



The Accidental Making of an Architect

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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 of 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, the 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 and very social confines of a hostel that our *Let's Go Europe* recommended. It had a Mexican cantina 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). At the end of that day we were chilling out at the hostel enjoying some green Cokes and it was there that we met up with a lovely girl from Argentina named Marianna — a university student on "summer" vacation. In the course of casual conversation, she admitted to us that she was frustrated with her parents' insistence that she pursue a career as a lawyer. She was studying art history and loved it; she knew there was no career in it

but didn't really want to become a lawyer. At least, that's what we gathered because her English was quite broken. (She sang beautifully in French, and was, of course, fluent in Spanish.)

When she asked us what she should 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, since 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 got 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 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 to make the trek to Villa Savoye. If you've ever gone to Villa Savoye 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



TOP: Villa Savoye with Marianna and Mike in the foreground.

BOTTOM: Interior/exterior space, Villa Savoye. PHOTOS: THE AUTHOR

Thumbnail: Anthony Provenzano in the Villa Savoye, Poissy, France. PHOTO: MICHAEL WOLF

Mike responded philosophically that we didn't saddle her with a fickle profession; rather, we'd freed her from the shackles that would inevitably have held her creativity down, had she become a lawyer.

to screw up. And neither Mike nor I was comfortable enough in French to really converse with a local, whereas Marianna was completely fluent in French. Since she had enjoyed Villa La Roche 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 nice enough to invite her along on our trek, we were a little selfish too, since we needed her help.

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 four-hour visit, we experienced the villa at times together and at times apart, did sketches and took photos. Basically, we took it all in.

The green Cokes tasted even better that night, as we decompressed with some more of the Mexican fare. Marianna, who at this point was prepared to see any building we 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 took her with me to another Corbusier house, which could only be photographed from the outside.

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

1996

I had graduated in 1995, and moved two or three more times since

exchanging addresses with Marianna. Aside from a postcard or two, shortly after the Paris trip, I had lost contact with her. So you can imagine my surprise when I received her postcard from Buenos Aires, 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 it was cool how that worked out.

2001

I was working at NORR architects and, since I'd last heard from Marianna, I'd changed mailing addresses at least three more times. So you can imagine my surprise — again — when I received an email at my work 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 from architecture school, where I met and married my husband Enrique. We have one child and an architectural practice together. Argentina's 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 anymore. In fact, seconds after reading that email, I had waves of guilt flood over me. I remember thinking that if I had just kept my f@#\$ing mouth shut in Paris, she would probably have listened to her parents and would be a lawyer

by now — in far 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 that he was also to blame for making Marianna susceptible to the market forces that architects deal with. Mike responded philosophically that we didn't saddle her with a fickle profession; rather, we'd freed her from the shackles that would inevitably have 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 and Enrique with links to all the provincial professional associations, along with a map (to illustrate the vastness of Canada), a synopsis of Canada's major cities and some advice on 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 never heard from her again. But I half expect to. I haven't even updated my mailing or email address with her, because I get the sense that she will find me. ■

Anthony Provenzano is a Toronto architect who is still wrestling with the fact that he will never be a professional hockey or soccer player.