

Architectural Odyssey: That Time I Made an Architect.

1993

It was back in 1993, while on the University of Toronto's Study Abroad program, after completing our study term in Florence, Italy – my classmate Mike and I found ourselves in Paris for one week, in search everything great that city had to offer. As young and ambitious architecture students, we were chiefly concerned with experiencing some of Le Corbusier's work first hand – and naturally, the Paris backpacker's staples: Jim Morrison's grave at Père Lachaise Cemetery, the Mona Lisa at the Louvre, Eiffel Tower etc, etc, etc. On one hand we were in search of high art, and on the other we were content with black berets and Edith Piaf music.



We were lodging in the cheap & very social confines of a hostel that our 'Let's Go Europe' recommended. It had a Mexican cantina restaurant and a social gathering place in the basement. Down there, one could get Heineken cans out of the Coke machine which at that time was a revelation – we lovingly referred to them as "green Cokes".



One of the first things we did in Paris was tour the Fondation Le Corbusier (Villa La Roche) and at the end of that day we were chilling out at the hostel enjoying some green Cokes. It was there that we met up with a lovely girl from Argentina, named Marianna. She was a university student on her 'summer' vacation. In the course of casual conversation, she admitted to us that she was frustrated with her parent's insistence that she pursue a career as a lawyer. She was studying art history, loved it, she knew

there was no career in it and yet didn't really want to become a lawyer. At least, that's what we gathered because her English was quite broken – however, she sang the most beautiful French, and obviously Spanish was her native tongue.

At any rate, when she asked us about what she should go see while in Paris, we said "why don't you check out the Fondation Le Corbusier, we were just there today!"

We even gave her our maps with directions to the Fondation as we were done with them and had other plans for the next day.

I believe the next day we'd gone to the Centre Pompidou and some other sites and when we went back to our friendly stash of green Cokes we ran into Marianna who was ablaze with a smile. "Thank you so much for the recommendation, I really, really enjoyed myself at the Fondation Le Corbusier – do you have anything else similar that you can recommend"

Now, the next part wasn't quite as gentlemanly honest and genuine as our first Corbusier recommendation because the next day we were planning on making the trek to Villa Savoie. If you've ever gone to Villa Savoie using only public transit, you'll remember that there are a few bus transfers to make and it's a long ride that's easy to screw up – and neither myself nor Mike were comfortable enough in French to really converse with a local. Whereas Marianna was completely fluent in French, and since she enjoyed Villa LaRoche so much, we invited her to join us at Villa Savoie, explaining to her that she'd have to 'do the talking' for us as a group. So while we were being nice to invite her along on our trek – we were a little selfish in the sense that we needed her help with the language too, sorta kinda.



So the next day we all went to Villa Savoie – and what an experience it was. A recent trip to Corbusier’s Carpenter Centre in Cambridge, served as an excellent reminder of how incredible Corb’s buildings are ... but that first trip to Villa Savoie was a soul moving experience. Truly remarkable. And over that 4 hour visit, we’d experienced the villa at times together and at times apart, did sketches and took photos and basically took it all in.

The green Cokes tasted even better that night when we decompressed with some more of the Mexican fare. Marianna, who at this point would go see any building we’d recommended, asked if she could tag along with us if we had other interesting architecture to see. Mike was leaving the next day - so I brought her with me to another Corbusier house which you couldn’t get into, but could photograph from the outside.

The next day, my flight left and Marianna had another week in Paris before she returned to Argentina to continue her degree in Art History and presumably follow her parents request that she pursue a career in law. We exchanged mailing addresses and said good bye.

1996

I graduated in 1995, and I had moved two or three more times since exchanging addresses with Marianna, and aside from a postcard or two shortly after the Paris trip, for all intents and purposes I had lost contact with her. So you can imagine my surprise when I received a post card from Buenos Aries from her that said,

“Hello Anthony, I just finished my first year of Architecture School – why didn’t you tell me this would be so hard?”



Well, I thought to myself ... I guess that law career didn’t pan out. I called my classmate and updated him on our Argentinean friend from Paris. I thought that was somehow cool how that worked out.

2001

I was working at NORR architects at the time, and since I’d last heard from Marianna, I’d changed mailing addresses at least 3 more times ... so you can imagine my surprise when I received an email at my work email address that said something like, “Hello Anthony, I’m not sure if you remember me from the hostel in Paris – it’s Marianna. I hope you are well, to update you on my life; I graduated architecture school where I met and married my husband Enrique. We have one child and we have an architectural practice together. Argentina’s (then) recent economic collapse has really eliminated most of our work and we are considering emigrating. Can you provide us with some information about architecture and Canada?”

If in 1996, I thought it was cool to have ‘made’ an architect – I didn’t think it was cool any more. In fact seconds after reading that email, I had waves of guilt flood over me ... I

remember thinking, “if I had just kept my f#\$%-ing mouth shut in Paris, she’d probably have listened to her parents and be a lawyer by now and in way better shape to face an economic crisis ... and now I’ve involved this Enrique fellow, whom she wouldn’t have met if I’d been silent in Paris about Corbusier. AND now there’s the innocent child who wouldn’t be faced with parents scrambling to survive because I had to be an archi-guide nearly a decade ago”. In an equally irrational way, I called my classmate Mike and explained, he was also to blame for making Marianna susceptible to the market forces that architects deal with.

To which he philosophically responded that we didn’t saddle her with a fickle profession rather we’d freed her from the shackles that she would have inevitably held her creativity down, had she become a lawyer. He reminded me that she found her calling and shifted her life in a way that she wanted because we (inadvertently) gave her a push in the right direction.

And with that I composed a long email to Marianna & Enrique with links to all the provincial professional associations and a map (to illustrate the vastness of Canada) and a synopsis of Canada’s major cities and where I saw her fitting in best. (which was Montreal, in large part because it’s a little more Euro than the rest of Canada and she, as I recalled from Villa Savoie with great fondness, sang the most beautiful French)

I didn’t hear from her again. But I kinda half expect to here from her at some point. I didn’t even update my mailing or email address with her, because I got (get) the sense that she can find me.

That’s my architectural odyssey... that time I made an architect.