

# University of Washington

## Scan Design Fellowship Program Evaluation

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For a student interested in design and the built environment, Copenhagen is an excellent place to study for two primary reasons. The first reason is the city itself. Copenhagen is an example of the best and worst of urban planning, sustainability at an urban scale and innovative transportation planning. The second is less immediately tangible. Danish culture supports art and design in a way that the US does not, and for that reason it has been and continues to be an incubator for innovation and creative endeavors. Collaboration between architects, artists, musicians and researchers is frequent (especially at the Academy where the music and film schools are housed directly across the street), and the city's proximity to other European cities and their respective art and design scenes/institutions makes cross-pollination easy. Currently, Copenhagen is home to a number of exceptional design firms doing very exciting work, and the success of those firms can be partially attributed to the way that design is taught at the Royal Danish Academy. I chose to study at the Academy because of its location, its excellent reputation, the innovative research being undertaken, and the way that design is taught there.

### Arrival

Housing can be somewhat difficult to find in Copenhagen but the Royal Academy assists exchange students in finding housing before they arrive. Most of the arrangements offered through the school are apartments with rooms for rent. In these situations the landlord is often also living in the apartment. Some of my fellow exchange students had good experiences with the school arranged housing and others did not. I was lucky enough to be in contact with a former UW student who had been living in a flat in Copenhagen and was leaving. For future students I would suggest contacting former students and finding out which living situations were acceptable and contacting those landlords. Dorms are also generally good in Copenhagen, and students apply to them independently. I had several friends who lived in dorms and they had positive experiences.

When I arrived at the Royal Academy, I participated in a weeklong orientation that gave a general overview of the school and city, and provided an opportunity to meet other students. I had been to Copenhagen once before with the Copenhagen Classroom, so in many ways I was much more prepared than many of my fellow exchange students. When I arrived in Copenhagen I already had a rudimentary grasp of the language (enough for me to read signs and menus, order coffee and understand when the train was delayed) and I was able to navigate the city by

metro and by bike. Nevertheless this week was incredibly helpful in terms of getting settled. It covered issues of obtaining CPR cards (social security cards which allow you receive health care, a library card, and receive a number of other services), buying food (groceries are expensive) and other details of day-to-day living in Denmark.

### Academics

At the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Art- School of Architecture, in Department 3, education is organized around the design studio, where the act of designing is learned and practiced. Edification is primarily based on dialogue between the student and the professor, but it also happens between students through critique, debate and collaboration. Studios at the Royal Academy last for the entire academic year, during which a singular theme is explored from different perspectives and scales. Theoretical and practical learning is internalized within the studio as professors learn the strengths and weaknesses of their students and arrange workshops to address these. This means that a self-motivated student who knows what they want to study will be able to dig deep into the subject of choice. A studio project undertaken at the academy has the potential to be much more complete and in-depth than a studio in the UW architecture program due to the lack of external requirements and the length of the semester, which varies but is approximately 5 months long.

Although I chose to study at the academy for the above reasons, it was still very difficult for me to transition from a rigorously structured system with significant oversight, to one where I was the primary driver of my education. At times I felt like I was not receiving enough input (Studio professors meet with students once, maybe twice per week) and I was not able to step away from my studio project for perspective in the way that having other classes to juggle allows. It took most of fall semester to become comfortable with the school and the pedagogy, and aware of the opportunities available to me. I applied to the school for a second semester because I felt that one semester was far too short to fully reap the benefits of this type of education. My second semester was fruitful in many ways- I was able to gain momentum with my studies and I also did a part time internship at a small architecture firm in the city. However I still missed the external input that supplementary classes and professors provide outside of the studio, and I felt disconnected from the UW architecture program and faculty. Royal Academy allowed me to dig in to subjects that I found compelling, refine ideas about how I would like to participate in the field of architecture, and more fully understand my design process. However, because my studies were so self-driven, I always felt that I was potentially missing something.

Grading of the studio project is done on a scale of 1-12, 12 being the highest grade and 1 being the lowest. The studio professor also writes an evaluation of the student and design

project. All other workshops and classes are generally pass/fail although some are graded on the same scale as the studio.

The Academy recently launched two English-speaking masters programs (in Department 2 and 11) open to international and Danish students. Exchange students are not allowed to enter these departments, and as a result there is a concentration of exchange students in other departments. Department 3 was particularly saturated because our professors taught in English. In other departments, the teaching was primarily in Danish and not much effort was made to accommodate English-speaking exchange students. In 2009/2010 the Masters program in Department 3 was composed of approximately 20 exchange students and 5 Danish students. This was unfortunate in some ways because I did not have as much exposure to the Danish culture and language that I may otherwise have had, however I was able to meet architecture students from all over the world.

In terms of facilities, the Academy is very well equipped. The library is one of the best design libraries I have ever encountered. It not only has an extensive collection of design-related books, but it also has a significant periodical section and the librarians are extremely helpful. The wood and metal shops are also very nice, although access to these shops is limited due to a system where departments are able to rent out these facilities for weeks at a time. Access to the laser cutter is particularly limited due to the fact that there is only one large industrial machine rather than many smaller and less powerful machines (like the machines we have at UW). The system for reserving the laser cutter requires that the student sign up a week in advance for one of the very limited time slots. As a result, it is difficult to make a model with the laser cutter without significant planning in advance. There is also a charge for use of the laser cutter. The school also has a small materials shop and copy center. Though the materials shop is quite expensive, it has a good selection of materials for modeling, paper, pens and pencils. The academy does not own plotters, so the copy center is the closest and easiest place to plot for a presentation. However, it is extremely expensive. There is one place in Amager that is reportedly less expensive and it is worth researching.

The computer labs at the Academy are decent, although somewhat slow. It is preferable to bring a laptop. The cafeteria is actually quite good, and food is also available at the music and film schools across the street.

The school is located on Holmen, an island directly across the harbor from downtown Copenhagen. The campus is composed of old military buildings, most of which look directly out onto the harbor. Christianshavn is the closest neighborhood and metro stop, although it takes about 10 minutes to walk there from school. There are many small shops and cafes in the area, and some of the oldest buildings in the city are there. The Academy itself seems somewhat isolated, however on bike or by bus it is very easy to get to town.

## Health and Safety

I was fortunate enough not to have any health concerns that required a visit to the doctor while I was in Copenhagen. However, with my student visa and CPR card I was assigned a doctor in my area and I would have been able to visit them for free if any medical issues arose.

During the fall semester I lived in the neighborhood of Nørrebro and during the spring I moved into an apartment in Vesterbo. In recent years Nørrebro (a very culturally diverse and vibrant neighborhood) has been the site of gang related violence and during the fall there were several shooting incidents reported in the area. This violence was specific and directed, and in general I did not feel unsafe walking at night there. Copenhagen is an extremely safe city. The density of the urban fabric means that there are always people in apartments, bars and cafes keeping watch over the street. I felt the same way in Vesterbro, although I avoided walking at night through the “red light district” near the train station. I did not walk very much in general because I traveled primarily by bike.

## Culture

Integration into the Danish culture was challenging because I was surrounded by international students at the Academy. However the fact that I had taken some Danish before I began my semester was critical to the integration that I was able to achieve. Although it is easy to converse in English with a Dane when you are one-on-one, in a larger social setting the default language is almost always Danish, and in order to follow what is happening, an understanding of Danish is important. Copenhagen is an international city, and as such it has an international cultural persona that speaks English. It is possible to go to Copenhagen and understand it on purely this outer level. By speaking English, the Danes present their public, English speaking selves to the world. However, the Danish culture is much more rich and multi-faceted than this outer persona reveals, and it is impossible to understand this without an understanding of the Danish language. I was also lucky enough to have a few very close Danish friends (former Scan Design exchange students from Denmark to UW) who introduced me to their friends and invited me to do things (dinner parties, music, kick-ball tournaments) and go places that I wouldn't have otherwise gone. The Danes are sometimes difficult to get to know, perhaps because they do not move around the country as much as Americans, and their friend groups last from childhood through adulthood. When a new person attempts to come a social group like this, particularly a person with a limited amount of time in Denmark, it can be difficult to break into that dynamic. However, knowledge of Danish and stubborn persistence helps.

In general, the Danes are quite forward and blunt, which for an American can seem rude. This is just a cultural difference that I had to accept at the beginning of my time in Denmark.

## Exchange/Scan Design Fellowship Administration

The Scan Design administration (Particularly Anni Fuller) did an excellent job of guiding me and fellow Scan Design recipients through the massive amounts of paperwork and logistics required to enroll in the host institution, find housing, concurrently enroll at UW, apply for additional financial aid etc. I do not think I could have organized my studies abroad without significant help from her. Once in Denmark, it was wonderful to have Marianne Stoelen to organize events and provide support. I did not have as much interaction with the administration at the Academy but the little interaction I did have with them was good. I did not have any problems on that front.

## Program/Student Type

The ideal student for this program is someone who is very self motivated and driven, and probably someone who has been through at least 2 years of the Masters of Architecture program at UW or an equivalent undergraduate experience. It can be a very fruitful experience if the student can learn to tap into the resources that exist at the school and seek out opportunities when they arise.

I feel very lucky to have spent the last year studying in Denmark and I will hopefully go back in the future in a professional context. As with any long-term abroad experience, there were difficult moments, but overall my experience was very positive. I was able to refine my interests and goals within the field of architecture and dig into projects and subjects that I will continue to work on in the future. Working within a different academic culture was very liberating, and I was able to explore ideas that I had not felt free to explore at UW. My experience at the Royal Academy will undoubtedly influence the direction of my future studies and career, and without the support of Scan Design that experience would not have been possible.