A CULTURE OF ARCHITECTURE

JASMINE PLACENTINO

PARABOLICA

For a number of years, I've been contemplating the question: what is the cultural value of architecture?

This question has emerged from a growing interest in the role architecture plays within public life, and an understanding that cities are defined not only by their buildings, but equally by the spaces between them. I've often wondered to what extent architecture and place-making can be understood as cultural acts that are capable of shaping how people experience the world.

The Dulux Study Tour provided an opportunity to explore this question firsthand. Three cities, each with their own distinct character, revealed both contrasts and unexpected similarities. Parallels emerged between approaches to city planning and governance, cultural frameworks for place-making, the integration of nature within urban environments, and long-term investment in social infrastructure and housing.

Through the experiences of buildings and city streets, as well as nature cultivated and left wild, I began to understand the effects of long-term planning within each place. By observing the people within these cities; how and where they lived, and how the public spaces, buildings, and natural environments were inhabited or used, I sought to better understand the relationship between architecture, culture, and everyday life.

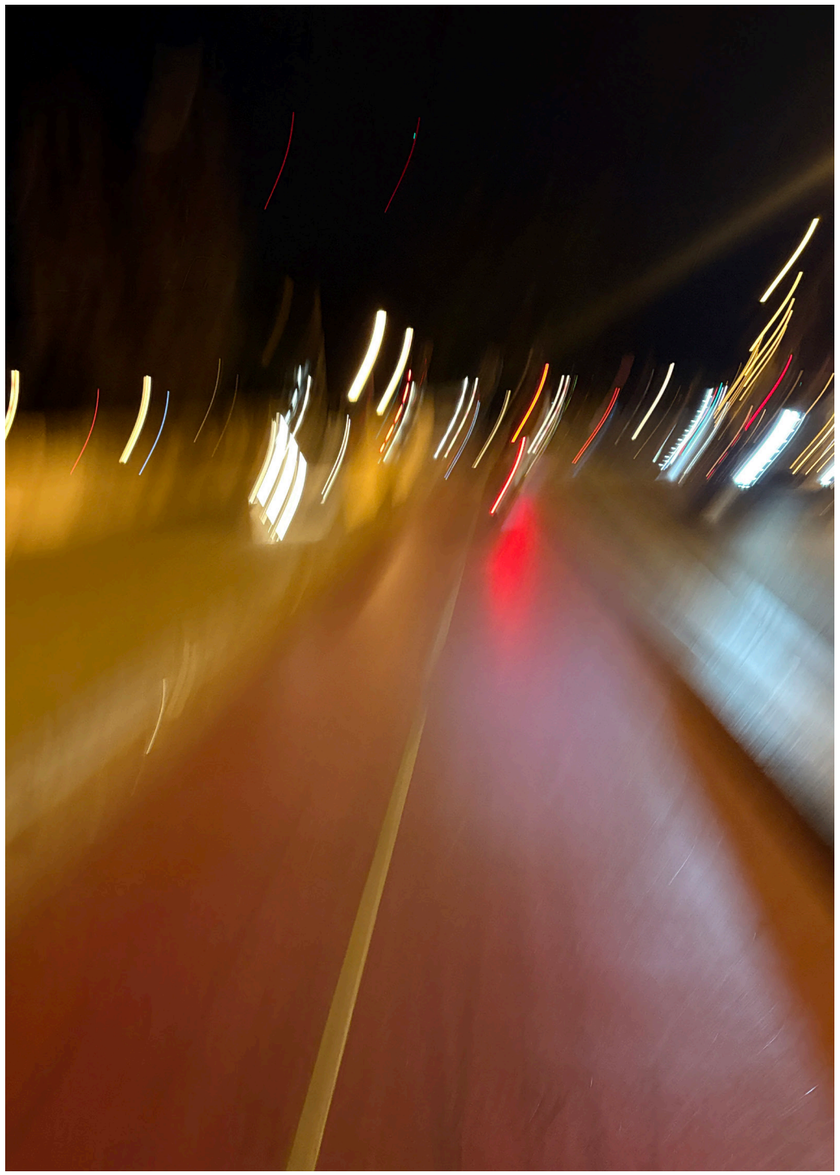
Travel has a way of altering perceptions. Days become compressed and expansive simultaneously. Hours pass quickly, yet experiences linger, embedding themselves into memory. Routines dissolve, each day becoming a series of heightened moments that weave together. It becomes necessary to experience a place through the senses. How the air feels on your skin and whether it is heavy with rain. The gentle smell of early summer as you move through parkland. Tastes of new foods that speak of culture and locality. The way the wind whips through your hair on an evening ride.

These sensory experiences form into questions. What does a city feel like to walk through? Does that feeling change between day and night? Is there enough shelter from the elements? Are the streets wide enough to move comfortably? Are the public spaces welcoming and inclusive? How does the built environment reflect the culture of this place?

This report is not a catalogue of projects visited, nor a comprehensive account of the tour. It is structured as a reflection across a series of recurring themes encountered along the way.

- A civic expression of culture.
- Enduring visions for the built environment.
- The atmosphere of everyday life.
- Evidence of the hand of humanity.

What follows is a personal account of observations gathered throughout the journey. An attempt, perhaps, to understand not only what architecture is, but what it can mean.







A CIVIC EXPRESSION OF CULTURE

Culture is often understood through language, food, religion and tradition. Yet it is also embedded within the physical environment. The way a city allocates space, prioritises movement, invests in public life and cares for its inhabitants reveals what it values most. What I observed in the cities of Singapore, Paris and Vienna is that the public spaces, and urban environments more broadly, are shaped by each city's long-term civic priorities.

In Singapore, we see extensive vegetation in both the preservation of natural habitats, as well as the integration of vertical greenery mandated by planning controls. Today, developments must provide landscape replacement areas up to 100% of the site area within strategic zones. Practices such as WOHA have been at the forefront of this movement for many years, with their buildings acting as important case studies that made these planning codes possible.

The city-state of Singapore invests extensively in social infrastructure as an integral part of its urban planning, not as an afterthought. We saw at the mega-development of the Punggol Digital District, by WOHA in collaboration with Henning Larsen landscape architects, which connected vast areas of the campus by greenery-lined undercover walkways that created much needed relief from the sun. Large, undercover outdoor areas created generous communal hawker-style dining spaces with furniture designed to encourage social interaction. The city felt designed around everyday life.

In recent years, Paris has also been going through a substantial urban-greening of public spaces. The recent transformation of streets and public spaces has been a city-wide push to make streets pedestrian and bike-friendly, and to re-vegetate hardscaped public areas and subsequently reduce the urban heat-island effect. Rather than feeling imposed upon the city, these interventions feel like a natural evolution of the Parisian urban identity. The city feels more welcoming than when I was there some ten years ago.

Vienna's public spaces vary quite a lot depending on which part of the city we speak about. Upon arrival, I was excited by the amount of grit we saw along the edges of the Donaukanal. It wasn't a part of the Viennese identity I was aware of, but the summer weather brought out many people enjoying walks and bike rides. The canal was lined with people skateboarding or making use of the city's e-scooters. Walls were covered in graffiti - but the kind that feels urban and vibrant. The grander city squares reflected the city's history, while neighbourhoods of social housing - dating back to the Red Vienna movement of the 1960s, but continuing through to the neighbourhoods today - were full of play spaces for children, small parks, and community gardens.

Although each city expresses its identity in different ways, they share a common understanding that public space is a cultural asset rather than residual land between buildings. The streets, parks, transport corridors and civic institutions are not simply infrastructure. They are physical expressions of collective values, shaped patiently through successive generations.

ENDURING VISIONS FOR THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

Meaningful urban change takes time. Cities don't evolve overnight. They are shaped through successive decisions that adhere to a long-term civic vision.

Let's first look at Vienna. The city's reputation as one of the world's most liveable places becomes immediately understandable. High levels of housing affordability, reliable infrastructure and investment in public amenity create the conditions for stability and wellbeing. Investment in the built environment, particularly social housing, has existed for many decades. The Wohnpark Alt-Erlaa large-scale social housing project was completed in 1985 and continues to house over 10,000 residents in over 3000 units. The surrounding ground plane is occupied by outdoor areas, schools and medical centres. Green spaces are expansive, and buildings are an appropriate scale.

Vienna's success stems from the consistency with which these principles are applied across the city. New suburbs such as Sonnwendviertel, which was developed into a residential district in 2012, follow the same line of thinking. Most apartment buildings are mixed-use with commercial or community spaces at ground level. There is a central spine for bikes and pedestrians, linking together public spaces such as parks, playgrounds and productive gardens. In close proximity to the central station, the suburb is well connected to public transport. While cycling through the area, it felt incredibly liveable. For Australian families that fear the trade-off of the backyard for an affordable home - this is the case study to look at.

Singapore arrives at liveability in a slightly different way. While it's densely populated, there is still an underlying feeling of generosity which stems from the abundance of greenery. A true celebration of the climate that allows for such wonderful vegetation.

When I think of Singapore and architecture, my mind immediately jumps to the work of WOHA. I see tall buildings that integrate roof gardens and public spaces. I see elevated playgrounds and outdoor dining terraces. All of these design elements shaped by many years of planning policy.

Yet Singapore has also not forgotten the ground plane. Quite the contrary. We visited Rifle Range National Park which demonstrated careful preservation of natural habitat. With landscape design by Henning Larsen, the elevated timber boardwalks allow water to move naturally during heavy rainfall while maintaining wildlife corridors.

Punggol Green by DP Green illustrates a more recent push to utilise land dominated by infrastructure. The linear park integrates play spaces and basketball courts for public use by the communities within nearby housing developments. What was once a harsh and bleak no-go zone below a highway is now a vibrant and well-used place for people of all ages.

What becomes apparent across both Vienna and Singapore is that generous cities do not emerge by chance. They are the product of long-term decisions that privilege everyday life over short-term expediency. The built environment becomes the physical expression of those priorities.







THE ATMOSPHERE OF EVERYDAY LIFE

The sensory experience of architecture. You enter a building and immediately sense its spatial quality.

I remember as a child visiting a restaurant owned by my uncle. The design may have made it into magazines. I saw it, and indeed felt it, as a concrete shell that was cold to the touch, with sound bouncing uncomfortably from the hard surfaces. It is my earliest memory of disliking a space, and perhaps understanding that spaces could, in fact, be liked or disliked at all.

Religious buildings are long-standing examples of architecture designed to affect the senses. The way light enters a space, or the way sound travels across its surfaces. Early - even ancient - architects understood the importance of atmosphere.

Public buildings today vary greatly in typology. Religious buildings are still constructed, but so are libraries, galleries and other civic spaces. If architecture shapes everyday life, then atmosphere is fundamental. It is one of the primary ways architecture shapes our experience of the world.

We visited many public buildings throughout the tour. Beginning in Singapore at the Church of St Mary of the Angels by WOHA, on to the commercial precinct of Marina Bay Sands by Moshe Safdie, and finally The Jewel at Changi Airport, also by Safdie. The uses of these buildings could not vary more, yet each serves the public. Can the spatial quality of a shopping centre be considered as important as that of a synagogue?

I believe it should. While the purposes of these buildings differ greatly, each shapes the emotional experience of thousands of people every day. If architecture has the capacity to influence wellbeing, memory and delight, then atmosphere should not be reserved for sacred or cultural institutions alone.

My exploration of this idea continued in Paris. The highlight was Bourse de Commerce by Tadao Ando. A gallery housing the Pinault Collection, where Ando's restrained concrete intervention sits comfortably within the nineteenth-century stock exchange. It also happened to be exhibiting the highly atmospheric 'Fog Sculpture' by Fujiko Nakaya.

Walking through the National Library of France by Dominique Perrault, along the public subterranean corridors that run the length of the building, I enjoyed seeing these circulation spaces so well used. Lined with furniture designed specifically for the space, people sat listening to music, working on laptops or reading quietly in solitude. The corridors had become destinations rather than simply spaces of movement.

Throughout the tour I found myself returning to the same question: why does atmosphere matter? Because atmosphere shapes memory. It influences whether we linger or leave, whether we feel welcome or uncomfortable. It is something embedded within architecture from its earliest conception. If the quality of everyday life is the measure of good cities, then atmosphere must be considered an essential part of the public realm, whether the building is a church, a library, a gallery or a shopping centre.

EVIDENCE OF THE HAND OF HUMANITY

Visiting the Lina Ghotmeh Architecture studio in Paris was a moment of realisation for what this tour was offering me. Exposure to projects, yes - but beyond that, a glimpse into a different culture of practice. A different way of seeing architecture; of understanding not only what it can be, but what it can do.

We had the opportunity to learn from an international practice. One that works across many cultures and contexts, and therefore begins each project not with preconceived ideas, but with curiosity. Before a concept can be imagined, the climate must be understood. Community needs must be understood. The brief must be understood - and perhaps challenged. Architecture here comes from listening and learning. From an appreciation of local materials, local crafts and ways of working. There is a rigour of research, drawing inspiration from many sources; nature, culture, art and language.

I found a similar rigour in the work of Lim Shing Hui, founder of L Architects. We were fortunate to visit a private residence named My Last Home - a deeply personal project for a retired professor returning to Singapore after many years abroad. As Shing Hui recalled, he told her simply and sincerely that this would be his final home.

With the care and respect such a brief demands, L Architects carefully peeled back the layers of the existing terrace house, exposing the raw brick and structural concrete that had remained hidden behind plaster for more than thirty years. Once the project had been pared back to its bones, new elements were introduced with extraordinary restraint. An entry threshold that gently filters light. A carefully considered bench for removing shoes. Shelving that quietly displays a lifetime of books and collected artefacts. The house is sparsely furnished, yet every piece has purpose. Nothing more than what is needed.

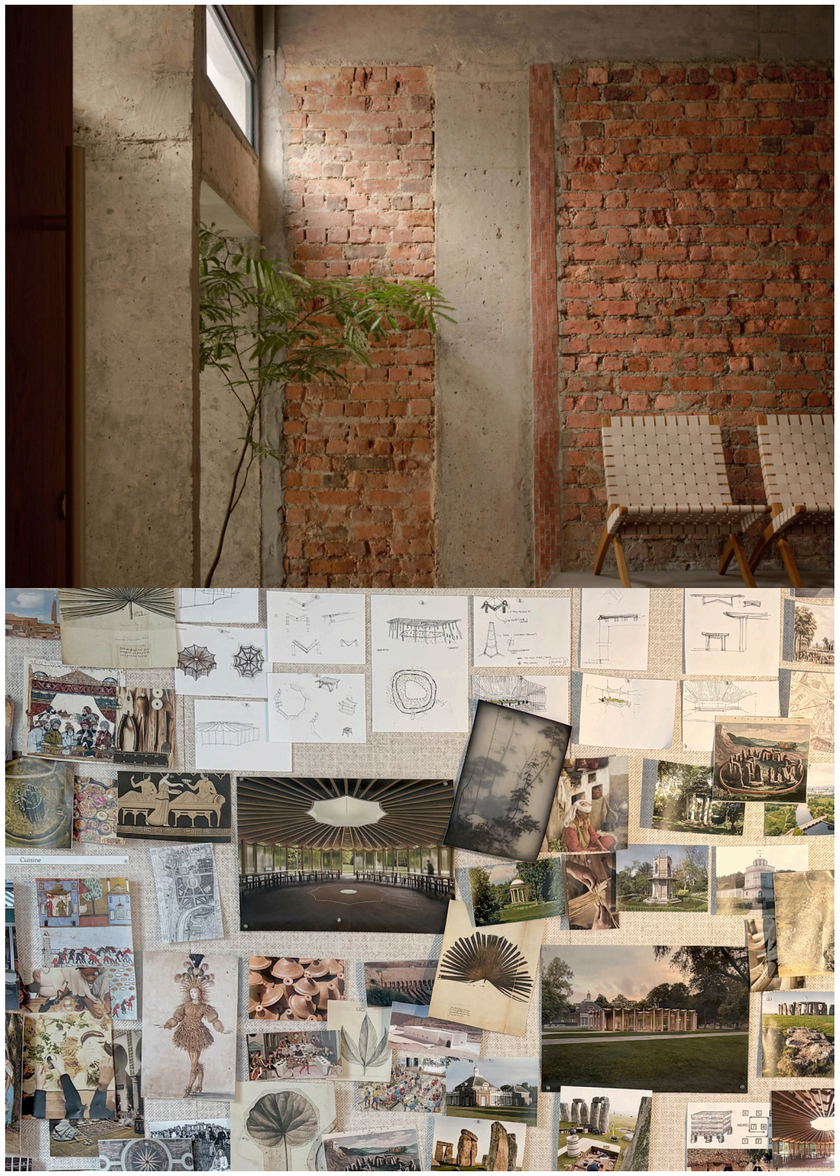
Shing Hui has taken this approach across a number of projects, and spoke of her desire to introduce a different way of thinking to Singapore. There is often a preference for 'newness', where older buildings are more readily demolished than adapted. She hopes to see more projects that celebrate what already exists, embracing the principles of adaptive reuse rather than replacement.

For me, these two women practice in a way that is deeply meaningful. It is not easy to go against the grain. But when was anything worthwhile ever easy? In both instances, the method of practice is not about creating buildings as monuments, but about creating places that are meaningful to the people who inhabit them.

I am confident that Lim Shing Hui will leave a lasting mark on Singapore's built environment. Lina Ghotmeh, I believe, will one day be named a Pritzker Prize laureate. Why do I feel so certain?

It is her way of embedding - and I mean deeply embedding - humanness into her work. She speaks of the archaeology of the future; of leaving evidence of the hand of humanity. If architecture is to endure, it must first belong to the people and places from which it emerges.

Evidence of the hand of humanity. There is no greater aspiration for architecture.



This experience has shaped the architect I will become,
and the way I will practice architecture.

Dulux Study Tour 2026
Singapore - Paris - Vienna

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