

2016 Public Life Survey Reflection

In March 2016, the Divided City sponsored Humanities Graduate student, Damarias Moore, from Romance Languages and Literature to participate in the Sam Fox School's Master class in Urbanism, Architecture, Landscape, "The Lively City: Behavioral Studies and Public Space Design in Rotterdam and Amsterdam." Over a five-day period in Rotterdam and Amsterdam, Netherlands, students explored the urban life of the city and investigated the manner in which the City of Rotterdam has made the revitalization and programming of their public spaces a central strategy.

As Damarias explains, "Thanks to the generous stipend provided by the Divided City Initiative through the Center for the Humanities, I was able to spend my spring break at the Lively City workshop in Rotterdam, Netherlands. As a student in Wash U's French PhD program, and thus firmly rooted in the humanities, a week spent with architecture students seemed intimidating. My trip to Rotterdam featured presentations by municipality officials, architects, and urban designers based in Rotterdam, a tour of an organization that houses homeless residents and refugees in the city center, an in-depth exploration of the major sections of the city – rich and poor; old and new – a 12 hour day of on-site field research, and two days of compiling our research and data, which we presented and later combined to provide a printable publication of the study. Consequentially, my immersive experience was markedly different from anything I had participated in via my own academic field.

At first glance, architecture, urban design, and the humanities do not seem to have much in common. After a week working with architecture students during the Lively City workshop in Rotterdam, Netherlands, it became very clear that the life of an architecture student was very different from my own. They know how to use design programs that I thought only professionals used on a regular basis. The research conducted on the trip was field based, which is very different from trying to find original manuscripts of old French texts. However, there is great overlap between architecture, urban design, and the humanities when content and purpose are examined. All three fields question how humanity interacts, whether it be through literal space and place, cultural interactions, or invented meetings in imagined spaces.

A week with architects and architecture students provided me with a fresh and practical perspective towards architecture and urban design that I will now be able to apply to my own studies. Public space and urban design are especially relevant to my interests in representations in French literature of government buildings built for marginalized and impoverished sectors of French society. Although this workshop took place in the Netherlands, I gained a more in-depth understanding of what makes buildings and public space functional for residents. It is not simply an issue of a building being ugly or unwelcoming: there is, rather, an entire theory that goes behind creating a structure that promotes a happy and healthy population. Additionally, a survey of Rotterdam demonstrates that even cities with the best intentions struggle with maintaining an inclusive city center, because new architecture tends to push lower income families outwards. I now have both a theoretical and practical conception of these kinds of questions, which I will go one to apply to my own future research to provide a better understanding of these same issues in France.