



The Livability of Historical Cities

Aidan DeLuca

With support of:
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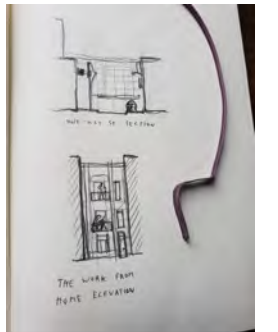
A Patchwork Quilt in Bruxelles



After the cacophony of consecutive transit layovers from a train to New York, to a plane to Oslo, to another plane to Berlin, I finally emerged out of the chaos of my final train with a red-eyed haze in Brussels. Arriving promptly in the early morning, I quickly shook off my fatigue with a sandwich and a coffee. I started at the north train station, and I spent the next few hours meandering south on foot. The foot traffic for me was comfortable, not being interfered much by other traffic flows. Many roads had been closed for pedestrian exclusivity, and

the vehicular traffic that did exist was clearly delineated in appropriate lanes (car, bike, walk).

I found my way to my hostel in the afternoon to be surprised by the pleasant encounter of some new friends. Brussels was very quickly beginning to open up to me as a city where I could reside. Taking more trips around during that first day, the city felt less flashy than I had imagined. There was an atmosphere more in tune with what I was familiar in Philadelphia. The city was a patchwork quilt





A Patchwork Quilt in Bruxelles



of neighborhoods, but still very closely tied to each other artistically, organizationally, and culturally.

Over the next few days, I took every opportunity to venture outside of the city center. Locally I was able to receive recommendations and even occasional tours from the locals whom I acquainted myself. Brussels felt very small-town-esque. It was comfortable for wayfinding, and despite having out of the city center, I kept finding myself passing places I had been. That is not to say navigation was always so intuitive. At this point I was

familiarizing myself with the metro system: although it was speedy and efficient, it was terribly confusing. Lines cross at odd angles, intersections with roads, pedestrian paths through metro rails, and a bilingual split between French and Dutch that constantly tampered with the naming of locations and stations. Nonetheless, I could get to where I needed to be in a timely fashion.

When I found myself in the periphery, there was always a free public event of some sort. In the Parc du



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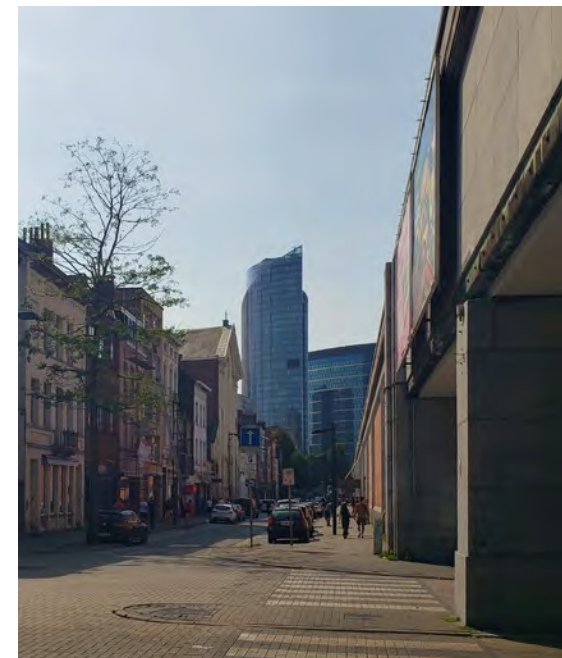
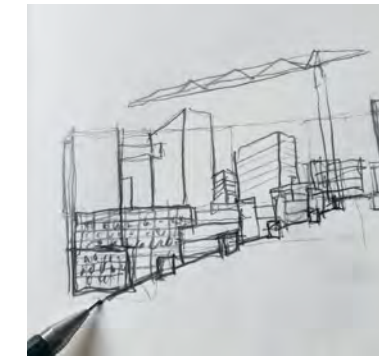


Cinquantenaire I stumbled across a Latin color festival, and in Leuven I experienced a suburban street festival combined with a flea market. There was an apparent recognition for the value of providing lovely, free events to the citizens that is still very foreign to me. These events seemed to be so numerous and available that many people chose not to even attend. Outside the events I would find people relaxing and playing in completely unrelated contexts.

I visited some lower-class neighborhoods as well to analyze

how the city responds to public safety needs. The cleanliness level (of things like litter) were kept constant throughout my walks, despite the class of the area. The lower class areas still had decent tree coverage, adequate transit access, and open spaces where a citizen's surroundings are kept visible (as opposed to tight spaces where aggressors may hide). I felt safe in most of my walks, although I was accompanied by new friends for some.

As for the historicism imbedded in the city, I was





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absolutely enamored by the diverse layering effect of Flemish traditional with French traditional all juxtaposed to modern high-rise. One of the first things to note about Brussels was its cosmopolitan energy, and the scattered but interwoven styles of its buildings absolutely reflected this worldly union. There were of course some sad scenes of historic decays as a more historic neighborhood was readapted for white-collar or business use, but I appreciated the streetview moments where the two could coexist.





A Patchwork Quilt in Bruxelles



As I told one of my new friends as I left, Brussels does not seem like a quick-vacation city, but rather a city with which I would fall in love after a long stay. The character felt welcoming and authentic, and something has captured my attention. I do not believe that my time with Brussels has ended, and I await the day when I may return.



Berlin, Germany

Berlin, Deutschland





Berlin is So Big, I was Overwhelmed!

With a hasty and comfortable train returning to Berlin, I enjoyed the remainder of my Wednesday afternoon with leisure. My hostel was located in the southernmost area of the city (the catch for booking the cheapest hostel room), but luckily it was placed adjacent to Osdorfer Straße Station, giving me efficient metro access to and from the city within 30 minutes. I enjoyed myself in Berlin, but it was quite the adjustment coming from Brussels. My first impression was of course noting the expansive suburbs in which I found my temporary stay. The impression

was calm, organized, and uncanny-American. I realized quickly (having known the feeling my whole life) that I was back in a very cartesian realm, one in which a foot-peddler like me would have some difficulty. Fortunately aside from the area's lack of laundromats, absence of grocery stores, and slow late-night transit during the weekdays, my first impression of Berlin was somewhat false. In the city center I found much of what I needed with reliable transportation and at mediocre (but acceptable) distance to one-another.

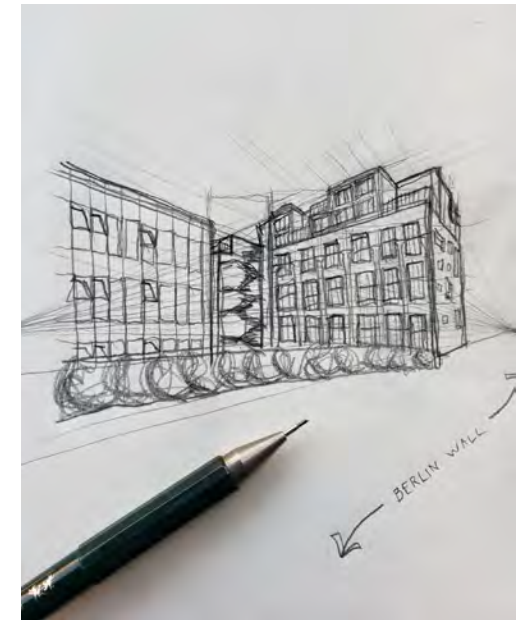
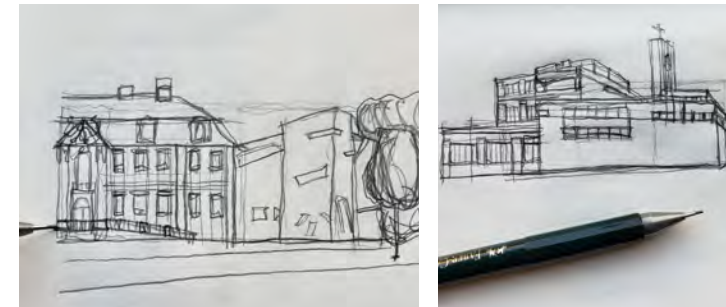




Berlin is So Big, I was Overwhelmed!



Bottom line, Berlin is a big city. It felt to me very idealistically American with its car-centric city-planning, its industrial consumerism (liquidation stores, fast food, etc.), and its respect to the suburban life. In a way, it seemed like the common lifestyle that the U.S. tries to achieve, with the added bonus of reliable suburban transit and affordable (or even free) public recreation. Conversely, the construction of Berlin's suburbs feels much more authentic: houses are detailed with better hardware and more durable finishes. They also each have a quirky, stylistic





Berlin is So Big, I was Overwhelmed!



touch of German vernacular; not the copy-paste, thirty-year-lifespan shacks that have gained popularity with contractors in the U.S.

During my frequent trips to the city center, I absolutely had to visit one of my favorite pieces of architecture for the first time: David Libeskind's Jewish Museum. One of the first buildings I thoroughly studied in university, this museum was constructed using countless techniques to give the occupants feelings of hopelessness and false-optimism as a memorial to the

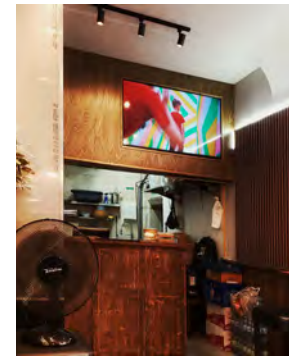


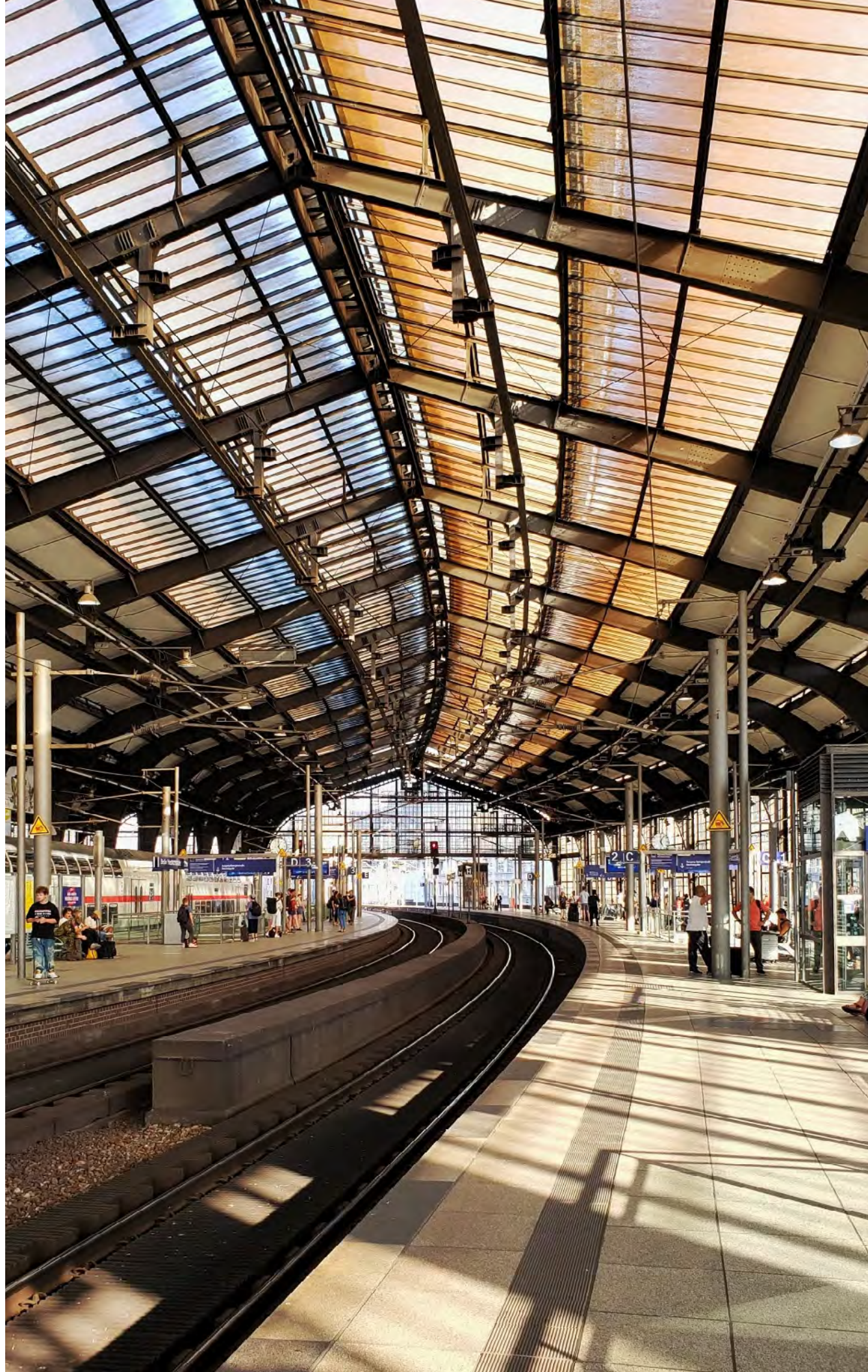


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Holocaust. I took my time with this one, rejecting the audio-tour to experience the building and its content in the intended silence. In the same day I traveled to the Berlin wall. An earlier recommendation was to explore the pocket-neighborhoods along this memorial, so I attempted to view as many as possible. Of course as I imagined, it was quite a long distance to walk, but each new block offered a unique urban environment and used the wall in a slightly different manner. I was happy to see such a complex memorial footprint being so naturally integrated





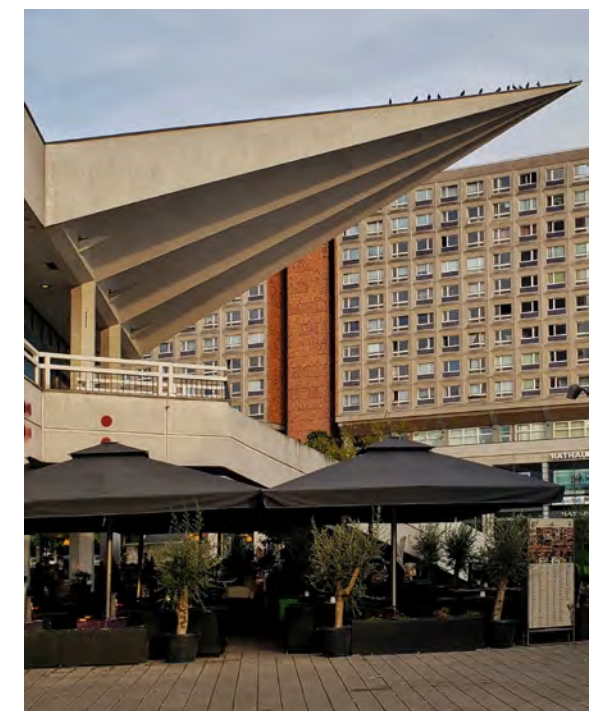
Berlin is So Big, I was Overwhelmed!



into the modern city.

Night life in Berlin was the liveliest I had ever witnessed. The most cosmopolitan scene I found during my stay was in the bar and club districts, and it lasted for the entirety of an owl's waking day. These clubs were found in something I'll call a Berlimbo, a ring layer between the city center and the suburban outskirts that held the industrial, manufacturing, and otherwise unattractive city-zoning: the perfect hub for nightlife.

Although my hostel was empty aside for one new companion, I was able to quickly make friends who were traveling as well. With them I learned that night-life in Berlin is quite exclusive and can cater to quite a specific clientele; regardless, I enjoyed



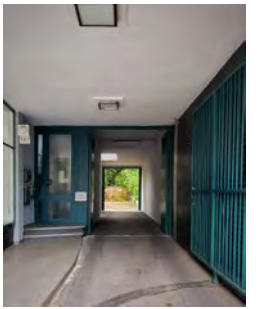


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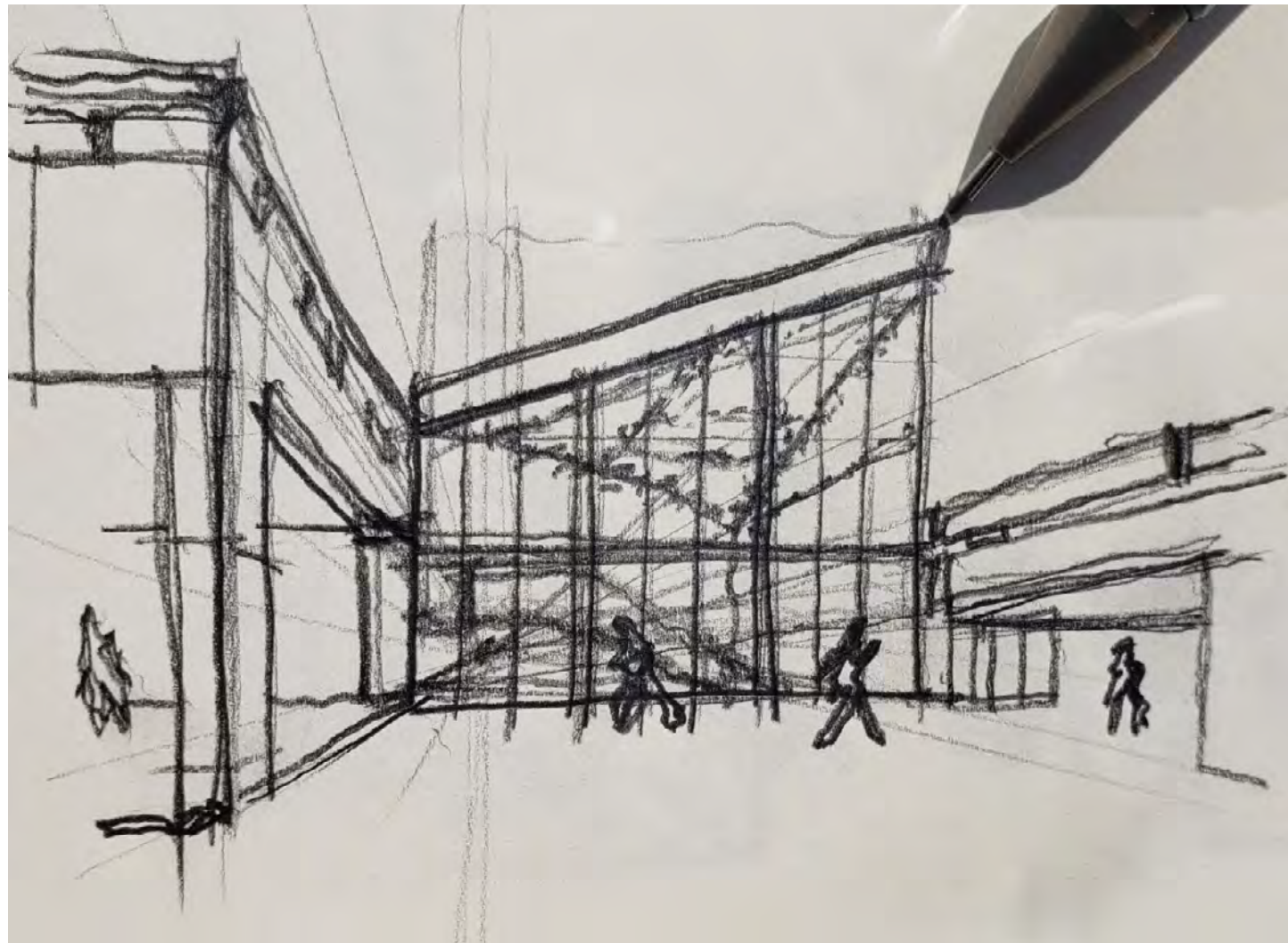


myself, and it was refreshing to be surrounded by so many lively, fun-loving, young-adults.

If I were to return to Berlin, I would certainly prefer to bring a friend. For someone who is moderately social, I think it would be wise to travel in familiar company in such a vast urban setting. Vast is no exaggeration, as I still find myself getting lost in a simple map of the city. However in the time I allotted myself, I believe I gained a reasonable familiarity with Berlin, one from which I can employ similar city-planning techniques in my career's far future.



Philadelphia, U.S.
Philadelphia, U.S.



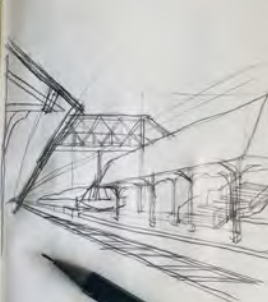
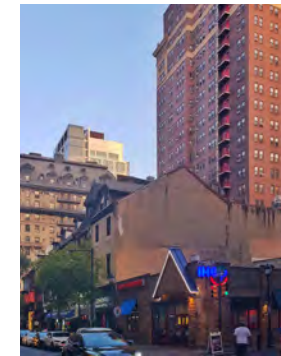


Back Home in Philly

And finally after the stormy, hazy rush of a wonderful dream, I was back home in my familiar parts of the United States. Weeks of European travel juxtaposed against a carless lifestyle in this country is always a sore spot at first, as my very first 3.5 hours off the 9.5-hour plane were spent commuting through transit-to-transit. Vehicle-delays, company-switches, and some fairly... uncomfortable encounters... were enough to remind me the dream has ended for now. No matter: there are the wonderful parts of this country that I have missed as well, and the week of

my return has had some cherished insights.

One of the first appreciations I've had were of the vast height that parts of this city achieve. One of the most particularly grandiose features of Brussels was its high-altitude composure of business districts, one that resonated with me as an East-coast American accustomed to settings like New York City. In Philadelphia however (and I suppose NYC as well) the high-rise settings seem to sprawl endlessly, whereas I had a much easier time establishing





Back Home in Philly

borders in Brussels. Berlin doesn't even seem comparable: the length between destinations was so vast that the high rises felt satirically urban in a suburban context. Perhaps authenticity is what I found attractive this week: Philadelphia's high-rise, business, nightlife, young-professional communities in Center City feel like they meet their intended purposes.

Contrarily: my ability to travel through the city has been nothing short of frustrating since I've returned. Between the delays in buses, missing my trains which only come every

hour, and the lack of amenities like a simple grocery store, I've felt flustered. Just the other day, I was returning from a professional event in Southeast Philadelphia (near the Navy Yards) to my apartment in the Northwest. As small as a city Philadelphia is, my trip took over 2 hours (two buses, one metro, and a missed bus that turned into a lengthy walk). Che sara sara; I try not to let these bumps get on my nerves.

Philadelphia is also a deeply historical city for my

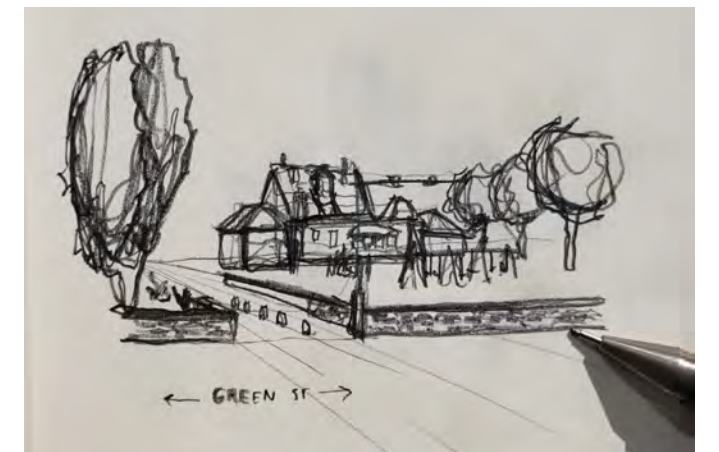
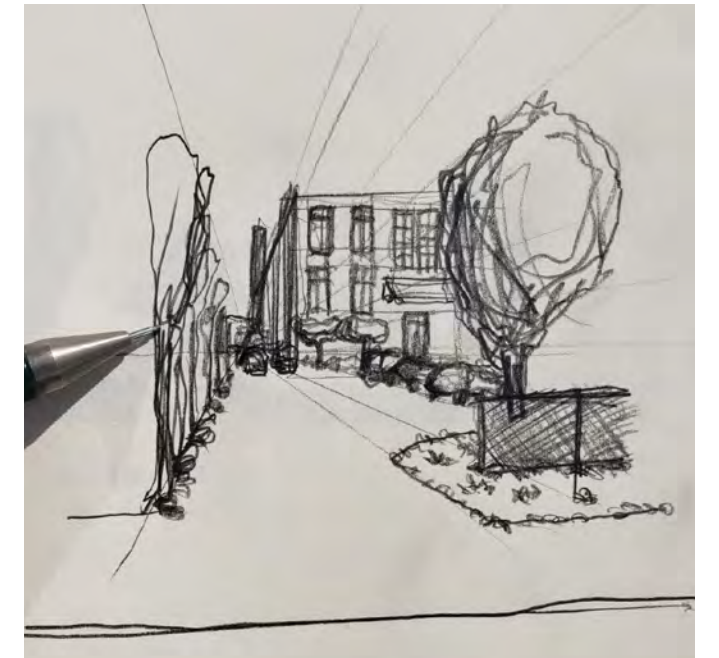




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country, and I have needed to reevaluate my appreciation of this for the sake of these studies. Although many of the places I have studied belong to a more 20th century paradigm, they still contained many embedded similarities to the areas of Brussels and Berlin that I had exposed myself. The arrangement of streets in Brussels felt very Philadelphian to me; the large axis roads act as guides for gridding sub-streets, while the natural landscape shifts neighboring city blocks into an organic, less-rigid arrangement. Wayfinding may not always be as easy as a

simple, uniform grid (like what Berlin was clearly capable of achieving), but this hybrid of city planning techniques still has a way of generating clear navigational imagery inside the users' heads. Many of Philadelphia's housing I find to be incredibly beautiful, and much of it (no matter the state of the home) hosts amazing historical detailing. From the local-stone masonry to the preserved wood detailing, all of them have a story that excites me. My favorite trip was into Germantown, a working-class area that, in my opinion,

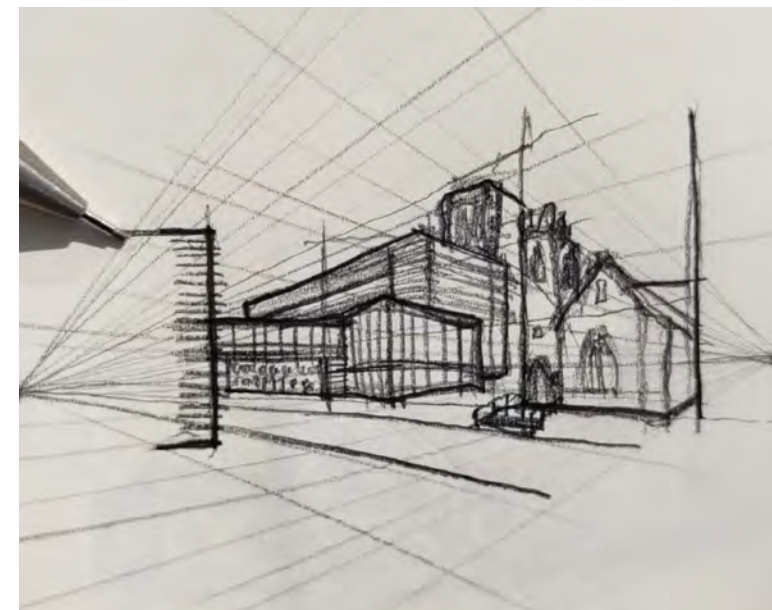




Back Home in Philly

features some of the amazing, hidden gems. Although I live so close, I've never given myself the true opportunity to practice my sketching here. For the first time, I could take in the delights that this community has to offer: homes, apartments, and even businesses.

My plans as an architect are to drive my career towards city planning and a generally altruistic civic duty to the city in which I live. Although traveling is certainly a key aspect of my life, the far future could entail for me a permanent return to Philadelphia. If





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this were the case, these types of travels may very well result in my key decision making in this city. At the start of this trip, I hoped to gain valuable knowledge on city safety, transportation, and historic beauty that I could employ throughout my professional life. Now, I simply await the opportunity to do so.



New Friends Along the Way

