IT University Travel Report

Host University: Parsons The New School of Design

Study Programme at IT University: Digital Design & Kommunikation MSc.

Exchange Agreement or Study Abroad: Self-arranged Study Abroad

Courses studied abroad:

- Bootcamp
- Thesis 1
- Writing & Research
- Design Capitalism & Social Movements
- Genigame (Collaboration Studio)

Your stay abroad

What was it like to study at Parsons The New School Of Design (including choice of courses, academic level, social life at campus)?

Simply put, Parsons is the best school I’ve attended (and I’ve attended a few). It employs world-renowned faculty with strong real-world experience, attracts motivated students from across the globe and is located in beautiful buildings across central Manhattan.

I was enrolled in the Design + Technology MFA program during my stay - a multidisciplinary program focused on art and design through enabling technologies. The program’s overall themes are physical computing, web, wearable technology, mobile, creative computing and games.

A semester at D+T is made up of required and elective classes with ample room for customization. Classes are generally small and typically run in a studio format of 10-15 students pr. professor/advisor. Some classes have a reading curriculum, but students are generally expected to define his or her own project(s) for the semester and let the project guide the research and readings.

Students on D+T are expected to build, prototype and program their ideas throughout the semester. I came to Parsons and D+T with a solid understanding of interaction and UX design and basic programming skills, and you can take specific programming electives to get the ball rolling. You are
expected to know your way around (or be willing to learn) basic Processing, Open Frameworks, Arduino, Javascript or C++. If you manage to attend D+T as a visiting student, I strongly recommend enrollng in the D+T Bootcamp program which is targeted at incoming incoming students, runs in August (before the actual semester starts) and covers the basics of web, design and code in a 3-week intensive lecture series. It’s well worth its cost in terms of both knowledge and as a social catalyst with the rest of the students.

Thesis 1 and Writing & Research were two inter-dependent classes and an obligatory part of the second year syllabus. Think of it as 50% of a traditional thesis semester at ITU where you define a design problem and work on solving it through research and prototypes. It felt similar to group semester projects at RUC or Aalborg University, except done individually. I was required to give a 10 minute presentation of my progress each week, and receive and give critique from and to the other students in the studio. Thesis 1 focused on making and Writing & Research focused on documenting that work in a formalized way.

The types of thesis projects in my thesis studio varied wildly and a quick sampling included interactive household objects for urban singles (http://mfadt.parsons.edu/2013/projects/one-with-one/), a brainwave-supported interactive novel (http://mfadt.parsons.edu/2013/projects/rob3115/), a VJ iPad application for music visualization (http://mfadt.parsons.edu/2013/projects/formulator/) and computer-supported body sensor devices (http://mfadt.parsons.edu/2013/projects/sensory-pathways-for-the-plastic-mind/). At Parsons the Thesis studio runs across two semesters, so I ended mine prematurely, but the studio and the work I did here ended up creating a strong foundation for my later thesis at ITU.

Genigame was an exclusively hands-on studio, and the goal of the class was to develop a game that taught middle schoolers about the mechanics of genetics. Working in groups, we had the chance to showcase our prototype - an interactive quiz game that involved AR codes on custom clothing accessories, a board game and 200 yellow and blue M&M’s - at the 2012 Maker Faire in Queens.

Design, Capitalism & Social Movements was a class that focused more on reading, in-class discussions and writing weekly response essays. Less practical, it was a welcome break in the production-heavy environment of D+T that gave room to reflect and talk with students from other design programs/traditions like Fashion, Architecture or Lighting Design.

Because Parsons is located in central Manhattan it doesn’t have a traditional campus life. The city is the campus, and you’ll equally bump into NYU students and New School students at the coffee shops, libraries and bars in the area. The social life at the D+T program itself was great, and I found everyone helpful, outgoing and friendly. The program is made up of 40% foreign students, so everyone is looking to make friends and explore the city.

The school has a great connection to the outside world and I had a chance to participate in several talks, workshops, exhibitions and game jams throughout the city that enhanced my experience and network during my stay.
What was your initial motivation for going abroad and did your stay meet your expectations?

My motivation for going abroad was two-fold: I wanted to live in New York City, and I wanted to study at a top-tier academic program. Both were met in full at my stay at Parsons.

The school is located bam-smack in central Manhattan, on 5th Avenue near the busy Union Square so the campus was the city. The school itself is one of the most renowned design schools in the world and attracts extremely talented students and faculty. It’s ambitious (without feeling overly competitive) and keeping up definitely proved to be a full-time job.

Please describe what you got out of your stay, both personally and academically, and how do you expect it to contribute to your further studies?

- On a general level, I was exposed to a more positive technical mindset than I’m used to at ITU and the focus on applied technology in the D+T program definitely enhanced my programming skills. Although I didn’t have time to dive into too much new technology, I did manage to greatly improve my Processing and web skills over the course of the semester.

- I attended a great deal of academic events and talked with many influential designers and developers. Physically being in NYC made it so much easier to simply strike up a conversation with your academic influencers and get into whatever scene that floats your boat.

- By attending Bootcamp I got a great intro to the other students in the program and was able to connect with many more people on a social level than if I had skipped it (seriously, attend Bootcamp!).

- On a personal level, my stay confirmed my presumption that I want to live and work in NYC full time. I’m currently looking for jobs in the city for after I graduate from ITU.

Arranging your stay

Please give a short description of the process involved in arranging your stay:

One of the first things people tell you about (self) arranging to study abroad is "start early". What they don’t tell you is just how early that is. My first notes date back roughly 8 months before I got off the plane at JFK airport, and I could definitely have used more time. So I won’t sugar coat it: Arranging your own stay at a university is a royal pain. If you’re even remotely thinking about doing it, start immediately after you finish reading this travel report.

Basically a lot of the application process is "hurry up and wait". You'll be dealing with several independent entities (ITU, your host university, the US embassy, the SU department, scholarships, TOEFL), each with their own internal processes and deadlines that you are responsible for aligning.
I started researching schools and programs in December 2011 to try and figure out where I wanted to go, and whether they accepted foreign visiting students. This involved a lot of googling and emailing back and forth with various student service offices. In January 2012, once I had found and confirmed that Parsons accepted visiting students, I booked a TOEFL test in Malmö. In early spring I applied ITU for advance approval of credit transfer for every possible course at Parsons, built my design portfolio, asked two of former professors for letters of recommendation and wrote a letter of intent for my Parsons application. As Parsons only takes in visiting students if a given program has room left after the full time applications have been processed, I was instructed to send my application (via old fashioned mail) between April 1st and May 1st.

Quick note here: The actual application process will vary from program to program and university to university and you won’t find details for self-arranged visiting students on most university websites. I recommend cutting through the noise and either shoot an email or stock up on Skype credits and call the school’s admissions office or international student service office directly. My contact at Parsons was Courtney Malenius (maleniuc@newschool.edu), and she helped me understand everything much better than the Parsons website ever could. Contact her if you are thinking about applying.

I heard back from Parsons on May 30th that I was accepted, and all of June basically went with getting visa papers in order. It required a certificate of eligibility for exchange visitor status (J-1 in my case) from Parsons, a letter of financial backing from my bank and setting up a visit at the US Embassy in Copenhagen. It will feel overwhelming, so keep a cool head and just try to follow protocol.

What resources did you find helpful in planning your stay and which people did you use (if any)?

- **Finding a school/program**: I used Google and Quora to source a rough list of design schools in New York City which I then researched thoroughly to see if a program matched my interests.

- **International Office at ITU**: Because I arranged my own stay, it was limited how much help they could provide with specific questions as every situation varies in those cases. But just talking to them was nice and helped keep me sane in the application process.

- **Parsons staff**: Email or call them (via Skype) directly. Their response time is stellar and many crucial questions got answered or clarified quickly by reaching out to them.

How did you arrange practicalities such as accommodation?

I arrived in NYC in late July, just before Bootcamp started, and immediately moved into a New School dormitory in Manhattan for my first three weeks there. It was lousy, overpriced and I would recommend trying to find a room literally anywhere else if you can swing it. But if you can’t, the New School dorms are, if nothing else, a convenient starting point when you’ve just arrived (and pretty much the only time you’ll ever live in central Manhattan as a student).
During the 3 weeks of Bootcamp I was surfing Craigslist for shared flats and wrote emails almost every night. I wasn’t picky - you really can’t be in NYC - and eventually it paid off. I found a sublet in Bushwick, Brooklyn in a shared loft with three roommates for $800/month (this is considered cheap), interviewed a few days before I had to move out of my dorm and was lucky to get the room just in time.

Expenses and Financing

Please comment on expenses connected to your stay abroad

Tuition at Parsons averages at around $20.000 pr. semester, which seems like the standard going rate for the well known schools on the East Coast. The 3-week D+T Bootcamp cost $2.100. Additional required costs included an application fee ($50), a student services fee ($130), a health services fee ($300), international health and accident insurance ($500, via Gouda) and various visa application fees ($400).

My monthly budget (including rent, food and a Metro card) was 10.500 kr., and I generally managed to sustain myself on SU and SU loans while abroad.

Did you apply for scholarships and would you recommend any ones in particular?

I took a shotgun approach to scholarships and applied to as many as I could find, including Oticon Fonden, Augustinus Fonden, LF Fights Fond and Wilhelm Hansen Fonden. I was fortunate enough to get 12.000 kr. from Knud Højgaards Fond and the ITU Rejsefond, but received negative replies from everyone else.

Recommendations for other students:

• Keep research notes. I maintained a document of potential universities, programs, deadlines and contact information. This was a simple, but incredibly useful, resource in the beginning of the process.

• Talk to people who have been through the process. Ask for their application essays, portfolios, recommendation letters. This will A) help you understand what is required, and B) keep you sane. If you have specific questions about Parsons, email me at jonasmaaloe@gmail.com.

• Buy Skype credits so you can call your host university directly, on the cheap, before you arrive. I solved several administrative issues by calling (and Parsons admissions office have great on-hold music).

• Develop your Google-fu. I found several current students' online application portfolios and a few application essays for inspiration when I was writing my own, by throwing together the right search queries. This will be a huge help and make your own application better.