

Service Learning in the Global Community: Ghana 2013

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Service Learning in the Global Community (SLGC) is a course offered through the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Manitoba, which primarily focuses on a design-build project in a developing country. In May of 2013, professor Kelley Beaverford, along with TA James Frank, myself, and seven other students in the faculty traveled abroad to Damongo in the Northern Region of Ghana, where we spent three and a half weeks learning about community development, vernacular furniture/architecture, and Ghanaian education, as well as participating in the hands-on construction of the Presby Primary School Library and Computer Lab.

This project initially began when Tools for Schools Africa (TFSA) foundation, an NGO focusing on the improvement and quality of life in the Northern Region of Ghana, approached Architects Without Borders Canada (AWB) to design the new library and computer lab. Precedent, programmatic, and site research guided the design process, and through a number of design charrettes and discussions as a collaborative team, a plan was finalized for the new building, and SLGC was able to commence.

During our time in Damongo we stayed with the local Catholic Diocese, where we had access to running water and electricity. Mary, the head cook at the Diocese, kept us well nourished and prepared local dishes such as Banku, Kenkey, TZ, and groundnut soup with rice balls for us to eat. Experiencing the local cuisine was an integral part of the course because it allowed us the opportunity to compare Ghanaian food to Canadian, as well as learn the local dining etiquette – such as not to eat with the left hand.

As a class, we spent Monday through Friday on the construction site, as well as Saturday mornings. Isaac, our local foreman, was very well trained in brick and mortar construction, truss construction, and concrete formation. Others working on-site included students who were working on their school break as well as full-time builders. I spent a

lot of my time conversing with the students, who ranged anywhere from 18 to 22 years in age. At Presby School, most of the students were older in comparison to the level of education we would be at in Canada – typically because they started school later in life, or because they had to take time off from school to work and make money for their tuition.

On the construction site, we learned how to form bricks, mix mortar, cure concrete, tie rebar, and build trusses. My favorite was forming bricks, because I found the process to be so organic, and you could see the fruits of your labour come to life in a very short amount of time. The heat was so intense during the day that bricks that were made in the morning would be completely dry in the afternoon. Spending time with the local people each day gave me the opportunity to learn what life is like in Ghana; their everyday challenges are much different from my everyday challenges. For example, many Ghanaians do not have running water in their homes, and therefore have to walk to a well with empty jugs and carry water home for cooking and washing. Electricity is another concern, as many people in Damongo do not have access to it. Even on the construction site, there was not a single power tool, which is quite the opposite from a Canadian construction site. However, I also discovered some similarities between the local workers and myself, such as the music we listen to; sports that we play, such as soccer and football; and educational goals, such as going to university. We were also able to bond over the importance of family and spending time with loved ones.

Three evenings a week our group would meet for a class seminar, where two people would facilitate a discussion on our directed readings for that seminar. We covered topics such as Ghanaian history and current affairs; defining poverty; white privilege; service learning; community partnership; and ethical construction. These readings were an integral part of the course because they typically supplemented our daily experiences on site. We were able to relate and discuss as a group, some of the personal interactions with the local people we were having, and connect these instances to our course readings.

Sundays were our day off and typically a few of us would walk to the market in town. The market was a very authentic cultural hub for the community, where anything from food, textiles, household goods, clothing, and Shea butter could be purchased. Experiencing

the market was a wonderful experience because we could see where the people of Damongo did their shopping, sold their goods, and interacted with their community – we even saw our head cook Mary there one day! Going to the market also gave us the opportunity to support their local economy, and purchase goods to bring back to Canada.

I am humbled to have had this cross-cultural experience during my time as a student. Traveling abroad has opened my eyes to some very real and important issues happening around the globe, and it has taught me that there are many differences between cultures, but also how I can learn from these differences, and how we can learn from each other. Thank you to the AWB International Scholarship Committee for supporting my involvement with this project.

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