

Sustainable Structures

What Allison Conley learned from Parisian architecture

This article was published in Abroad View magazine spring 2009

by Samantha Leal



Allison Conley, a senior studying interior architecture at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, decided it was important to learn different ways to be green in building design. “People always say that we’re running out of resources, but we can conserve what we have if we just practice smart designing and planning,” she says. “It’s important to keep sustainability in mind in order to move forward.”

Sustainability is meeting the needs of the present without compromising the needs of future generations. This is exactly the topic that Conley proposed to research while studying abroad at College l’Ecole Speciale d’Architecture in Paris through [Middlebury College](#) in spring 2008. She’d heard about Middlebury’s new [Sustainability in Study Abroad Grants](#), which award Middlebury study abroad students up to \$500 to research environmental topics. She submitted a proposal, and the possibility of receiving a grant furthered her interest in the subject.

“As someone who’s going to build buildings someday, it’s important to try and reduce the energy consumption and learn more about sustainability and sustainable materials and building systems,” she says.

Because of her love for French culture and language, Conley focused her efforts on France and its architecture. Her question, “How does France emphasize sustainability in its modern architectural design?” led her to Paris. “[The city has] a huge movement in modern architecture and [its] actually doing a lot of sustainable architecture, even though [this] wasn’t exactly focused on in [l’Ecole Speciale d’Architecture],” she says.

In the beginning of her semester abroad, however, it was difficult to find information on green architecture. She says there was little written information and only a few books published on sustainable design in connection with French architecture. Conley instead turned to architecture libraries and the Internet to do further research.

“There seems to be a lot more published on other European countries’ [sustainable architecture whereas] France seemed to be behind. I thought I wouldn’t get very far,” Conley admits. “But then I learned about HQE.”

Haute Qualité Environnementale (translated as high environmental quality) is a French standard for green building based on specific principals that a building must adhere to from design to completion in order to become HQE certified. It supports sustainable architecture that has a greater care for the external impacts on the environment. The practice focuses on the building's ability to improve environmental quality and reduce the negative health-related consequences of traditional building practices. It is not a regulation but a voluntary approach for those who want to take environmental quality into account in their building projects. In the United States, LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) is the equivalent to HQE in terms of a green building regulation. LEED, which is also a voluntary program, provides standards and regulations for sustainable U.S. construction.

“I started looking up buildings and architects around Paris that had or had used this [standard],” Conley says. She researched well known buildings she knew had been erected recently. She would identify the architect and see what his or her position on sustainability was and “go from there.”

Talking to architects and looking at buildings, Conley began to learn about design strategy and the overall goals of these sustainable designs. She also attended a sustainable design exhibition, which further enhanced her knowledge of what Paris is doing with its modern buildings. The city is putting systems in place to reduce energy consumption and gas emissions and making buildings environmentally friendly in essence, such as putting wind turbines on top of roofs to create energy for the building and reducing CO2 emissions. Talking to different professionals and workers helped Conley get a better feel for sustainability and how people are doing it now, she says.

During her research for the sustainability grant, Conley's project expanded beyond something strictly visual into several copies of a short book, written in both English and French (click [here](#) to view the book). Conley says she believes that as more environmental regulations and actions are implemented in France, sustainability will become a part of building in general, and that is something she believes should be taking place. “I think sustainability should be a regular practice for architects and others involved in construction as well as city planning to make energy consumption a daily practice around the globe,” she says.

How much of an emphasis does France put on sustainability in modern architecture?



Comment l'architecture contemporaine française met en valeur le développement durable ?

Conley also scoffs at the ideas that being green is trendy and that sustainable architecture is unnecessary. “It's drastic the way you can change gas emissions and energy consumption and all kinds of other issues through sustainable practices in designing,” she says. “It's becoming more popular, but it's more than a trend, and hopefully it will continue so that future generations can live better.”

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