

Design Students Study Abroad: Miami+Havana



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BACKGROUND

ADS 532 Study Abroad Comparing Culture: Miami+Havana, is a studio course in which students observe and document the architecture, design, art, and culture of Cuba. Prior to departure each student chooses several subjects to research and observe while abroad. Subjects include anything that is part of everyday life in Havana and Miami. Students document their subjects by collecting images, making sketches, and writing observations. A book and exhibition featuring each student's collections were produced to document this experience.

THE GOALS

- Introduce students to the history of South Florida and Cuba through readings, lectures, and films.
- Prepare students for the cultural differences between the Midwest and South Florida and between the US and Cuba.
- Help students develop a research plan to be implemented while in Miami and Havana.
- Lead students on a three-week tour of Miami and Havana.
- Help students present their findings in exhibition, website, and book formats.

THE CHALLENGES

- The US economic embargo (still in place) restricts Americans' travel to Cuba.
- The amount of time from students' commitment to the program (mid-October) until we depart for Miami (January) leaves little time to prepare.
- Using research methods to document and study urban places is new to most students.
- The program is open to all students, which results in a range of experiences and maturity levels.
- After returning, students launch right into the spring semester; research documentation suffers because of a lack of time and commitment.

COURSE CHANGES

Between 2015 and 2016, I organized the pre-trip research into a list of primary, secondary, and tertiary resources to help students know what they must see/read with their limited time. I also refined the trip's itinerary,

- making breaks longer so students had more free time to explore and research their projects;
- eliminating tours, museums, and events that did not support our research; adding tours, museums, and events that suited our research better.
- On the most recent trip I required students to keep a daily writing journal. This was successful to varying degrees—some students were more diligent than others. I also gave students a series of photographic prompts as a scavenger hunt-like exercise to help them look, think, and observe.

STUDENT WORK

The group exhibition in February 2015 at the Art & Design Building was more successful than expected. We received widespread praise and recognition from students, faculty, and administrators within our school, and from the University. The students' individual projects (books, videos, and websites) have varied greatly in quality, completeness, and success.

REFLECTIONS

I am very happy with the success of my adjustments to the pre-trip research and to the trip's itinerary.

To further develop students' pre-trip research, I would like to plan and schedule a series of required screenings and guest lectures.

My biggest concern is with the final product. I think I need to express my expectations more clearly to students and develop a structure/schedule to keep them more accountable.

I would like to expand the number of students and address the diversity of the students' backgrounds.