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ScanDesign Evaluation Essay

March 2010

I studied Landscape Architecture at the University of Copenhagen, LIFE, Fall Semester 2009-2010. My course work at LIFE fulfilled my final credit requirements for my master degree in Public Administration from the Evans School of Public Affairs at the University of Washington. In addition, my course work provided me with a broadened framework of urban sustainability theory. Funding from the Scan Design Foundation made this semester abroad possible.

I was culturally prepared for my time in Copenhagen. I studied Danish 101 Spring quarter 2009, continued my Danish studies in the month of August at the University of Copenhagen, and took part in Copenhagen Classroom. As a result I felt comfortable with the culture and language from the beginning of my stay.

My previous experiences living in Germany as a student and professional prepared me for the cultural barriers one might expect living abroad. Since my time as a high school exchange student in Hamburg, Germany, it has been clear to me that it is impossible to fully understand or appreciate a culture without understanding the language of that culture. Living in Copenhagen proved to be no exception. While the city is essentially bi-lingual (Danish/English) Danish culture is not easily accessible in English. I quickly learned that English is a tool used to communicate professionally, to collaborate with other cultures, and to access international media. But it is not a language used to express key elements of Danish culture.

While I took great effort to continue my Danish studies and speak Danish in shops and social situations, I none the less communicated in English on a daily basis. My courses at the University of Copenhagen were taught in English. I used English at my internship at Gehl Architects and I used English to communicate with non-Danish students and friends.

Taking courses at LIFE in English gave me an advantage over the other masters-level students. I was the only American and native English speaker in my courses. My Dutch professors spoke perfect English and my classmates imperfectly articulated their points never resorting to Danish, Swedish, or Icelandic. Collaborating in a multi-cultural learning environment was rewarding. Classes at LIFE were not as structured in terms of lecture time but were highly dependent upon independent study. The exams at LIFE were much more challenging than any exam I have ever taken at UW.

My housing situation in Copenhagen was ideal! I shared a small flat in central Copenhagen with two other international students from LIFE. My room was super tiny but super cozy and I absolutely loved having a kitchen in which to entertain. I

had 10 grocery stores and markets within a 5-minute walking distance of my flat not to mention two yoga studios, a doctor's office, bank, post office, bakery, and theater. The lakes were two blocks away and I traveled everywhere by bike or on foot. Public transit was too expensive.

Taking Danish courses, riding my bike, and joining a yoga studio helped me integrate into Danish culture. I met many of my Danish friends at parties on bikes and I practiced my Danish in bars and at yoga. I also spent many Sundays with a Danish family that adopted me, inviting me over for dinner and family parties on a regular basis. Most international students in Copenhagen had a difficult time meeting Danish people and learning the language. I was determined to integrate though, because so many people told me that I wasn't going to make Danish friends and that I wasn't going to learn Danish. I guess that my stubborn approach eventually worked out.

Copenhagen is expensive but I quickly learned not to eat or drink out. My kitchen was a key element in my social life. I threw dinner parties at home and invited friends over for drinks on a consistent basis. I spent a lot of money on food and yoga and saved in areas like transportation, clothing, and entertainment. I embraced living simply and having fewer choices.

I've never felt safer in public than when living in Copenhagen. As a woman in the US I often fear walking alone at night and feel the need to plan my night around other people's plans just so I won't have to take the bus alone. But in Copenhagen I found a new sense of independence and well-being. I discovered that I could walk around or ride my bike alone at night without any fear. I discovered that Denmark is not in the midst of a baby boom, as it might appear with the large numbers of mothers and babies in strollers, but that Danish women just feel safe walking around outside with their children. I realized how important it is to prioritize people over cars when planning a city. And I savored the immense satisfaction of being a cyclist and pedestrian in a city that honors the rights of non-motorized traffic. It has honestly been shocking and unnerving for me to return to a city that talks a lot about its bicycle and pedestrian friendly infrastructure but in all reality allocates the majority of its public space to cars. In this sense I really miss Copenhagen.

Marianne Stølen was a fabulous facilitator of the Scan Design program and I am indebted to her for her hospitality and friendship. My time in Copenhagen would not have been the same without the many coffee dates, long walks, and rowing adventures instigated by Marianne.

Studying and living in Copenhagen was a life changing experience and I wish more students had the same opportunity.