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Third year

As an urban planning student with an interest in transportation, Denmark, and especially Copenhagen, appealed to me as a place to study abroad. They have a reputation for having a balanced and environmentally-friendly transportation system. Denmark also does a good job of creating compact development. I wanted to see this up close and to study it. The Royal Danish Academy appealed to me because of their emphasis on graphics and design. These are not skills I'd yet developed, so I thought it was a good opportunity to take myself out of my comfort zone and learn some skills that would be useful later in my career.

Many of the international students at my school had trouble finding housing in the right location and price range. Luckily for me I was able to connect with a Danish student who was planning to study abroad that semester, and sublet her apartment. This was in a kollegium, or graduate student dorm. I recommend that single students look at these kollegia, and consider them as a housing option. It was a great way to meet people while still having the privacy of one's own room and bathroom. Also, start the apartment hunt early.

The Royal Danish Academy ('Karch' for short) did a good job of orienting us to the institution and the city. They assigned a few continuing masters students to give us presentations about how to get around, where to shop, and other practical information like that. We also went out for food and beers a few times. I don't remember hearing a lot about the institution during those sessions, but at Karch that's more the responsibility of your home department.

The instruction at Department 1 ('Architecture, City, and Landscape'), where I studied, was studio-based. The studio ran for most of the term, interrupted occasionally by workshops. These were topics like Nordic architecture and an intro to GIS. The studio itself was hands-off. As a visiting masters student, the school put me in with the 4th year students (it's a 5 year architecture program), and students at that point are expected to have all the necessary skills to develop a site plan. So as an urban planning student with few design skills, I was behind. There were not a lot of resources available to help me catch up. There was an IT tutor who directed me to some online teaching sites to help me learn Photoshop and Illustrator, but most of my learning was self-directed. Each of us had a tutor come and evaluate our work once a week for 45 minutes. These were practitioners with busy schedules, so they did not keep office hours and usually could not come in other times if you had additional questions. The lack of instruction led me to feel sometimes like I was simply renting a desk. I also found it difficult to get attention from the administrators when I needed a form, for example. It took me over five weeks and repeated visits, calls, and emails to the department secretary to get a translation of the semester syllabus (they have a translator on staff).

On the bright side, the other students were extremely talented, and generous with their time. There were many occasions when they would take time out from their project to come over to my desk and answer a question I had or give me advice based on what they were seeing. I was amazed and inspired by the work product in my department and others. It's clear that Karch attracts top flight talent. And in the end, I achieved what I'd set out to achieve: a handle on the basics of urban design and an introduction to site planning and architecture.

In regards to the IT infrastructure at the school, I recommend that students bring a fast laptop loaded with the Adobe Creative Suite at a minimum. Karch can provide a student version of ArcGIS. The computer labs were fine, but you'll want to be able to work in the studio with the other students in your department.

While I'm glad that I had the opportunity to study at Karch, I would encourage urban planning students to think and plan carefully before applying to an architecture school. I wish I had taken a few design courses before attending so that I was more prepared for that type of learning environment. It is very different than urban planning, and the theoretical/analytical courses I'd taken at the UW did not come into play much over there. I would also be mentally prepared for more distant student-faculty relationships than we are accustomed to at the UW (at least in Department 1).

The Karch campus is in Holmen, which part of the island of Christianshavn in Copenhagen. It's a lovely campus, surrounded by water and boats. There is a grocery store a few minutes walk away. The downside is that it is not in the center city, so there aren't a lot of things to do or do right nearby.

Danish medical care is of course excellent. I had one occasion to see a doctor and it was quick, easy, and free (with a residence card). Safety was good, though once I was threatened in Norrebro for taking pictures. I since learned that parts of that neighborhood are a gang headquarters. Students should ask locals about these places and avoid them.

I was the only international student in my kollegium, so I had plenty of opportunities to interact with Danes. We had a lot in common, and shared many of the same cultural references. They were thoughtful in trying to speak in English around me, though there were many times when they would have trouble expressing themselves adequately and would switch back to Danish (which I do not speak). This was common in school as well. In fact I was generally surprised at how little English I saw and heard around Copenhagen. I was expecting something like the situation in Canada, where French is the second language. However nearly all the people I met could speak very good English when prompted, so it wasn't hard to get help when I needed it, like at the grocery store or on the Metro. The cultural differences were subtle. Strangers tended not to speak to each other on the street or on public transport, but my friends and acquaintances were very warm toward me. I noticed that there seemed to be a different standard of service at retail shops; long lines were common. I also observed that my Danish friends spent a lot of time planning elaborate parties and dinners. I recommend international students to chip in with that planning. These social events were some of the highlights of my trip.

The Scan|Design fellowship was a huge help in making this experience possible. In retrospect I don't know how I could have afforded it otherwise, living costs as they are in Copenhagen. In terms of managing one's money over there, I recommend applying for a CPR number immediately, and then using that number to open a Danish bank account. You can avoid a lot of withdrawal fees by transferring your dollars to a Danish account using a transfer service, then using the free bank account & check card. I used xe.com/fx and a Danske Banks 'netbank' account. I spent about \$450/mo in rent and utilities, plus maybe another \$600-\$800 for food, transportation (long term bike rental), and other expenses. This does not include trips I took. This is probably less than what most people would spend, since most students spent more on housing.

I was pleased with my interactions with Scan Design staff in Seattle. All of my interactions with them were pleasant and efficient. They seemed genuinely interested in helping me to have a good experience in Denmark. I also enjoyed meeting the board members at the recognition luncheon. If I had to make a recommendation, it would be that the Seattle staff make clear to applicants the relationship between themselves and the Danish schools. I was confused about that relationship for a while. I didn't have many interactions with IP&E before I left, other than handing over some paperwork, but that went well enough.

In summary, I encourage applicants to Karch to remember that this is an architecture school first and foremost. They will expect you to have the skills of an architecture student and to work with space and forms in a creative way. If that's what you're interested in doing, then Karch may be the right place for you. There are departments for every scale from urban design to furniture design. You will time and space to pursue your idea.

Despite the cautionary tone throughout this evaluation, I was thrilled to live and study in Denmark. I'm still marveling at all the wonderful times I had and how special it was to be there. I came out of it with an appreciation for a new culture, and a renewed appreciation for my own. I also gained a number of skills that will help me as I pursue my thesis and begin my job hunt.