



*“The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.”
~ Marcel Proust*

Everything Old is New Again

My time in Italy last spring was an incredibly gratifying experience. It was truly a privilege to lead a group of University of Illinois architecture students on a sketch trip through the Amalfi Coast and then to conduct some of my own independent studies.

Although it’s a bit cliché, I believe it’s true: travel and experience are really the best teachers. If you travel with an open mind and an open heart, the path naturally unfolds for surprising learning opportunities. I will admit, however, that I did start this journey with a keen interest in seeing how the Italians approach sustainable building – historically and today. Below are some musings on a few of the discoveries I made, and how they relate to the approach at Full Circle Architects.

New Urbanism & Community Development

I enjoyed the positive effect of communities built around centralized, human-scaled, gathering spaces – mainly piazzas in Italy. It was true bliss to enjoy a cappuccino (or Chianti!) in a square teeming with people engaged in the infinite narratives of daily life. Street performers, vendors, sketching students, friends, families and neighbors engaged in lively conversations: all providing a dynamic backdrop for a vital community life that encourages personal interactions.

The magnetic appeal and sense of community – which comes from public spaces designed to encourage interaction - has resulted in a delightful way of life since the earliest urban plans. Today in the U.S., the buzz word for community development is “***New Urbanism***”. The ideas behind this movement are not new at all, as the supporters of this philosophy look to traditional urban features such as piazzas to improve our quality of urban life today.

As described on www.newurbanism.org, the New Urban Principles include qualities such as walkability, community connectivity, mixed and diverse building uses, and centralized neighborhood structures – all with an emphasis on beautiful surroundings to nourish the spirit. My experiences in Italian outdoor spaces strengthened my support of the New Urbanist movement in the U.S., validating that we truly need more planning like this.



Piazza Grande in Arezzo, Tuscany

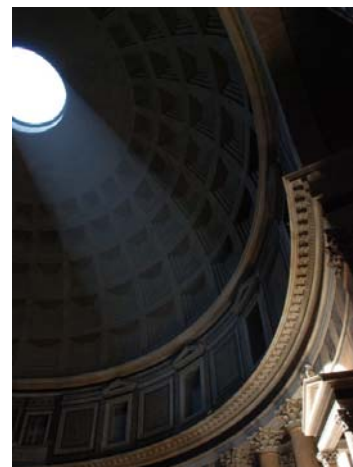


Piazza Greve in Chianti, Tuscany

Natural Day-Lighting

The trip renewed my appreciation for the classics, with admiration for the innovations of the master builders that came thousands of years before us. It was a very moving experience, standing within the walls of the Pantheon in Rome, watching the sun stream through the oculus intentionally bathe various architectural features in light. It confirmed the fact that today's discussions around **day-lighting** solutions have a long, rich history!

Whether the objective is to naturally illuminate a specific interior space, or to consider the orientation of a building for energy savings, the thoughtful consideration of a building's context and its relationship to the sun's path is significant in the design process.



Interior of Pantheon, Rome

Sustainable Building

Sustainability and **“green building”** reflects a return to construction in harmony with nature and indigenous resources - as it was done before the industrial revolution. Green architecture is not about simply tacking the latest “techno-toy” onto a building. It involves wise design in accordance with the laws of nature, something found in ancient civilizations.

It was fascinating to see the ruins of Pompeii reveal how that society harnessed (with beauty and finesse) limited resources to sustain people’s daily activities. The water management systems used for rainwater collection as well as heating and cooling could inspire us today to consider how we, too, can do this with beautifully integrated architectural features.



Water collection within the courtyard of a house in Pompeii



Evidence of subfloor heating system in the Forum baths (saunas) at Pompeii. Water from hot springs heated some of the buildings, providing early evidence of geothermal heating.

I discovered that some “up-to-the-moment” design and building trends in Italy are really based on very traditional systems. I was shown building technologies and systems that save time, material and money, and that create - by design - much healthier indoor air environments. Needless to say, I’m inspired to use some of these systems on our upcoming projects.



Renovation of an existing house outside of Rome using ventilated under-floor cavities. This feature enhances energy efficiency, reduces dampness, mold and mildew, and diverts any permeating gases (including radon) to the outside of the building. The theory behind this new system is based on the structural characteristics of the ancient dome

Building on our architectural past remains a vital means for moving into our future. The value of seeing old sites with new eyes can promote innovation in unexpected ways. Whether it's large or small scale, technology or design, our ability to evaluate historical references and transform them into meaningful solutions for today's lifestyle continues to feed the passion in those of us who strive to design truly relevant built environments.



Piazza del Campidoglio, Rome, by Michelangelo, 1536



MAXXI, National Museum of XXI century Art by Zaha Hadid, Rome 2010.