



Adventures in Armenia – An Architecture Master Thesis Project with the United World College Dilijan

Before departure

The project's premise started with an opportunity to do an eight-week field study for an organisation called United World College, shorthand UWC, in Armenia. UWC is a movement of international schools for students aged 16-19 located across the world. Their motto is to make education a force that unites people, nations, and cultures for sustainability. In each school, students from very different social, economic, and geographic backgrounds live and learn together for two years. I myself graduated from UWC in Singapore, and in this project I was hosted by one of their schools, which is still in development, UWC in Dilijan, Armenia.

UWC Dilijan (UWCD) is the first international boarding school in Armenia, hosting 220 international students from 70 countries. Due to the influx from neighbouring regions, the UWCD is expanding its educational capacity with more teaching/learning spaces in the form of a Performing Arts Space (PAS) for music, dance and theatre. The thesis addressed the need to explore and develop the PAS' educational spaces to unite students, teachers, staff and members of Dilijan for sustainable development.

The UWCD campus is located in the valley of the 16th-century town of Dilijan, at a crossroad of Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. The region is culturally, politically and economically complex with a long history at the junction of the Persian, Byzantine, Ottoman, and Russian Empires. With little prior experience of Armenia and the region of Caucasus, much of my preparations were focused on researching the context and finding local contacts to visit once I arrived.

In terms of the UWC organisation, I have a general idea of the activities of the UWCD school and was excited to compare it to my experience in Singapore. From conversations with the Head of Advancement Office (one of my contact persons), I expected to partake as much as possible in the day-to-day activities of the school. The administration generously provided me with an office within the academic building to use as a base for the project's research. In addition, a local architecture firm was very helpful in planning walking tours and interviews to provide more insight into the local built environment before my departure.

The interconnected region of Armenia harbours a history of conflict and political instability. Recently, events escalated into horrific disputes in the Nagorno-Karabakh, resulting in a refugee-like situation. Therefore, it was vital to constantly surveil the political changes in border areas and maintain close communication with contact persons three months before departure. Caution was exercised by abiding by the travel restrictions and guidelines provided by the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In addition, Armenia is susceptible to natural disasters such as earthquakes. Therefore, the local evacuation procedure in Dilijan (provided by UWC) was being followed, and a list of emergency contacts was regularly updated.

Upon arrival

In the timeframe of the thesis project, the departure to Armenia was two weeks after the official start in mid-January 2024. One of my contact persons had provided info about a taxi service which helped me to travel from the airport to the school campus. Accommodation was arranged with Airbnb near the housing of faculty members outside of campus. A warm welcome was hosted by UWC's chief operations officers, who helped me with administration and settling into the school's digital system. A few days after arrival, I introduced myself to the educational community in a weekly assembly. During the total stay of 8 weeks, I spent much time with the administrative and student body by sharing meals, hosting interviews, sitting in on lessons, etc.



UWCD Academic Building

Financials

Accommodation and travel costs made up the largest part of the budget, as expected in the preliminary budget proposition. However, living costs such as consumables and day-to-day travel expenses were much less, leading to the possibility of exploring neighbouring areas further. I was also generously able to travel along with trips to sites/destinations already organised by the school. The remaining travel grant was donated to the future efforts of the school's expansion.

Accommodation

The entire field study accommodation occurred in an Airbnb studio apartment between the UWCD campus and Dilijan's town centre. It was beneficial for the research to stay outside campus to get a more local experience of the living conditions. A more extended stay can significantly reduce the cost per night through the Airbnb platform.

Project

I believe that the societies of tomorrow are shaped by the skills and knowledge acquired today. Education is a human right for all that transforms lives when students grow as individuals, members of a community and world-changing global citizens. With a young campus still in development, UWC Dilijan in Armenia became the thesis research's primary case study and host. The exploration of the thesis lies in expanding the public space of the existing school campus to interact with the local community through the universal language of live performance (music, dance, and theatre). Through interviews, sketching and exploring the school's local context and surrounding vernacular environment, the village typology of a "hamlet" recurred as traces. Interpreting the elements of the vernacular became a way to anchor the programme, composition and materiality to the local context of Dilijan, shaping a space of coexistence.

Both the educational community and external organisations, such as local architecture firms, played key roles in understanding the unique qualities of the context. I always felt very welcome to ask questions, and I was often met with curiosity and a will to go above and beyond when I asked for help! The results will be shared digitally with all involved stakeholders, who were kind enough to share their time and knowledge.

Country

Initially, I felt overwhelmed yet excited by the unfamiliarity of being in a new country, mainly due to my lack of a reference frame. It took some time to adjust and recognise the unique qualities that define Dilijan and Armenia. The country is still developing, which brought a different way of living, particularly in Dilijan. The winter season highlighted specific challenges, such as heating and access to fresh water. However, over time, I grew to appreciate the beautiful surroundings of the Lesser Caucasus mountains, the rural charm of Dilijan spread along the River Aghstev with its hidden gems, the minimalist lifestyle combined with a warm attitude towards neighbours, and the striking contrast with the monumental public buildings from the Soviet era. I learned much about vernacular approaches, Armenia's cultural heritage, and the importance of interpreting them in today's built environment.



Photos from Yerevan (capital) and Dilijan



Lesser Caucasus Mountains

Leisure and social activities

At the UWC school, the boarding aspect meant that living and learning occurred in parallel on campus. This arrangement centred much of the activities and daily life around the school spaces, where students, teachers, and administrative staff spent time together. My aim was to integrate into the academic life as much as possible to understand how the campus was utilised. For example, everyone participated in collective meals three times a day in the canteen, engaged in sports activities after school, and participated in social services with local students. Additionally, UWCD has an impressive network with local and national organisations, which I was able to engage with during the field study.



Student Performance “Regional Evening”

Sustainability

The proposal for further integrating the PAC with Dilijan's context aligns with Goal 11 Sustainable Cities and Communities "make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable". The improvement of educational spaces is further related to Goal 4, Quality Education, and Goal 16 Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions, as part of UWC's mission. The targets below are further interconnected to the thesis:

<p>Target 11.3 - “capacity for participatory, integrated and sustainable human settlement planning and management”</p>	<p>Target 4.7 - “ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development”</p>	<p>Target 16.a - “strengthen relevant national institutions...in particular in developing countries”</p>
--	---	--



Local School in Bjni Village

Other recommendations and observations

United World College is an amazing organisation to work with if social sustainability and education are an area of interest! Developing an understanding of each other has been at the heart of the movement ever since its first school was founded in 1962. UWC's educational curriculum extends beyond students' academic advancement to explore what connects us as individuals to foster agents of peace. The 18 schools and colleges of UWC are set on four continents worldwide, each with a distinct identity influenced by its host country. This creates many exciting opportunities when combined with the KTH and Field Studies travel grant!