

## Promoting Critical Perception of the City through Acquisition of ‘Third Place’ Neutrality

### *Abstract:*

Students can gain valuable knowledge through engagement with real life examples of planning issues and their resolution. This exposure, however, often remains quite limited to that of the urban context within which they are situated. Lessons learnt are often heavily biased by the urban setting and the prevalent cultural values and attitudes and therefore may not readily contribute to producing the self-critical planner who may challenge the *status-quo*.

This paper highlights how exposure to a different urban context through international study tours could help students realise and thereby discount for the biases that may distort their perception of an urban context and its planning issues. It is contended that a firsthand experience of another city supplemented by an acquired cultural sensitivity could help students develop criticality about their own urban context.

The paper reports on findings from a survey of planning students participating in two study tours to Tokyo led by the author in consecutive years, focusing on the shift of students’ perceptions about Tokyo and their own city due to tour exposure. For both years, emerging themes from individual responses to questionnaire surveys were further explored in a focus group discussion format. While one study tour group was explicitly asked to assume a position of objective neutrality in line with the ‘third place’ concept, the other was not. The degree of shift in perceptions of the two study group participants is compared.

The paper will draw conclusions and offer recommendations regarding the utility of applying the ‘third place’ concept borrowed from cultural and foreign language learning to the design and execution of international study tours for planning students.

## **Introduction**

Globalization requires interaction with different regions and various cultures and this is leading universities to redefine the direction of their courses and the graduate attributes to be pursued. Economic and cultural pressures associated with globalization have created a concern for a workforce that is globally aware and employable in cross-cultural settings.

In order to remain competitive, Australian universities feel the need to internationalize their course content. While there are various means employed by universities to this effect, an increasingly popular means of internationalizing the content of education is the incorporation of study tours into the curriculum. International Study tours thus have the potential to play a significant role in helping universities to respond to the demands of globalization. Depending on how well they are organized, study tours can be academically rigorous and can create a cultural experience useful in the globalizing world. As a standalone elective unit (subject) they also offer a format of delivery that is time efficient which suits the current life-styles of students who often balance their education with part-time employment.

Study tours can deliver high value educational experience over a short period of time. For planning schools they offer an effective means of exposing students to contemporary planning issues and their solutions overseas, thereby ensuring a balance between the local specific and international content within the curriculum. Through international exposure, study tours can help broaden the awareness of participating students to international developments in the field of planning, possibly discovering best practice examples. In the process, participants of study tours can also develop their cultural sensitivity and intercultural competence benefiting from the direct and high impact exposure to planning in action they could acquire than is possible through

library research or electronic access. The exposure provides an opportunity for students to develop their inter-cultural competence which is a valuable attribute for planning professionals, making them job ready for an expanding and increasingly international job market.

Because of the relatively short duration of its delivery and high costs of organizing and executing international study tours, it is crucial that they are properly designed to achieve their objectives. Visiting and interacting with a different cultural environment can be a valuable educational experience, helping one realize one's local culture and values. However, the full value of study tours is realized only when touring students can assess the other culture objectively rather than use the experience to merely reconfirm stereotype assumptions. This requires serious planning, designing and execution of the tour, from deciding the theme, selecting study locations, and working out the itinerary and activities.

This paper focuses on the authors' experience of conducting two overseas study tours taking undergraduate students enrolled in urban and regional planning course from Perth to Tokyo in consecutive years. It reports on the findings of post-tour studies involving the participants.

In the section following this introduction, relevant background information on the pressures universities face due to globalization and their response is discussed. It also explains the utility and popularity of international study tours in this context. This is followed by a discussion of theoretical aspects of teaching planning concepts in the study tour format, making specific reference to IcLL and the notion of the 'third place'. A description of the design and execution of the study tour conducted by the authors follows which highlights measures taken to ensure that the pedagogical and theoretical concerns are reflected in the study tour design. The next section reports on the findings of a study conducted following the two study tours where participants were administered a survey questionnaire and later invited to a focus group discussion. Finally some conclusions are drawn - based on findings of the study and the authors' experience - as to the extent that the theoretical objectives of study tours could be achieved.

## **Background**

### ***Internationalisation of Education in response to Globalisation***

International fee-paying students represent an important source of income for universities. Australia enjoys considerable comparative advantage in attracting international students, being a developed country belonging to the English speaking world and with some Australian universities figuring in the list of top universities worldwide. Rankings such as the Times Higher-QS World University Rankings are given much weight in the globalising world. Accordingly, Australia has set up rigorous audit processes for quality assurance such as the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) to maintain its status among the top universities worldwide, a major selling point in attracting fee-paying international students..

AUQA considers internationalisation of the course content as a desired feature for a university. AUQA's Audit Manual "suggests that internationalisation is focused on the processes used to recruit students from overseas and on offshore programs." (Reid and Loxton, 2004). In order to gain a competitive advantage in meeting customer-led needs "the focus of internationalisation has been on encouraging students from overseas to come to Australia (Jones, 1998), taking

Australian courses overseas, or providing support for international students.” (Reid and Loxton, 2004).

There is, however, more at stake in internationalisation of education than merely seeking to attract international students. In an increasingly globalised world, it is important for graduates to be aware of and have an adequate understanding of developments in other parts of the world. Globalisation not only affects the key players that drive and profit from the economy but also the communities across the world that are engaged in the process, even if passively or unwittingly. For policy makers, professionals and educators, therefore, the cultural aspects of globalisation are just as important to understand and consider as the economic aspects.

As Ince (2007) notes, universities (in western/ developed countries), “are closely integrated into the economies and societies of which they form part.” It is natural then that global job networks created by multinational corporations coincide with universities’ concern for producing globally aware and versatile graduates ready for the international job market. Against this backdrop, internationalization of higher education may be defined as a ‘proactive’ response to globalization (Knight and de Wit, 1997).

### ***Internationalisation of Education through Study Tours***

Reid and Loxton (2004) evoke the knowledge and discovery focus of universities as an alternative way of treating internationalisation of higher education as opposed to that driven by a concern for marketing and quality assurance. They stress that from the students’ perspective “internationalisation can mean the experience of visiting a different country, learning about contrasting ways of living and thinking, and perhaps integrating these experiences into their own value systems” (Reid and Loxton, 2004). This seems to reflect closely their university’s wider strategies which seek “to prepare students to live and work in a global and multicultural society, with cultural and environmental sensitivity, understanding and communicative competencies” (Reid and Loxton, 2004). Study Tours represent a useful delivery mechanism for such enriching educational experience and competencies.

### ***The Popularity of Study Tours***

Australian universities are well placed to undertake international study tours because students can relatively easily afford travel costs, speak the universally understood English language and generally have minimal visa/ entry requirements for most countries. Coupled with the universities’ push for internationalisation, these factors seem to make study tours in Australia “a relatively new and increasingly popular mode of international mobility for students” (Douglas and Covelea, n.d). This makes study tours in various disciplines including urban planning feasible, even in times of economic decline such as the one we currently face.

Study tours are attractive because they are seen as an opportunity to combine leisure activity with education. The ‘Y’ generation student who “sees the value of leisure and plans to take advantage of it rather than work excessive hours” (McLean et al. 2007, p.127) would thus find it appealing. Douglas and Covelea (n.d.) also note that “the travel involved in Study Tours is a major part of their attraction”.

Designing a study tour is no different than designing any other unit of study. Douglas and Covelea (n.d) describe study tours as representing an academically rigorous model of teaching that has an added advantage of incorporating a cultural experience and international exposure for participating students.

### **Study Tour within Curtin University's Planning Course**

International study tours are usually offered as university-wide elective units of short duration. Curtin University's undergraduate planning program, however, features the study tour as a major component of a fourth year core unit (subject) titled International Perspectives of Planning also cross-listed as a recommended elective for Masters. While the unit is a semester-long core unit delivered in the face-to-face teaching mode, the study tour component within the unit is optional.

Being optional, those not wishing to join the tour component are provided alternative study tasks in lieu of work carried out during the study tour. Those opting to take up the tour have to meet their expenses related to the study tour. The university funds the expenses of the academic and supervisory staff and provides limited subsidy for certain expenses. Also, effort is made to find ways of lowering costs through itinerary design, partnerships and support from local institutions and identifying discounts and concessions. However, care is taken not to seek savings at the cost of the quality of the learning experience of students.

International Perspectives of Planning unit is designed to explore key questions about how different nations go about planning their cities and regions. A main teaching objective for the unit is to create a realization of the universality of planning concepts and principles as well as the importance of the local context in determining implementation processes and outcomes. Students are expected to reflect on the extent to which planning issues are similar everywhere and whether or not they are understood and tackled in the same way. The unit encourages students to explore the extent to which planning theories and planning solutions are relevant across the world.

This unit treats the study tour as an opportunity for students to be exposed to approaches to planning different to those prevalent within Western Australian urban and regional contexts. The study tour is therefore designed to inform and coordinate learning experience within the context of difference. The fieldwork incorporated into the study tour requires students to realise the orientation of perspectives as they analyze urban issues and approaches to resolve planning dilemmas. The study tour, in effect, serves as the main vehicle to deliver international exposure and inter-cultural exploration within the planning curriculum.

The study tour aims to encourage students to become independent, self-critical thinkers who could improve the status quo, rather than simply producing more of the same. The choice of the study tour destination is thus largely guided by a search for difference to Perth in cultural context and/ or planning agenda. Perth's urban form and transport systems serve as a starting point. Perth, commonly referred to as the most isolated capital city, features one of the worst cases of low density urban sprawl. As reported by Borg et al. (2002), about 80 percent of all personal trips undertaken in Western Australia are either as a car driver or passenger. An earlier World

Bank study of 37 cities across the world also found Perth at the top of the list in terms of having an inefficient and wasteful passenger transport system (Murdoch University, 1998).

The state of transport has not improved much despite efforts by the State and Federal governments at urban consolidation, mainly because in Perth, as in the rest of Australia, there is a general apprehension against high rise buildings and high density development. Many scholars have explained this apprehension in terms of a negative cultural attitude towards high density development brought in by early immigrants who escaped from the sordid overcrowded conditions of British factory towns. The prevalent perception is that high density leads to overcrowding and congestion. These perceptions are often also stretched to connect high densities to higher crime rates.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### ***Planning and the Cultural Context***

Exposure is good – but to learn effectively /// First be exposed, observe, analyse – within the context. In the process you need to objectively compare.

Due to growing complexity of urban society over time, urban planning problems and their solutions increasingly tend to be viewed in holistic and contextual terms rather than as isolated phenomena. In a similar vein, from an ontological perspective, urban planning systems could be seen as social technology evolving from within their cultural contexts and determined by a mixture of facts and values.

Study tours can perform an important function simply by increasing students' exposure to new things. However, they can also be designed to promote effective learning while observing planning practices and outcomes, especially where facts need to be viewed together with values. Because of extended hours of interaction with the tour participants and predetermined schedule, their design could sufficiently guide students' observation and analysis through selective exposure and commentary. This could be used to sensitize them to take into account both physical and cultural contexts while analyzing planning issues and their solutions in a new location.

It is argued, however, that unless a positive shift occurs in one's perspective, the 'other' context is likely to be viewed from the vantage point of one's 'own' context. Features of the other context tend to be measured against standards evolved in and shaped by one's own cultural context. This could lead to a biased and distorted view of the other place, diminishing the scope of learning that an unbiased assessment and analysis could otherwise provide. Thus, cultural bias or cultural blindness could lead to wasting the opportunity that the study tour could provide.

The same considerations and sensitivity are also valuable in formulating planning policies in one's own context. The realization of the local context that comes about with the awareness of 'other' context is crucial to developing cultural sensitivity and a more objective understanding of difference. Adequate knowledge of other contexts can help one realize and take into account the influence one's own culture bears on the individual. Lessons learnt during study tours could thus

also help planning students realize the potential distortions stemming from difference of perspectives between various actors, including the planner, even within their own context.

### ***IcLL Approach to Cultural Competence***

Inter-cultural language learning (IcLL) represents a new approach to foreign language learning that offers an effective way of reducing cultural bias that could pose as a barrier to objective learning. It treats the study of language and culture as integrated and holistic, recognizing “an increasing need to focus on developing inter-cultural understanding” in meeting educational objectives in a global community (MCCETYA, 2005)

IcLL introduces the notion of “Third Place” which can be described as the “unbounded point of intersection where interactants from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds meet and communicate successfully”. (Crozet et al. 1999, p1) Learners develop an intercultural perspective where the culture and language contexts in which they live (the First Place) are made apparent alongside the target culture and language contexts (the Second Place). Using this knowledge, learners move to a position (the Third Place) in which their developing intercultural competence informs their language choices in communication (Crozet et al., 1999)

Yazbeck (2007) summarises the fundamental aspects of IcLL as espoused by Lo Bianco et al. (1999) as the teaching of culture as part of language, comparison between learner’s own language culture and those of the target group and the exploration of a shared, negotiated space between the two. As pedagogy, IcLL and the ‘third place’ concept seek to encourage language learners to find a place from which they can negotiate a relationship with the target culture (Yazbeck 2007). The third place thus “is a place from which one can comfortably relate and be among difference at large” (Liddicoat & Crozet, 2000, p.15 in Yazbeck, 2007).

### ***Adapting IcLL Theories to Planning Study Tour***

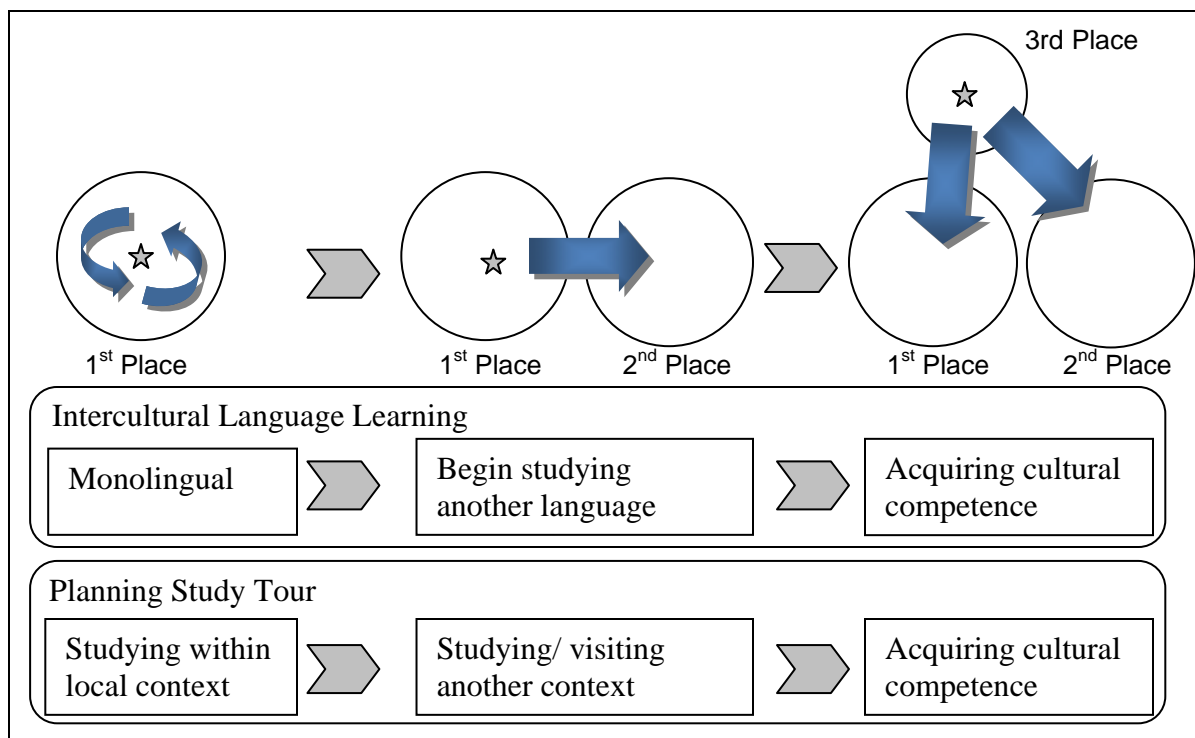
IcLL “connects the study of culture to language and linguistics learning and sees them as integrated and holistic.” (Commonwealth Dept of Education, Science and Training). Rather than treating the study of culture as a collection of facts and artifacts, IcLL approaches culture as dynamic, treating cultural learning as an outcome of engagement with practices, beliefs and attitudes. Such cultural learning promotes intercultural competence whereby students can “reflect on the knowledge and assumptions they make about their own cultures as well as of those of the target language.”

We contend that the IcLL view of studying culture could be extended to studying of the ‘other’ cultural context within which planning is played out. The language learning element, integral to IcLL, can be substituted by creating a first hand and intense encounter with the target culture. We believe that the acquisition of the third place and the resultant shift in the observer’s perspective can be assumed by means of conscious effort by individuals, facilitated and augmented by the way the study tour content, activities and itinerary are designed and conducted. Students can be put into situations where they are encouraged to consciously assume the ‘third place’ position for objective analysis of different contexts.

It is argued that the notion of the ‘third place’ can be effectively employed in creating an understanding of themes related to the urban planning in a foreign context, without actually

involving the language learning component. We believe that the learning objectives of the International Perspectives of Planning unit could thus be well served by introducing the notion of the ‘third place’. We contend, therefore, that the international study tour provides an ideal format to deliver this concept.

Borrowing IcLL concepts to describe the study tour situation, the ‘first place’ is the observers’ own cultural context where they are normally situated. The ‘second place’ is the context being studied, i.e. the cultural context of the study tour destination. IcLL suggests that a third place is an inter-cultural position that can be created and assumed by the observer in order to observe both, their own and the other contexts. The ‘third place’ is dynamic rather than a fixed point and varies from one to the other individual. The notion of the ‘third place’ in language learning is centred on “negotiation and the finding of a meeting place between different forces, different cultures and world views” (Crozet et al.1999, p.15). Figure 1 is intended to graphically illustrate how the IcLL view of the process of acquiring the third place can be translated into the context of planning related study tour.



**Figure 1: Translating the “Third Place” concept from IcLL to Planning**

*Source: Khan and Khan, 2009*

Our interest in the third place relates to the importance of inculcating an objective approach to comparative analysis across different contexts. This, we believe, is fundamental to developing a balanced and critical understanding of issues not only in a foreign context but, by extension, also to the local context of the observer. The ability to acquire a third place position will not only serve to reduce bias, but also increase sensitivity and critical analysis of the students.

This study seeks to determine whether or not the notion of the third place is possible to achieve through guided exposure to a foreign context over short time duration. Furthermore, it seeks to establish whether or not the acquisition of the third place is more likely to eventuate if observers, i.e. tour participants are explicitly made aware of the notion of third place and directly asked to seek to acquire the third place during their study tour exposure.

## **Method**

This study compares aspects related to the design and execution of two similar study tours to Tokyo undertaken in 2008 and 2009. Post tour questionnaires were used to collect responses from tour participants of both years. Questions sought to determine participants' view towards specific planning concepts and changes that may have occurred to their views or perceptions because of the tour. In the case of each tour (2008 and 2009), individual responses to the questionnaire were used to identify topics for a follow-up focus group discussion session, to obtain in-depth understanding of issues involved.

Results from the two questionnaire surveys and follow-up focus group sessions are compared to detect differences in the degree of objectivity and critical analysis of observations. Additional information related to the 2009 tour was also collected from pre-tour and post-tour assignments submitted by study tour participants. Both assignments required students to develop comparative profiles of Perth and Tokyo, the former relying on desktop research and the latter primarily relying on hands-on experience and first-hand observations.

While the theme, design and itinerary of the two study tours were largely similar with only slight variations, the manner in which the acquisition of cultural literacy, as a teaching objective was sought to be delivered was different. While the design of both tours sought to encourage students to acquire the notion of the 'third place', only 2009 participants were introduced to the theory during course work prior to the study tour. They were explicitly asked to consciously attempt to acquire the position of 'third place' from where to comparatively analyze their observations during the tour. Additionally, the 2009 students were also asked to prepare comparative profiles of Perth and Tokyo based on desk-top research and first-hand observations for pre-tour and post-tour assignments respectively.

In summary, we compare the responses of the two sets of tour participants, one of whom were explicitly informed about the concept of the third place and the importance of acquiring an objective perspective, while the other was not. The comparison allows us to ascertain whether consciousness to the notion of the 'third place' concept results in the acquisition of greater objectivity and critical analysis among planning study tour participants.

## **Designing the Study Tour**

### ***Aims of the Study Tour***

The study tour was seen as an opportunity to create a balance of focus between locally specific planning issues and developments and those occurring in the rest of the world. This was also seen to be in line with the university policy of internationalisation of orientation and course content. Because of the exposure the students would get, the study tour was also seen as an

exercise to development of cultural sensitivity and intercultural competence among students. The study tour was thus designed to sensitise students to both the universality of planning theory and principles as well as the local specific nature of cultural contexts that shape the planning framework and practice.

The tour itinerary sought to provide a balanced exposure to technical matters related to the planning discipline and cultural learning aspects. A deliberate decision was taken to avoid treating the cultural learning aspects as a minor add-on element either during the semester work for the unit or the study tour component.

### ***Selection of Staff and Destination***

In addition to the consideration of themes related to developments in the area of planning outside Western Australia, the tour destination was also chosen based on the availability of personnel to serve as effective resource persons.

Each of the three staff members of the team has a certain degree of familiarity with the Japanese culture. This author who is the unit coordinator and a frequent visitor to Japan, is supported by a co-lecturer who is a native Japanese based in Perth, and a tutor, an Australian who has previously lived in Japan for four years. Between them, the team could carry out extended liaison with Japanese counterparts as well as organise walking tours in the backstreets of Tokyo.

### ***Designing a study tour - an academically rigorous model of teaching***

Significant effort was put into the design of the study tour and its itinerary. The team discussed how best to emphasize certain learning aspects through guided exposure where possible – including those pertaining to planning related technical concepts such as urban densities, urban fabric, transport systems, pedestrian flows as well as those related to inter-cultural learning concepts. For the latter, we relied on the concept of ‘third place’ in designing both tours.

The theme of ‘globalization’ has been selected for the unit International Perspectives of Planning. It focuses on issues faced by global cities and their solution from the perspective of planners and citizens. The itinerary included ‘global projects’ (as defined by Marshall 2003) and examples of ‘world class architecture’. In order to ensure a sufficient exposure to understand the overall context in which to view the global iconic features, the itinerary was carefully constructed to provide a balanced view by including ‘local’ and ‘traditional’ elements as well. Thus locations of various types ranging from Shinjuku to Asakusa and Yanaka-Ginza were also included.

Mindful of the scarcity of high rise structures and the absence of and cultural aversion to high density development prevalent in Perth – the study tour was seen as an opportunity to expose students to intense and high density urban development. Also, in view of the tendency to relate high density to over-crowding and crime, the itinerary purposely included locations to ensure students experienced intense crowded situations such as the Shibuya intersection and Harajuku streets.

Other spots representing vibrancy and spontaneity such as the back streets of Shinjuku after dark were also included. The itinerary included traditional downtown areas of Yanaka-Ginza and

Asakusa to help contrast the more western influenced and formally organized high end developments represented by the global projects. The idea was to design sufficient exposure for students to develop a level of critical analysis and sensitivity whereby they could differentiate between intensity / vibrancy and over-crowding and safety concerns.

### ***Logistics and Practicalities***

Managing costs and fitting in required activities within available resources (time and money) was a major challenge for the supervising team from the inception of the tour design to its implementation. Local partners were sought and identified and extensive liaison was carried out to ensure that students could meaningfully engage in worthwhile experiences. This involved extensive and time-consuming correspondence, scheduling and time-tabling of events at specific locations with various local partners. Dealing with a number of collaborating partners also meant that last moment changes to the itinerary had to be incorporated. The amount of administrative and liaison work generated by the tour added significantly to the time and effort required to conduct the unit.

This was in addition to the normal load associated with the conduct of the semester long teaching for the unit. It was only possible to take on the extra tasks and workload because there was additional support staff available. The fact that one of the team members was a native Japanese speaker was also instrumental in avoiding language and cultural barriers that could otherwise have hampered the progress of designing and execution of the tour.

### **Feedback and Discussion**

Following both 2008 and 2009 study tours, questionnaires and an invitation to a focus group session were sent to participants. We report on the findings of these surveys and discussions in this section.

A total of twenty-eight students had participated in the 2008 tour, twenty-two of whom could be contacted. Out of twenty-two questionnaires sent out, eleven (50 %) were received, while nine (32 %) attended the follow-up focus group. In the case of the 2009 tour, out of seventeen participants, twelve (70 %) returned the questionnaires, while eleven (65 %) attended the focus group. While the numbers involved do not lead to rigorous statistical analysis, we believe it is a sufficient representation of the study tour groups, allowing for meaningful deliberation.

### ***Balance of focus – local and international***

In both 2008 and 2009, many questionnaire responses from tour participants suggested that the planning course curriculum at Curtin was heavily Western Australia specific, with limited reference to various planning issues and possibilities. These responses were flagged for discussion in the follow-up focus group session with 2009 study tour participants and found unanimously agreement. In the discussion that followed, students maintained that by studying planning issues from another cultural context, they could discover new aspects of planning and culture. One student commented that planning “in Japan encompassed many aspects that weren’t covered in Curtin, such as the use of technology”. Another response suggested that the unit should be offered earlier in the course “before our minds are already set with the Western Australian way of planning. It would perhaps help us to widen our perspectives and think more

broadly ..” One student, however, commented reported the realisation that “the planning courses will change so much depending on what country you are in. We learn how to plan for WA ...” This could imply that if we continue to do so, our graduates will be ill-equipped for the international job market or international careers. More importantly, it would mean that we will tend to produce professionals who are good at producing more of the same – rather than breaking the *status quo*.

### ***Acquiring the notion of the Third Place – A deeper comparative analysis***

We find that asking students to make the effort to consciously acquire the notion of the ‘third place’ (i.e. a neutral station point) while studying the ‘second place’ (i.e. Tokyo) has led to a more objective and deeper analysis by students. The following section compares the responses of 2008 and 2009 tour participants to the same set of questions about their study tour experiences. While the structure and design of both 2008 and 2009 tours was largely similar, only the 2009 tour group was introduced to the concept of the ‘third place’ and explicitly asked to acquire the notion. The 2009 tour group seems to have made a more detailed observation and attained a greater ability of carrying out critical analysis. In comparison to the 2008 tour, the 2009 tour group seems to have better succeeded in placing themselves in the ‘third place’ and assuming a neutral perspective to study Tokyo from. In analysing from a ‘third place’ perspective, they could constantly make comparisons across the ‘first place’ (i.e. Perth) context and the second place context (i.e. Tokyo), thus ensuring a more objective analysis.

Students from 2008 as well as 2009 tour were asked to report any changes to their perception of themselves, their city or its citizens, attributable to their study tour exposure. Responses to this set of questions from the 2008 tour revealed that most students’ perception of themselves and their city had changed to become critical and even negative. Questionnaire response suggested that a number of students found Perth as a city to be “small”, “backward” and “messy”. Many more were very critical of the level of courtesy found among Perth locals. These responses, when flagged for discussion in the focus group were generally endorsed by the whole group. A couple of students added that over time they had progressed on to be able to see Perth’s potential of development that suits its population and unique situation. They realised that Perth had a lot to offer but the potential needed to be promoted and realised further.

Response from 2009 tour participants to this set of questions was different. Questionnaire response suggested that they found Perth to be “very slow”, “small”, “less vibrant” and “low density”, etc. Some respondents complained that people in Perth “have no respect for others and are selfish in the way they act (i.e. graffiti, litter, lining up for trains, moving about in large crowds etc)”. Another student reported that local governments were “pedantic” while people “want the best of the city lifestyle as well as the rural lifestyle.” People were also reported to be too “caught up with being against high density and overlooking”.

When the responses were flagged for further discussion during the focus group, students commented that Perth was at an earlier stage of development in comparison to Tokyo. They said that the tour exposure made them realise that the city had a strict “anti-high rise” approach, and that it needed to be changed. They came up with two reasons for this situation. Firstly, they suggested that there was the mind-set that connects high density development to tiny, “dodgy” apartments manifesting poverty and crime. Secondly, they believed that people in Perth were not

exposed to good examples of high density development. From the general tone of discussion it could also be construed that students felt that they had been exposed to good examples.

The 2009 response is significantly different in comparison to the 2008 response. There were fewer negative descriptors used in the perception of Perth. The responses also tended to be given in more detail. While Perth was seen to be lacking in vibrancy and vitality, it was also noted that it had more open spaces and potential for growth. Perth was seen more as being at a different stage of development in comparison to Tokyo rather than inferior. The responses seemed to be suggest room for optimism even though the need to set things right was identified. As one student explained “Perth is in its infancy and if we are to mature into a world class city then we have to take action now to do it right, which at the present time we aren’t.”

The 2008 questionnaire response and discussions brought out the issue that the Japanese public was polite and conformed to rules and regulations without the need for elaborate enforcement. This matter came up in discussion about behaviour in crowded situations, train stations, train carriages, etc. In 2009, questionnaire responses again covered these issues. In follow-up discussions, students related this phenomenon to traffic movement where they observed pedestrian and vehicular traffic successfully sharing very narrow streets - in the absence of pavements or traffic control devices. The feasibility (or lack of it) of applying such a solution in Perth’s context was brought into discussion, noting the tendency for elaborate separation of pedestrian and vehicular traffic movement, whether or not required.

Responding to a question about change to their motivation towards the profession, some students reported a new interest in pursuing further studies in disciplines such as law and economics, or to study overseas. Others seem to have had a re-think of the planning profession. One student wrote that the study tour “highlighted the fact that planning is not all about where a dwelling sits on a residential lot and that there is a lot more to planning than Local Government planning in WA”. Another student felt that the significance of planning was re-affirmed as “a universal and life-changing profession”. This suggests a change of perspective towards planning and the role of planners.

During the 2009 focus group discussions, the very role of planners was also brought under discussion. The fact that Japan does not have planning as an established discipline, prompted a discussion on the role and utility of planning and planners. The fact that in Tokyo the community and developers could work out issues with minimal involvement of government agencies, and private developers and planning agencies could work together through “negotiation” rather than regulation were also discussed and the feasibility or otherwise of applying such concepts in the Perth context were also discussed.

Clearly, the level of observation of particular phenomena, their analysis and hypothetical application across contexts was significantly higher in the 2009 group.

### ***The importance of a balanced itinerary***

While we largely replicated the theme, focus and most locations of the 2008 tour, the itinerary had to be slightly modified to incorporate visits to three campuses and carry out joint activities with their students. While finalising the 2009 tour itinerary, therefore, adjustments had to be

made till the last minute to accommodate urgent requests for change by partner institutions. Working within the constraints set by the collaboration, the priority to optimise the itinerary was balanced with that of ensuring optimal interaction with partner institutions.

The following section discusses some of the issues that emerged possibly due to the modification of the itinerary. It seeks to highlight the impact of missing certain parts of the tour as well as the possibility of over or under emphasis of certain features observed during the study tour based on their sequence. This section is based on the observations made by students in compiling a post-tour assignment that asked them to compare specific features of Perth and Tokyo.

In 2008, a bus tour of the central areas of Tokyo was organised on the first day which drove students past the Imperial Palace, administrative buildings of the national capital, the landmark Tokyo Tower, park areas and commercial buildings, with a stopover at Asakusa. The bus route was specifically designed to maximise the coverage of the central district and surrounding major centres. The extensive drive around did not allow for detailed observation or seeking deep understanding of any one part or feature of the city, but provided instead a shallow but wide coverage introduction to the city. In 2009 the bus tour to Asakusa had to be cut short significantly, thereby losing the introduction to the overall urban structure.

This difference in the itinerary seems to have influenced the way the city was perceived by participants of the two tours and was reflected in the way the two groups sought to analyse the city. In 2008, while students referred to the difficulty of getting a grasp of the overall city and their struggle to find out where to start the comparison with Perth, they seemed to have had a better grasp of the city structure. Among the 2009 study tour participants survey, this issue about overall urban structure did not figure in the questionnaire response or follow-up discussions.

It appears that the absence of a detailed initial introduction to the central areas of Tokyo meant that students did not fully grasp the multi-centred nature of the urban structure that contrasts to that of Perth. Instead, students appear to have gone straight into analysing and comparing different segments of the city (such as Shinjuku, Shibuya, etc.) to Perth. It should be noted that this was despite the fact that students had been introduced to the structure of Tokyo in class prior to the tour. Only one student noted that he initially found it difficult to comprehend Tokyo's urban structure because he tended to apply Perth's urban structure to analyse Tokyo.

The lack of comprehension of the urban structure was also apparent in the way many students attempted to compare the Tokyo buildings and skyline to that of Perth. They tended to compare a particular sub-centre to Perth. Also, in describing major buildings, students focused on commercial buildings while most of them did not include public sector or administrative buildings.

Perhaps because of engaging directly with specific areas of the city before getting an overall grasp of the big picture, some distortions of views were noticed. In describing parks and public places in Tokyo, most students referred to an example of a small pocket park within the built up area with concrete floor, gates that were locked up between dusk and dawn and featuring signs restricting activities such as sleeping, eating or playing ball games. This was a particular park situated in an area that had once tended to be crime infested and whose policing had been handed

over to the local residents' committee. This park had been pointed out to students during a joint walking tour with students of a local university because it was an exception. Even though its context had been lost, the park had left a great impact on the students' memory. This reason could be that it was the first park that students came across and the only pocket park pointed out to them.

## **Conclusion**

Study tours are an effective means of internationalisation of the course content and can serve to motivate our students in a number of ways. By providing an opportunity for students to see planning problems that they are familiar with, in a different light, they can lead to a re-thinking among students about how to respond to problems in ways different to the established norm. This is fundamentally important if it is desired to produce planning professionals who could challenge the *status quo* in order to effect improvements in our cities.

Our experience with international study tours confirms the compatibility of the concept of the 'third place' promoted by IcLL to planning related analysis of the context. It reinforced the realization among students that planning concepts must be studied within the cultural context, where culture is largely understood in dynamic and contextual terms.

A comparison of the level of analysis obtained by the two largely similar study tour groups – with only one of them explicitly asked to make the conscious effort to move to a 'third place', i.e. to deliberately assume a neutral perspective, proves the importance of conscious effort for intercultural sensitivity. Such sensitivity proved useful in terms of the richness of analytical debate it generated among the group of students in a foreign context. Such sensitivity should also be equally useful for planners within the local context itself when faced with tasks that require dealing with plurality and difference. Perhaps this proposition needs to be further researched.

Study tours are exciting adventures not only for students but also for supervising academics. However, it requires significant logistical support to take care of the excessive amount of work it generates. As our research shows, slight changes in itinerary can affect the educational experience of participants. While collaboration with local partners is invaluable on the one hand, it needs to be negotiated well so as to minimize the need to change the study tour design once it has been finalized.

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