Research Abroad Reflection: Antigua, Guatemala

My research experience in Antigua, Guatemala, provided me with a valuable opportunity to explore a different cultural environment, develop my academic interests, and gain a better understanding of conducting research internationally. As an Urban Planning and Design student, I was interested in learning about Antigua's history, planning, architecture, and preservation efforts. Although my experience did not go exactly as I had originally planned, I gained new perspectives on the research process and the importance of flexibility and adapting to unexpected situations.

Before traveling to Guatemala, I had planned to conduct research examining the different reconstruction phases of San Agustin, which is a historic religious site in Antigua. My research focused on how the site's architecture changed over time in response to earthquakes and preservation efforts. Preparing for this project required me to consider the historical significance of the site, develop research questions, and think about how I could use observations to understand the relationship between architecture, history, and urban development. I was excited to apply research methods I had learned in the classroom to a real-world setting. I also looked forward to experiencing a city with a cultural and architectural history different from that of the United States.

One of the most significant aspects of my experience was learning that research does not always go according to plan. Although I had prepared to pursue research about San Agustin, my professor ultimately decided that our time would be better spent assisting with her other research project. I couldn't complete the research I had planned. While this was disappointing, it taught me that academic research can be unpredictable at times. I learned that researchers should be adaptable and willing to adjust to the unexpected. Even though the research wasn't focused on my own project, I still learned the importance of teamwork and flexibility in academic settings.

Despite the change in research plans, I had an overall positive experience in Antigua. I was able to examine and experience a new city for the first time. I learned a lot by observing urban development and historic preservation. Antigua's historic architecture, public spaces, and urban layout demonstrated how a city's cultural identity can be seen in its built environment. I appreciated the opportunity to experience these places in person instead of relying on photographs, maps, or academic papers. Observing the city in person helped build my understanding of urban planning and how design impacts physical spaces.

Another important lesson I learned was the value of experiencing the environment where research takes place. Conducting research abroad requires an awareness of local context and an understanding that approaches in one country may not always translate directly to another. My experience in Guatemala encouraged me to think more critically about the assumptions researchers bring into unfamiliar environments. It also reminded me of the importance of approaching research with curiosity, respect, and the willingness to learn. I began to appreciate understanding Guatemala's history in relation to its cultural identity.

The experience also influenced how I think about my future academic and professional goals. As someone interested in pursuing graduate studies in environmental planning, I understand that research often involves changing circumstances, collaboration across fields, and the ability to approach problems from different perspectives. Although I did not complete my

intended research project, I gained valuable insight into navigating the realities of research outside of the classroom. I also developed a greater appreciation for international research opportunities and the ways they can challenge current ways of thinking.

Overall, my experience was personally and academically meaningful. While the change in research expectations was an unexpected challenge, it strengthened my understanding of adaptability, collaboration, and cultural awareness. The opportunity to experience Antigua in person expanded my perspective on architecture, historic preservation, and urban planning. Most importantly, I learned that the value of conducting research abroad is not always determined by whether a project is completed according to plan. The knowledge, experience, and perspectives gained throughout the process are equally as important and valuable. My time in Guatemala reinforced my research interest and encouraged me to approach future opportunities with flexibility and an open mind.