

Pasta, piazzas and the Pantheon: A Minnesota architect reflects on his working years abroad.

By Dale Mullinger

The opportunity to work and study abroad always has been alluring to architects, and no city captures the heart and soul of an architect like Rome. There's nothing that compares with an evening stroll past the classics—especially after a hearty dinner of spaghetti alla carbonara.

And there on the city's medieval streets you walk enthralled like the countless artists and architects before you who traveled to Rome to build their own visual vocabularies in the presence of the finest works in Western culture. For an architect all roads lead to Rome.

The same can be said for students in the University of Minnesota's study-abroad program. Once in Rome all *stradas* lead up the 142 steps of the Piazza de Spagna. Then you turn to the right, down Via Gregoriana to *numero dodici*. Once past the caretaker, go up the antique elevator to the office of Spero Daltas Architects. You might be waylaid by the pictures on the walls of schools in Uganda, palaces in Persia or the geometric plan of a city in the shifting sands of the Arabian desert. However, the ultimate destination is the firm's rooftop, or as the Italians would call it, La Terrazza. On the terrace high above Rome, an ancient city spreads before you. Domes sprout everywhere: The low vault of the Pantheon, the twin domes of Piazza de Popolo, the spiral of San Ivo or the majesty of St. Peter's all lie before your feasting eyes. It's at this point you decide to wire home, have Mom sell the cross-country skis and forward your portfolio and all available money to Rome. You descend the stairs, introduce yourself to Spero Daltas and



A summer 1989 photo of architecture professor Dale Mullinger (far right, front row) and U of M foreign-study students on Spero Daltas's terrace overlooking Rome.

ask how soon you can start to draw.

As one of Professor John Sterling Myers' students on the first Minnesota foreign-study program in Rome in the late '60s, I had been up to the Daltas terrace and seen the evocative Arabic palaces on his wall. Later, in 1970, I returned to Rome to introduce this classic city to my wife and infant daughter. I had brought my portfolio with me, but work at Daltas's office was slow. By the mid-1970s we were back in Minneapolis, die-hard vagabonds searching for our next venture. I was hoping to join Professor Myers in Nigeria, while my wife was pushing for a less-exotic stint in Norway. When Daltas called with an opportunity to work in Rome, we happily compromised.

Within two-and-a-half weeks after the phone call, we sold the car, rented the house and with our two kids boarded a TWA flight bound for Rome. There we joined several colleagues from my student Rome days, they too with families in tow. The word had flashed across America that Minnesota alumnus Spero Daltas had a big project and was in search of a group of hard workers who

loved to draw. Drawing, of course, was what our Minnesota education had been all about.

Daltas is an architect with a special appreciation for drawing. His desks are always stacked with them: sketches, plans, details, engineering drawings or examples of Alvar Aalto's drawings. Drawing was the medium by which this Greek immigrant's son had lifted himself out of St. Paul, first to the University of Minnesota, where he graduated in 1943. After completing his graduate studies at Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1948, he was awarded the Prix de Rome and a Fulbright fellowship. In but a few short years he was studying St. Paul's Outside the Walls, instead of the St. Paul Cathedral. It's no surprise that he soon was invited to join the office of Eero Saarinen.

During his tenure on the Prix de Rome, he had the opportunity to experience Rome long enough to know that it was a city to which he would return. Ironically, his birth at the convergence of streets in ~~Minneapolis's~~ *St. Paul's*

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Seven Corners prefigured his move to the many roads that converge at the seven hills of Rome. Gazing out of his studio windows at the American Academy high up on the Gianiculum Hill, he could survey the city and familiarize

took up residency in Rome. Dewey Thorbeck, Milo Thompson, John Cunningham, Austrus Vitols and Bill Pedersen all won the Prix de Rome or Rotch prizes. During their sojourns in Rome they contacted Daltas, some working for him in short stints. In 1966 the University of Minnesota started its foreign-study program in Rome and the

days and far too many weekends to coordinate the many decisions involved in such a major undertaking. Daltas put his personal imprint on all concerns from master plans to doorknobs to assure a common theme for this Arabic architecture. We eagerly absorbed his knowledge gleaned from many years in Persia and his world travels in search of the classics.

By the end of the project the office had swelled to 110 talented specialists from around the world. We executed more than 16,000 detailed drawings to convey the information necessary to erect more than 30 million square feet of building.

But despite the long hours, designing in Rome had its special pleasures. We could pace pedestrian distances out in the city and compare them to our hypotheses for Saudi Arabia. We could stroll into San Carlo alla Quattro Fontana and ponder the domes we were considering for mosques. The pages of the history book of Western architecture opened anew around every corner of those ancient streets in Rome.

Gradually the hard work gave way to a more Roman way of life. Daltas had introduced us to the meaning of lunch, and we were soon needing a bump of espresso to wake us up for productive afternoons. We spent weekends on sojourns to hill towns and the summer months on the beach in a white-washed fishing village.

Minnesota and Italian culture merged as office humor included Lena and Ole jokes. We ate pasta discussing memories of Mayslak's roast beef, and the latest Gopher and Viking scores mixed with weekend soccer results between Rome and Milan. Our Roman apartments became the European oasis for many Minnesota families and friends: Lutheran parents visiting their children stopped to see the Pope.

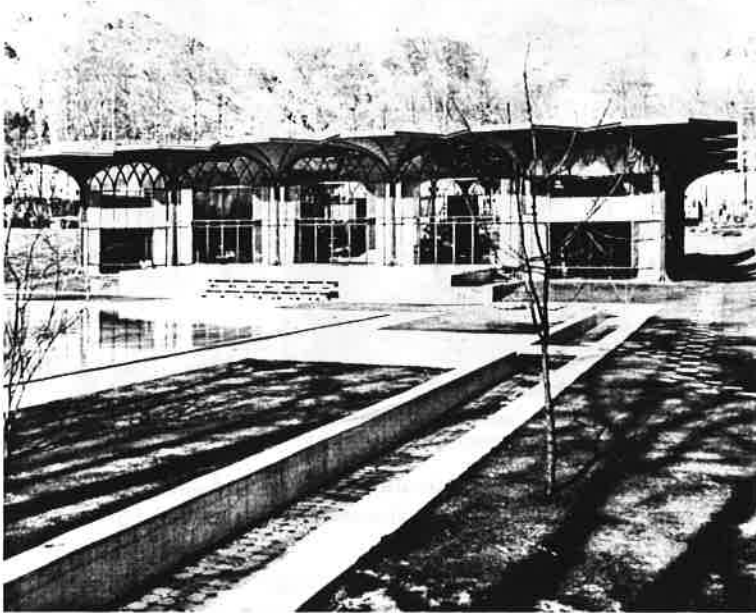
But even large projects come to an end and deep roots call you back to your home turf. Gradually my Minnesota colleagues returned to Minneapolis or other American cities, capitalizing on their experiences in Rome.

Daltas retained his design preeminence by winning the Milwaukee Lakefront Competition and finishing a finalist in the Australian Capitol Competition at Canberra. The firm has slowly returned to its original size and main-

tains offices in Cambridge and Rome.

The experience of working abroad, and in particular Rome, has given our group a unique reflection on itself, our home base and our profession. Reflection has been enhanced by an understanding of time, an appreciation for cultural values and knowing a place of true meaning. The special bonding of intimate friendships has bolstered self-reliance and personal initiative. Rome, much like our professional degrees from the University of Minnesota, marked a special passage into another realm of knowing.

I returned this spring with another group of young Minnesota recruits, students in the U of M's architecture department. I gathered them together, and we ascended the Spanish Steps, went down Via Gregoriana and up the antique elevator. As I stood with them on the Daltas terrace and again looked west into the sunset beyond St. Peter's, I could see Lake Wobegon on the horizon. I was convinced it was no mirage. Dale Mulfinger is a principal of Mulfinger & Susanka and teaches at the University of Minnesota College of Architecture and Landscape Architecture.



Daltas's 1962 design for the palace of Princess Fatemeh in Teheran, Iran.

himself with its special places. Years later when relocating his young firm from Teheran to Rome it would be on the slope of the Pincio that he would establish his office. Just a few hundred feet from the top of the Spanish Steps he found an apartment, a studio, and best of all, a terrace, each with views over the city looking west to St. Peter's.

Daltas had not forgotten his roots in Minnesota. Some of his University of Minnesota colleagues, with whom he studied in Boston and worked at Saarinen's office, were now back in the Twin Cities. Leonard Parker was building his own firm in Minneapolis, while the Rafferty brothers were keeping St. Paul on the design map by placing second on every major competition in America.

And Minnesota graduates regularly

Daltas office became a mainstay on the itinerary of traveling young architects.

My tenure with the Daltas office began with the rare opportunity to design a city—buildings and all—in Saudi Arabia. I walked into a project that was the size of the city of Red Wing, and by the time I left two years later it had grown to a project the size of Rochester, complete with hospitals. All this was fueled by a client with enough petrodollars to build it.

But it was no Roman holiday. The design of a multibillion-dollar King Khalid Military City, along with five major banks for the Saudi Arabian Monetary Agency, taxed the intellectual and technical capabilities of our midwestern minds. The Protestant work ethic was in full swing as we spent long