, Britain, Switzerland and of course Myanmar – that I keep up with today.

Experiencing the different culinary practices of people in South East Asia framed my thesis for my final year at the College of Architecture and Planning. Each country we visited had beautiful markets selling fresh fruits, vegetables, fish, poultry and other meats, and even bugs.

Immersing ourselves into the various country meant enjoying the culinary cuisine. One of the popular dishes sold in South East Asian countries are insects. They are sold fried or grilled and are sold at a variety of event. In typical markets around Thailand, Malaysia or Myanmar we could find insects being sold and eaten. Unique experience like this stuck with me and created inspiration to be used in future projects.

This experience sparked the genesis of my thesis investigation. I became interested in how these markets operated and why people ate insects. How could it be so normal there, but so unconventional in the United States?

My thesis for my final year at the College of Architecture and Planning at Ball State University investigated the contributions eating bugs can make in our diet and our environment and how architecture can create a bug eating movement in the United States.
Change your life. See the world.

CapAsia 2022: Spring semester in Thailand, Nepal, Russia + more
With Profs. Nihal Perera and Tim Gray

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CapAsia: 20 years and counting

Director Nihal Perera shares evolving pedagogy along with stories from the groundbreaking Ball State field study program

As a vehicle for learning, CapAsia has served a much greater set of beneficiaries than its participants. It has provided tremendous experience for partners, educators, and local communities. In the true spirit of CapAsia, I too have “learned by doing.” Let me share a bit of how CapAsia experience has shaped my approach to CapAsia, teaching, and self.

At the very beginning, in 1999, my friend Dikshu Kukreja who helped me organize a three-week component in Delhi (India) told me that even Harvard University does not have a program like this. That was just the beginning and I could not fathom what I heard. Dikshu had just graduated from Harvard’s Graduate School of Design, so I took it as a complement.

This immersive semester in Asia was conducted, with Alisa Coffin, as that year’s London-based program: PolyArk. Approaching from a different angle, I organized PolyArk XIV as a 10-week program in India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka which would wend with a week in London to explore how London has been influenced by its former Empire. Robert Home, the authority on British colonial planning, who gave the group a tour of East London, told me that “I know of programs that train Third World planners in the West but this is the first time I came across one that does the opposite.” I realized that I was up to something significant, but did not know the shape of what was yet to come; I still look for words to define it.

Upon return, I realized that Ball State’s celebrated foreign field studies were largely limited to Europe and there is no sustained guided-immersive program in Asia conducted by any other university in the USA. I thus transformed the one time-PolyArk effort into a guided immersive-learning semester in Asia. Both Vikram Prakash (University of Washington) and Rahul Mehrotra (University of Michigan) independently initiated collaborative-studios in India but ended after a couple of trips.

Restructured as CapAsia II (2001), the program was opened to both undergraduates and graduates of any discipline who are interested in the social and cultural aspects of social space. In 2003 (CapAsia III), the program was opened to students from other schools and was immediately attended by a

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student each from MIT and Berkeley. Since then, students from many universities including USC, UMN, Rutgers, and Portland State have taken part.

The biggest change was Wes Janz accepting my invitation to become the co-director of the program (2001-08). Our work together, developing many significant aspects of this program, I believe, were much greater than either one of us could have done alone. The other faculty who have been a part of the program include Jeff Brackett (CapAsia VI), Olon Dotson (CapAsia V), and Tim Gray (CapAsia IV, IV and Co-Director of CapAsia X).

Fieldtrips to “distressed cities” in the USA such as Flint, Mich., and Gary, Ind., as well as those to the South with Olon influenced CapAsia, and vice versa. Also, after helping the 2004 Indian-Ocean tsunami victims in Kalametiya (Sri Lanka) in 2005 (CapAsia IV), Olon, Wes, and I visited the areas damaged by Hurricane Katrina. Distress Tour in 2008 deserves a special mention as that was the main tour that we three co-organized.

The initial reflections of the students demonstrated the pedagogical potential of the program. According to Carryn Pierce, before going on CapAsia I, she thought that America is great and other countries are not but the trip made her realize the opposite. While Carryn was smart to develop more sophisticated understandings, I saw the need to balance large-scale binary-thoughts like this. At a more intimate scale, when Angie Furore told her roommate in Muncie how her homestay sister in Nepal told that women should not laugh that loud; the roommate judged it instead of accepting it as a cultural norm. Angie asked, why do you shake hands to greet someone? The roommate said “culture.” I gradually brought reflective thinking to the center of CapAsia pedagogy. This also revealed a big gap: the program is not so visible to outsiders (including the school) but immensely visible to the participants.

CapAsia II (2001) began with a two-day workshop in Delhi conducted in collaboration with the School of Planning and Architecture (SPA). The students
Perera ... continued

investigated a self-built settlement on Yamuna River bank. When we visited Yamuna Pushta, the CapAsia students said that the neighborhood needs better houses. The houses looked bad from planning and design perspectives. I asked them to check with the inhabitants. The following day, the students reported that the inhabitants did not want better houses; most wanted a school. This brought me back to my Asian roots: the parents are worried about the future of their kids more than their own roofs.

There is no way to find this information using maps, statistics, or any other technology. The students directly asked the inhabitants what they want. For this, we need to move ourselves to where they are, accept them as people, without "othering," and hear them in their own form of saying. Moreover, the students need to develop a self-critical mindset as what people think maybe different from what we have learned from important people in their lives. CapAsia builds such capacity to approach and hear ordinary people, empathically, paying attention to their worldviews.

In 2001, we dropped teams of CapAsia II and Indian students from Kamla Raheja Vidyamandhi (KRVIA) at five locations along the Eastern Waterfront of Mumbai and asked them to study each place. They were instructed to begin with the basic observation of an object, a person, or an act and build stories outwards identifying the larger structures and processes that it is a part of, or has helped create. With the support of Anirudh Paul and Shantanu...
Poredi, the students developed substantial knowledge and raised crucial questions. Yet, they made highly insensitive proposals such as huge apartment complexes and casinos, displacing the low-income neighborhoods rather than improving the inhabitants’ livelihoods.

Upon return, I informed the chair of my department, Paul Mitchell, of the discontinuity in the students’ thinking process between understanding a community and making suggestions. I also shared my suspicion that this break in the thinking process may not be unusual in the school environment where doing is privileged over thinking. Such insertion of assumptions, instead of building on the knowledge they developed, may go undetected as the projects are Indiana-based and the faculty and students may hold the same assumptions.

Paul understood CapAsia well. He visited Asia with me. When a department colleague aggressively questioned “why do we train students to be planners in Asia?” he stressed: “CapAsia is not producing planners to work in India; it provides a much broader education: It stretches the minds of the students.” I realized that CapAsia was here to stay.

Laying the foundation, the participants first learn about a community and its environment by living in it (homestays) and experiencing it with the help of locals, including students. Asking “Why do they build what they build?” the participants, empathically, build stories from the bottom, from small observations to larger processes and structures. It takes at least five to six weeks of living in a community for students
Perera ... continued
to step outside their comfort zones, empathize with community members, and truly immerse.

The communities, too, take **weeks to become acquainted with the visitors.** When the CapAsia V (2008) group visited the tsunami-affected area in Sri Lanka, the people flocked around them and informed of the event. When I asked in the local language: “Did you see?” the response was “no.” They were simply updating a group of foreigners who may like to know the mainstream story. After many turns, and six-weeks, a leader of the post-tsunami settlement at Kalametiya accompanied us, on foot, to the beach, showing all places of significance to him, including where he found his son’s corpse, his pants, and where he himself was when the huge wave came.

It practically clarified that **we are not the only subjects with agency but they too evaluate us and decide** on what to say and not. Nonetheless, the gap between us and them has reduced over six weeks and the two groups have begun to arrive at some common understanding.

The cultural immersion is reinforced by a couple of local incursions that would take the students deeper into the society and its contexts, especially the everyday life and cultural practices. Exploration of Saurashtra (Gujarat) during CapAsia VI (2011) exposed the students to a beautiful Jain temple on a mountain (Palitana), Asian lions (Gir Forest), old kingdoms and palaces (Junagadh, Bhavnagar), one of the holiest Hindu temples (Girnar), a key town that villages of African immigrants (Siddi Community), a ship-breaking yard (Alang), a former Portuguese town (Diu).

Such excavations into cultures are complemented by **quick stopovers** that broaden the exposure. CapAsia participants have not only visited places like Bangkok, Dubai, and Singapore but also consecutive world’s tallest buildings built in Asia such as the Petronas Towers (Kuala Lumpur) and Taipei 101, complemented by meetings with the designers and planners of the structures and the area. They have also met significant community leaders like Baburam Bhattarai just before he became the prime minister of Nepal in 2011, the daughter of the most revered Prime Minister of Malaysia, Marina Mahathir, and many local heroes like Ganesh Devi who left his professorship to establish a development center for the tribal people of southern Gujarat.

We also try to find **innovative projects to engage and learn from.** CapAsia III (2003) joined the initiative of the National Institute of Urban Affairs (NIUA of India), led by Renu Khosla, to build a Community Based Information System (CBIS) collecting information from self-built communities using innovative methods.

**CapAsia III (2003) revealed academic strengths and potential of CapAsia.**
Perera ... continued

Supported by professors Bish Sanyal and Lorlene Hoyt, Claudia Canepa (from MIT) stayed back in Delhi, where we did the main project, and continued the study into her master’s thesis project. She received a national award: Donald Schön Award for Excellence in Learning from Practice, in addition to a departmental award for the best master’s thesis. Most others did highly innovative thesis projects; some like Jeffrey Lauer went back to Asia to complete thesis research, Nirmani Liyanage and Hikoyat Salimova received departmental awards for the best master’s thesis, and Pradeep Dissanayake received the AICP graduate student award. Almost every alumnus is engaged in some “innovative” practice like Eric Davenport building schools in Haiti and Antony Piaskovy managing USAIDs development funds for southeast Asia, several others have published. Gardner Smith received a Fulbright to India, later to be followed by Lindsay Bacurin and Mona Luxion, while Jeff Lauer and Johanna Ofner were finalists. Several CapAsia alumni such as Harry Davis and Angelo Pancini went abroad for their master’s while a few including Lynette Boswell, Mona Luxion, and Adam Merkel completed PhDs. Several including Sanjeewani Habarakada and Kaushalya Herath are on the way to earning doctorates.

The key “practical” question on the ground is how to support and facilitate people’s life journeys without imposing our models on them? The question that drove CapAsia V (2008) was how do people recover after a disaster? In five teams, the participants worked with five new settlements built for tsunami victims in Sri Lanka. As the previous CapAsia (IV) had helped begin building new houses for the 35-house (re)settlement in Kalametiya in 2005, the directors were familiar and had good connections. They had prepared by visiting the areas affected by Hurricane Katrina. On the way, the students visited Banda Aceh, Indonesia, where 200,000 people died of the tsunami and, in the middle of the Sri Lanka project, visited post-tsunami settlements in Phuket, Thailand.

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As all five teams learned that the involuntary relocation of the tsunami-victims far from the beaches was even a bigger disaster, the second tsunami as people call it. They were uninterested in returning to where they were before the tsunami but had begun a new journey from where they were. Hence, they used all the provisions they received (including the house) as raw material to build the lives they wanted to live. So, the CapAsians worked with them, supporting their life journeys, especially helping the survivors familiarize the new environments provided by the government and the NGOs.

Similarly, CapAsia IX and X (2017, 2019) students learned how people are building their own lives and economies. Observe the differences between rural-based tourism in Sukhothai area and that of Bangkok, Amber Janzen wrote: In Bangkok, women are the object of tourism. But in Sukhothai, women run the tourist industry by establishing homestays [like Airbnbs], developing local products (new fabrics and local noodles), and displaying sustainable agricultural methods, all organized through the Wives’ Association. They learned how to pay attention to local emergences and nourish them rather than propose businesses that would exploit them, impoverish them, and channel profits to big cities.

CapAsia helped me to pay more attention to each student individually and support their processes of becoming themselves in a deeper sense. Most students find it difficult to make simple observations about people and things and to talk in simple terms; many talk in abstract terms such as populations, land uses, and housing systems. Enabling their intellectual journey requires the educator to recover them from these subjectivities and make it possible for them to become critical thinkers and reflective practitioners grounded in community and seeing intellectual frameworks and technologies as tools.

The arrival in Asia immediately transports the students from exotic to unfamiliar. Unless the place is so westernized as Singapore, for many, the expected exotic destination turns out to be unfamiliar, a condition, at first, reinforced by homestays and the interaction with local people. Moreover, students who are uncomfortable speaking to strangers in their own environments find it difficult to visit low-income people and/or strange environments that are vilified in their own culture; the fear is heightened, sometimes, by taxi drivers refusing to go there. Being young and resilient, the students immediately begin to familiarize the strange. It is important to manage this transition as they could become too comfortable so as to run into danger and/or treat the sunny tropics (with beaches) as a vacation place.

As their expectations hit the reality, the participants themselves begin reflecting. The process is facilitated by asking them to write down their expectations, prior to departure. Arrival is also the best time to help them begin transforming their experience into knowledge. It is here that the classes, readings, sharing of experience, discussions, and reflecting begin to play a role. The CapAsia experience is guided by a specific curriculum that exposes them to other experiences, theories, and thinking, but focus is maintained on the region. The participants are encouraged to observe the conflict.

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between the knowledge they carry and the local knowledges, so identifying the biases and stereotypes they carry. Assignments, too, are geared to help this process. Most significantly, the transformation of the self is made conscious through reflection and self-exploration.

I try different tactics to help students pass these barriers and enjoy these “teaching moments.” During CapAsia VI (2011), Tad Jamison was a bit unsure of going to Chharanagar (India) but was committed to work. As most designers and planners do, he began to make a map of the neighborhood. I felt, maybe incorrectly, that he was avoiding the uncomfortable neighborhood. I let him develop it and later asked about its accuracy. He trusted Google maps. As there was a lot of construction, I encouraged him to update the map on site. He was one of the participants who visited almost every house, and that map saved the community.

Per our observations, most Chharas are well-invested in their houses, some going over $200,000. So, the main issue that hinders the “development” of Chharanagar is the bad reputation caused by discrimination. The CapAsians wanted to figure out ways to replace the current narrative with the story of their courage and success. The students did some newspaper interviews. Finally, reporting their findings, they pleaded with the municipal commissioner of Ahmedabad not to demolish the neighborhood to build apartment complexes. They proposed urban upgrading, i.e., improving the living environment with the participation of the inhabitants. The commissioner not only rejected the proposal but also reiterated the derogatory picture of the community.

The team then observed some errors in the base map used for the renewal project. The clue was provided by the more accurate plan of Chharanagar that Tad produced; so, we presented the map as our present to the community. The community leaders used it to defeat the municipality’s effort to erase the neighborhood and identity. The framed plan is still hanging at the Budhan Theatre Library which is their community center.

Letting the participants observe, engage, and learn new things, and directing their processes to more meaningful ends, has been the key teaching strategy which I also gradually developed over time and bought back to the classrooms at Ball State. Making students understand the significance of little things that matter in life is part of the transition. Renee Yin, a bright student from Hunan School of Forestry and Agriculture who worked with us in Changsha (China), during CapAsia VII (2013), told me that she thought I was crazy to ask urban planning students to observe little things like chicken coops and vegetable patches in odd places. Yet she recovered herself though the process. She not only developed a great story of the neighborhood but also completed a master’s at Cornell.

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The key step in the process of knowledge production is to turn the observations into knowledge; teaching/learning moments its key nodes. When we arrived at Duakot, in the outskirts of Kathmandu, Nepal, for the second component of CapAsia VI (2011), there was a flimsy fence around what used to be a parking area, especially used by the buses of Nepal Engineering College (NEC). We, in collaboration with NEC, offered the villagers to build them a little better fence.

The students became excited to learn and build in brick, mortar, and bamboo. Many community members got involved, and each morning began with a meeting between the students and community leaders. I explained to the students that they were not simply building a fence with some materials exotic to them; they were, in fact, restoring the village square that the villagers lost with the establishment of NEC. Community members getting involved has been common to a large majority of CapAsia projects.

The interface between professionals and ordinary people is where professional knowledge is tested; the key instigator of new knowledge is the mismatch between these knowledges. Although we read deep theoretical material, planning theories, and successful interventions in other places in classes, the knowledge so gained is neither considered perfect nor dogmatic. The CapAsians try not to undermine the local’s capacity to explain phenomena by transforming local knowledge into data that could fit within their imported intellectual frameworks and check the boxes in our worksheets.

Instead of rewording the community within our episteme, the CapAsians try to provincialize their own world, enabling their own familiarization of the unfamiliar world of the locals. It is crucial that we do not discard what we call outliers; one never knows what they may teach us. When Brittany Rasdall (2008) had collected 80
percent of the surveys from the tsunami victims, I asked why she was collecting even more. She said she did not want to miss any unique idea.

CapAsia expects the participants to develop a closer relationship with local people beyond exchanging grand stories as “insiders-outsiders” with an “us and them” attitude inherent in professional approaches. The crossing of this boundary was evident when, during CapAsia VII (2013), Soyamprava, the leader of Satykali (self-built) community in Bhubaneswar, told me that your students know much more about us than the students from the big planning school in India itself.

Here, the CapAsia team led by Alkeyna Aldridge, Nirmani Liyanage, and Yuyi Wang visited the community daily to develop connection whereas the students from the Indian school breezed through the community in a few days making photos, videos, sketches, and recording interviews in many. As evident in Soyamprava’s statement, it takes some time and effort to get to know unknown communities. They had data, but the CapAsians had knowledge and connection.

CapAsia V (2008) also revealed the shortcomings of the much-revered SWOT analysis and the mantra: “planning is a problem-solving exercise.” In about three weeks, the CapAsians had levelled much of the differences between them and the post-tsunami neighborhoods and were having cordial relationships and were learning a lot. Our partner school in Sri Lanka decided to do planning workshops in all five settlements. When they asked the settlers of their problems, community members gave lists of problems and needs. At times the conductors of the workshops were sarcastic as the fishermen asked for “motor bicycles to go fishing,” i.e., to come to the beach. These were not issues the planners could solve but were, nonetheless, created by previous planning decisions to relocate fishermen five kilometers away from the sea. The local planning students not only looked down upon the fishermen, thinking that they are asking for more. The workshop also completed their job, and the CapAsians were all by themselves for the rest of the time. They had also lost the relationship they built with the locals as the community was expecting them to solve their problems.

As we spent the next three weeks in Mumbai, studying Dharavi, I took the time to rethink about ‘problem solving’ and SWOT which had failed us and the communities. Upon return, I advised the CapAsians to turn their focus on people’s life journeys, capacities, and achievements, their transformative capacity, and strengths, rather than the problems, victimhood, and the dependence on provisions from outside. They supported community efforts to take charge of their life-journeys. The Kalametiyans, with the support of Hikoyat, received the much-needed deemana patra (gift certificates) issued in lieu of deeds for their land which was a huge achievement for the community.

In CapAsia, graduates are given greater responsibilities and opportunities. While the credit should go to all team members, during CapAsia VI (2015), in Penang (Malaysia), the three graduates, Kaushalya, Nirmani, and Yuyi, led their teams well. Rifle Range is

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possibly the first apartment complex in the city and was considered for demolition. Yuyi’s team figured out that even rich people live in it and requested the elected official to consider improving rather than demolishing. Tanjung Tokong was a local village (kampung) that was being replaced by high-rises. Learning from how the displaced used temporary housing, Nirmani’s team proposed incremental development of public areas allowing the planners and designers to respond to people’s preferences. Clan Jetties where the Chinese immigrants who had worked in the old harbor live in family-groups (hence, clans) is part of the world heritage city but was not even included in any discussion on it. The team led by Kaushalya helped organize them across the old division into different jetties by forming an inter-jetty committee that would be included in the heritage city forums. At the last forum, and Australian professor said that these people would not be included if not for these American students. Yuyi also led a three-week Changsha component as well.

CapAsia makes genuine connections with community members and the empowerment so enabled has been long-lasting. When Nirmani first contacted Soyamprava, the female leader of a community in India, during CapAsia VII (2013), she was very much under the shadow of men. As they visited many government officers including the mayor, with the help of our coordinator Bibhu Kalyan Nayak, Soyamprava became stronger. Later, she established Facebook presence and we have witnessed how she grew into the leader that she is today.

Design, planning, and development are not one-time things. After our work in Chharanagar in 2011 (CapAsia VI), I invited Roxy Gagdekar, a leader, to attend the student presentation at Ball State in September that year. When in the USA, he visited the UNO and lodged a complaint to the general secretary of the Permanent Bureau for the Indigenous People about discrimination against their community by the Indian government.

CapAsia not only attempts to allow room for community members to exercise their agency but also aims to liberate the students. As they rely on dogmas and perceptions

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made up of large abstractions like statistics, abstract categories like land uses, and instruments like maps and computer programs, they lose their humanity, especially their ability to use their senses. Once I asked some students at Yangon Technological University in Myanmar to share what they observe in and around their dwellings. The first one began by describing transportation systems and housing systems to talk about the bus stop and the house. They had lost their basic senses and selves; they were replaced by adopted identities in an esoteric world. This is precisely from what most CapAsia participants are liberated. As they are given the opportunity to use their own senses, make sense of their observations, and make judgements, they develop their own self-confidence and identities.

Looking back at it, CapAsia has clearly been life-changing. Participating in the student presentation, Chad Phelan of Berkeley (CapAsia III, 2003) showed two photos: a clear photo of him standing in front of Taj Mahal and a blurry image of a person passing by. For him, the former represents his image of India before going on CapAsia; the unclear one signifies what he brought back. Marino Solorio (CapAsia V, 2008) told me before CapAsia he was American and his father was Mexican. After returning, they both are Mexican-American. Lynette Boswell-Washington, an African-American student on CapAsia II (2001), told me that, “for the first time in my life, people are not staring at me, and I feel much freer.” So, they learned a lot about themselves and their own communities which was impossible without the program.

CapAsia’s friends and partners in Asia have been central to this experience. They are too many to mention here; my apologies for missing the majority. The trust that Jamal Ansari of SPA placed in me, the support Utpal Sharma of CEPT provided, and the collaboration of Poonam Prakash were central to the success of CapAsia in south Asia. At the most initial stages, Madhura Prematilleke gave tours of Colombo to four consecutive CapAsia groups and it was his project that enabled us to help the Kalametiyans begin building their permanent houses (CapAsia IV 2005) which flowed into CapAsia V (2008). Madhura and Vijitha Basnayaka who organized the Building to Learn component of CapAsia III (2003) have taught modules at Ball State. Much of the experience gained in 2008 (CapAsia V) was due to the excitement and support of Jagath Munasinghe. Surasak KangKhao has been central to the deep experience that CapAsia has been able to provide in Thailand. Perhaps most significant is Donn Treese, a BSU alumnus who was the head of the architecture program at NEC. It was not only the key component of CapAsia I where students had homestays, Kathmandu has been the most visited CapAsia location and NEC. Thank you all!
CapAsia XI departs the USA in January 2022.

Will you be aboard?