Host University: New York Institute of Technology

Study Program at IT University: M.Sc. in Digital Design & Communication

Exchange Agreement or Study Abroad: Exchange Student

Courses studied abroad:
· Design Process
· Advanced Interactive Design
· Aesthetics & Theory

Exchange Period: Third Semester, fall 2016

My Stay Abroad

What was it like to study at NYIT (courses, academic level, social life etc)?
One of the first observations you will make is that the classes are considerably smaller than at ITU. In my smallest course we were 5 students, and in the biggest about 10. This means that you build a much closer relationship with the teachers (professors!). It is not uncommon to hang out with teachers outside of classes too. One of my courses were taught in the evening and the teacher ordered food for us most of the times. I also went out for drinks with him almost every week, and a few times with one of the other professors. Academically, it doesn’t compare to ITU at all, but to me that is not a bad thing at all. In the US it is extremely important for the students that they are able to get a job when they graduate, because they risk ending up on the streets due to their student debt if they don’t. This means that the focus is not on how to write great academic papers, but on how to perform well in your career. For me, I took the designer courses, and have learned just as much valuable information as I would have at ITU. In some aspects even information that I would never have learned about at ITU. Topics like where to apply, how you nail a job interview as a designer, which positions to seek out at first in order to advance quicker to the higher paying jobs etc. was also an important aspect of what we were taught.

The exams are hard if you have no actual skills (aside from writing academic journals), but easy if you know how to design. For me it was fairly easy, but I still felt challenged and motivated all the way through. The professors are more like mentors than teachers, in the way that they guide you towards your personal goals instead of repeating what you could read in the books. Almost about half of the other students are Chinese students, the money machine of NYIT according to the professors. Their English is terrible, which makes it easy for us Danes to shine in class discussion (I got A in all my courses). Needless to say I can only recommend to befriend the professors, one of them allowed me to take an additional course that I was interested in, free of charge, and in general I would not have learned half as much as I did, if I had not hung out with them. Social life is what you make it I guess.

I got a lot of friends, but only a few of them are from NYIT. Most are roommates, friends of roommates, and people I met at meet ups and events (there are a ton of free events all the time in NYC, so definitely check meetup.com and similar sites if you want to expand your network). I
also ended up taking a course in biohacking at Genspace in Brooklyn, recommended by one of my teachers. It was pretty cool, and they had a great student discount, but it definitely isn’t a must unless you are into that stuff. The teachers also tend to let their personal opinions shine through a lot. This is not what you would expect, coming from the Danish tradition where most teachers seem to rely solely on what other academics have written instead of supporting it with their own view. This is also true when it comes to political opinion and so on… you would never hear a Danish teacher say in class that anyone who vote for x party is a moron and a fascist but don’t be surprised if this happens in the US.

**What was your initial motivation for going abroad and did your stay meet your expectations?**

I love challenging myself and felt that I would regret it badly if I hadn’t taken this opportunity. I mean basically why wouldn’t you? Yes I had to quit my well-paid job, and make a lot of sacrifices, but this is like a once in a lifetime opportunity and you will be forever changed if you have never tried living in another country before. In a lot of ways the stay met my motivations, and in some ways it didn’t. I had never been to the US before, and I had an almost fairytale like illusion of what it would be to live in New York. It IS really awesome, but maybe just not as perfect as I had imagined. The city does have its own share of issues after all, poverty, dirtyness, shady areas etc. That being said I never experienced anything bad, even though I lived in East Harlem for a month and ventured through the central park alone at night numerous times.

I guess my idea was that the whole of Manhattan would be just shops, restaurants and cafes but this is not the case if you go up north. I lived a month in Washington Heights and cannot recommend that neighborhood. Even Harlem is a lot nicer, but it wasn’t till I moved to Soho that I really got that feeling of living in NYC. In general you should live as close to downtown as possible, and it is sooo worth the ridiculous high rent. Even though it wasn’t my intention I did end up living in three neighborhoods and I wouldn’t have had it any other way now, so maybe you could consider moving a bit around too. It really gives you a more nuanced image of NYC.

**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?**

I feel like I have already said what needs to be said on these topics but I can try to expand on it. I was getting a bit sick and tired of the same ol’ at ITU after having taken both my bachelor and candidate there. So it was definitely a fresh breath that renewed my energy and motivation to finish my education. It also made me consider what I want to do after I graduate, and I feel a lot more comfortable as a designer now.

In a way it almost feels like I have been out on my own, worked and learned so much, and now I am back where I started. Some of the academic jargon seem almost a bit silly now, because you know it won’t really matter in 10 years time. As a designer it would make more sense for us to practice design than to write over-academic articles. It’s not really a rant, I just feel like it’s part of what studying at NYIT has taught me.

**Arranging your Stay**

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

The process was extremely tedious, and I can recommend that you team up with the other nominee from ITU as I did. That makes everything a lot easier. I even bought tickets and housing together with the other nominee even though I had never met her, but she turned out to
be amazing at everything from paperwork to arranging accommodation for both of us, so taking contact and teaming up can definitely be a timesaver.

Anyway, here is my list of you need to take are of in order of what you need to do first:

1. **Apply for nomination** at the International Office at ITU. It’s not all about the grades so make sure to write about who you are, what you’ve achieved and why you wanna go too.
2. **Apply for grants** (even before your nomination. We had this weird dude who called himself “legat-Lars” come out at ITU to help us. To me he wasn’t of any help at all, but the internet is there for you. I also have some excel spreadsheets you can have if you contact me.
3. **Apply at NYIT.** I got in contact with a woman named Liza Hamberger. I know.. that is one weird name, but don’t let that fool you, she was extremely helpful and I’m sure the rest of their team will be in the future too.
4. **You receive your letter of acceptance.** You celebrate and do a little dance.
5. **Take TOEFL.** Make sure you prepare for it. You can buy (or pirate) a lot of their previous tests that can get you accustomed to what it looks like.
6. **Apply for pre-approval** at SAP.
7. **Obtain a J1 VISA.** I can’t remember the exact process but I had to upload a photo, a lot of personal information, and ensure them I wasn’t a terrorist in a hilarious online survey.
8. **Search for accommodation** (Apply for Bikubenfonden’s dorms and ManhattanNext. Curiously Bikubenfonden awarded me a grant of 50,000DKK but rejected letting me stay in their Manhattan dorms, so apparently it is not the easiest of feats to get accepted there (don’t rush your application). Also there are a loot of scammers in NY. So be sure to check out the place irl before you make the mistake of transferring a huge deposit like I did. Best thing would be if someone in your network could vouch for an apartment.
   And another pro-tip: If you arrive in the summer, make sure your room has AC! It was hell without it. Oh, and NYIT will ask you if you want to live in one of their dorms. Don't do it. You will share your room with two-three bachelor students and for the price you pay, you can easily find your own place instead.

**What resources did you find helpful in planning your stay and which people did you use?**
- I asked those who were currently studying abroad and they were very helpful.
- Random facebook groups like Gypsy Rental NYC, Danskere i New York etc was good too.
- I got a scholarship from Fulbright and they hosted an event with a lot of relevant info too.
- ExploreIT and Liza Hamberger from NYIT.

**How did you arrange practicalities such as accommodation?**
I think I already did answer that. But ok I can tell you a story instead. The thing is that all New Yorkers seem really nice at first, but once they have your money they don’t really care anymore. We found a place on AirBnB and to make sure it wasn’t a scam, we both saw the apartment, and visited the office of the real estate agent to have a meeting with him. He invited us out for brunch twice where we talked things through. He was very funny (looked and talked like Kevin Hart!) and we spent a lot of time with him. He told us we had to transfer the amount for the whole stay in order to make sure no one else could book it. As we did so, it was pretty difficult to come in contact with him.
He didn’t answer his phone, and when the day came, he told us he had overbooked our rooms, and instead of Upper West Side, he would give us an apartment in Harlem. He also forgot to mention that we would not live there alone, but together with a 60 year old Australian, and a 40 year old artist sleeping on the couch in the living room. We tried to get the money back and find
another place, but he didn’t really care and we would have needed to hire a lawyer and sue him to get the money back, which we didn’t really have the time or resources to do in the middle of our semester. So yeah, don’t get scammed is the morale of the story.

Expenses and Financing
Please comment on expenses connected to your stay abroad
I admit I was a bit unlucky with my accommodation, so you might be able to get away with less, but for me I spent around 200,000 DKK. New York is hella expensive. There was also some unforeseen expenses, for example, NYIT don’t care what Danish insurance you have, you are required to have an American one, and that alone cost me around 6000 DKK, even though my Danish one covered way more. So don’t buy one from home, unless you reckon it is worth paying that extra money to be even better covered. TOEFL isn’t cheap either, and the other nominee from ITU didn’t pass it the first time around so that’s a lot of money too.

Did you apply for scholarships and would you recommend any ones in particular?
Maybe I’m bad at selling myself but I wasn’t that fortunate. I think I got a forth of the scholarships I applied for. Still, that summed up to about 80,000 DKK so it is definitely worth it. I might not be the best one to ask, I’ve heard of others who obtained at least twice as much, but ask around. Usually people are pretty generous in sharing their applications and spreadsheets. The more data you have, the easier it will be to analyze how much money each grant is willing to give, and what they want to see in your application. For better or for worse, your bachelor grades seem to have a huge impact on most of them.

Recommendations for other students:
Just do it. Going on exchange is a lot of fun. And even though NYIT is pretty far from being Ivy league, it still looks dope on your cv when you get home. I’ve found that some graduate positions even expect you to have been an exchange student, so professionally it makes a lot of sense too. Start saving up asap. New York is no fun at all if you are broke. And apply for grants a year ahead, otherwise you will miss a lot of deadlines. If they require to see some formal paperwork of your acceptance, just tell them that you will mail it to them as soon as you get it.

Here is a list of random tips and tricks I’ve picked up along the way, that I don’t think anyone else have covered yet:

NYIT:
- All my courses were in the evening, because I love staying up all night and sleeping late. But it also meant that there were a lot of events I missed out on because I had to attend class.

- It is very important to never miss class. It works a bit like in Gymnasium where you say your name in the beginning. If you have too many day offs it will directly influence your grade. One teacher even stated that for every course that you skipped, you would drop a whole grade. That said, I was excused a few times. For example to experience the Halloween parade.

- NYIT is like having a semester at KEA. It is not as academic as ITU, but instead you acquire some actual skills that you can use after you graduate.

- I didn’t use it myself, but NYIT has free psychologists at your disposal, should you feel homesick, stressed, or just need someone to talk to. You can contact mschne01@nyit.edu to
set up a consultation (reach him from your NYIT mail).

- As I already mentioned, you need an American **insurance**. The AETNA student Health Insurance is approximately 6000 DKK, and they won't waive it for anything in the world.

- **Professors** matter more than the courses. In one of mine that was supposed to be programming heavy, he just asked us what he could teach us and what we wanted to learn. We all agreed that we'd rather learn design than programming, so he changed the syllabus to match our interests.

- If you are into motion capture, **3D printing** and that kind of stuff, make sure to visit the Hive lab on 9th floor and befriend some of the people who work there. I learned a lot about 3D printing and at the same time I printed Christmas gifts for my family.

**Accommodation:**

- I have lived with exchange students from other countries, with locals, and alone (just me and the other ITU nominee). They are three very different experiences, and if you want to learn about the American **culture**, staying with a local is invaluable. He cooked for us, we talked politics, had long discussions about his country and his views on everything. It was really interesting.

- In most parts of the city you can drink the **tap water** but it tastes A LOT of chlorine.

- **Cockroaches** are very common in NY, and we had them in all three apartments we stayed in. We had mice in two of them as well, so don’t expect the same standard as in Denmark.

**Food:**

- The **food is awesome**. You can find anything in New York. They also love frappuccinos, ginger ale, peanut butter, Oreo flavor and ice cream sandwiches as much as I do. Most places close early unless you are in downtown though. There you can always find great restaurants and bars 24/7.

- If you want to stay **healthy**, see if you can find a place to live near either whole foods, trader joe’s or fastfood chains like fresh&co (as it is just as expensive to make your own food in NY).

- This is a map of the bars and restaurants I liked. Feel free to modify it and pass it on to the next generation of exchange students. [Link](#).

- **Jerk fries** & jerk mayo sounds delicious but is disgusting. Consider yourself warned ;)

**Transport:**

- The **subway/metro** works like a charm. Buy a metro-card from the vending machines for 1 month unlimited. It is about 800 DKK. New York is also great for walking. Some days I walked about 10km. just to experience the city. There is always something happening, stores to look at, or art pieces, bars and restaurants to discover.

- Their train infrastructure is pretty easy once you get the hang of it, but I was really confused at first. **Express trains** are always on the opposite side of the local train. At night some of them change their destinations and this is where it can get tricky.
Not all trains have travel information onboard so pay attention and look at the signs of the stations you pass by.

- **Taxis** are cheap but Uber is cheaper. And Uber is cheap but Lyft is cheaper. Do Lyft. Also a culture thing is that you sit in the back of the taxi. This is true for Uber and Lyft too even though it isn’t quite as obvious, but they look at you weird if you hop in on the front seat.
- If you plan on **driving** in the US make sure to get your international driver’s license at Borgerservice in DK. I think it was 40kr.

**Events & Experiences**

- Sign up for the SpoiledNYC newsletter to stay on top of the festivals, parades, and events going down in NY. I seriously loved that newsletter and it kept me in the loop and more informed than even the locals.

- **Subscribe** to Groupon, meetup.com, NYCgo and whatever similar sites you can find if you are on a budget but want to get out and experience the city + mingle with the locals.

- Mark your calendar for **Community Day**. That means a lot of places let you in for free, and you can grab yourself free tickets for the US Open (tennis), or why not visit the headquarters of Google or Microsoft.

- In the mornings they hand out the **magazine** Timeout. It is free and a bit like our MetroExpress but usually has some discounts on events so check it out.

- If you arrive in the summer be sure to check out **Rockaway Beach**. Giant waves, a cool surfer bar with dj, and not as crowded as the other beaches. Also a great excuse to visit Queens.

- If you plan to watch a **broadway** show, get the official TKTS app to get fair discounts.

- Don’t go to the **cinema**. I did it three times because all my Danish friends who visited me wanted to try it, but it is such a let down. They almost don’t sell any candy, just popcorn and large sodas. The seats are horribly crammed too, and the cinemas are not any bigger than in Denmark. 1-0 to DK when it comes to cinema joy.

**Living in New York City:**

- You will blend in really fast. 2/3 of those living in Manhattan was not born in NY. This mean that it is not like London. In NY everyone has their own **accent**, so don’t fear if you have too.

- Get an American **Bank** account. It makes everything easier. We chose Bank of America just out of convenience because it is everywhere in the city, but I’m sure the others are great too. It allows you to transfer rent etc. from day to day without paying fees every time, and also you won’t confuse the waiters with your Danish credit card. Research the difference between credit and debit. It is a bit different than in Denmark, but I am no expert. I just know that you will get asked about it all the time. I just learned that with credit, you type in your pin number, while with debit you have to sign the receipt.

- In some **ATMs** and vending machines it asks for your Zip code (this is NOT your pin number).
Giving **tips** is huge. It is customary to tip approx. 20%. The waiters WILL call you out if they feel that you didn't tip them sufficiently. I tried that at both bars and restaurants. Awkward.

**Cellphone** companies are extremely expensive. The company '3' has a rule that you can't use it for more than 30 consecutive days abroad so that is not really a viable option unfortunately. In Denmark I have 12/12 for 79kr at Oister. The cheapest I could find in NY was 4/4 for 380kr at T-mobile. Coverage even sucks compared to Denmark, and don't expect 4G quality.

Change your App Store/Play store to American to fully utilize the vast amount of apps they have available. T-mobile even have an app where you can stream TV (named Sling TV). Do this after you have acquired your American credit card. That makes the process easier. Comedy Central’s app has a lot of free content too.

Speaking of **apps**, Hooch is amazing. One free cocktail every night at select bars and cafes. It is a great way to discover and research your local bars without spending a fortune. (see if the promo-code “spoiled” is still active). Their version of Just-eat is called Seamless, its pretty good too but try Maple instead. It's cheaper and better quality food (only available in downtown though).

With your J1 visa you can **enter the US** one month prior to your studies begin. Do that. Seriously. Experience the summer, and make sure you have set up everything before your classes begin. I did that and it was one of my best months in NY. Basically a month of vacation. You can do the same when you leave if you want to celebrate New Years eve in NY.

**Traffic lights** are a bit different. In downtown you just walk if there are no immediate cars. Mayor Bill de Blasio made it semi-legal to cross red lights, stating that the police shouldn’t waste their time handing out tickets for petty crimes like that. I've crossed a red light in front of police officers in NY 100+ times and can testify that they don't care. Also everyone does it, and traffic is slow so it's not as hazardous as it would be in Denmark. Almost every street is one direction too so it is easy to make sure you don't step out in front of a car.

The **embassy** has a list of Danes in NY that you can subscribe to. In case of emergencies like terrorism they will try to contact and help you.

Even with a **converter**, not all your gadgets will work in the US as they have a different voltage. My electric toothbrush for one did not charge, neither did my razor shaver. Computers, cellphones and speakers worked fine though.

I hope you found my tips helpful. Feel free to share them. Have fun!

– Martin Danty