

Hamburg Summer Semester 2009

Hamburg University of Applied Sciences

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It was quite a regular day in Long Beach, California. I was on my way to one of my classes. I always walked passed the study abroad building on my campus at Long Beach State. I always wanted to go to Spain or to France and I figured that I would pay a visit to the study abroad office to get more information. I went in to the office and asked about study in these countries for the next semester. I was quickly helped and was told that I needed to act fast if I wanted to travel and study in the semester to come. So I did I received an application to fill out and bring back with in the next week.

I came back the next day to really find out more in depth about what programs were offered and what schools I could attend. I was asked what I studied and I said Graphic design. None of the schools that I had an option to go to with in Spain or France had graphic design. In France I was able to go to a certain school, but the required me to have at least two years in French language. I only had 1.5 years. So that was out of the option. I decided I would study anything for the next semester. So it was, that I would go to Spain to study what ever I could and just enjoy a culture that I was familiar with. I had already traveled to Europe once and I enjoyed the Spanish culture a lot. I am fluent in Spanish as well so I figured I would accommodate just fine!

The next day I went back to get another application and I had a couple of questions that I needed answered as well. That's when Sharon Olson told me that there was a school in Hamburg that had graphic design. I had no clue what she was talking about...Hamburg? Where is that? I really did not know. So she said that it was in Germany. I immediately said that I didn't want to go there because I couldn't due to the German language. Usually the schools require two years of language study and I figured I couldn't go if I wanted to anyway. So that is when Sharon told me that I needed no German to go there. I said ok give me more information on it. I really was not so interested to begin with because it was not Barcelona, Paris, Milan, or Berlin. You know those major cities that everyone knows about and that everyone goes to? Well yeah, Hamburg I really had no idea and did not know if anyone had any idea where that was either. So I went home that day spoke to my parents. My parents were already not really inclined for me to go abroad. Maybe because they felt that I would not get any work done and by going I would technically loose a year in school.

The next day I was at work and I was really debating where to go. I had started to think and I felt that ok if I go to a place I don't know it will really provide me with a new experience that I have not had. I will be able to live truly on my own and really know what it is like to be in a foreign country. One of the

reasons why I wanted to go to a place like Spain was because I knew the language and the culture. I did not know it fully, but since it is similar to that of the Mexican culture I would be in a comfort zone; Germany not so much. That day I spoke to my friend Suzing. She had traveled to Cambridge to study during the summer. She was a big advocate of study abroad. And one of the reasons why I wanted to go was because of her. I asked her what she felt was best for me. She had many things to say. But she said if I was to go somewhere outside of the U.S., to go somewhere I did not know. She said that this was a once in a lifetime experience and to take advantage of it! Also she added that I would study design, and knowing that none of my classes would be counting towards my degree, and then at least I could get some portfolio work under me from a different part of the world. So, after talking to her I felt that I was on the right path to deciding what I wanted to do.

I filled out the application and turned it in the following days. I was in the process of going to Hamburg, Germany... a place I had no clue of. I was a bit scared and my parents were also in shock because they asked immediately... what about the language? I really did not know what to say to them, except for what I knew. Which in reality was that I was leaving and that I would study design for the semester. How I would do that? I had no clue!

So there I was months later at the airport in LAX, saying goodbye to my family and to friends. I got on the plane on a rather hot February day. It was quite hotter because I was wearing a jacket; I knew that London, where I would land, would not be as nice of weather as L.A. So I took a flight and ten hours later I was in London. Just as I expected it was cold as could be. I really had no idea how cold it could get around the world. I stayed at a friend's family's home for the night and the day after I flew into Hamburg. One thing I immediately learned was: Ryanair gets you in the luggage... and I had no clue so I paid somewhere around 200 British pounds. As some say in America... f*** my life. I was really pissed off, but at least I learned.

I got to Hamburg an hour later and while I was on the flight met a Danish man. Was telling me all about Hamburg, but he said he really did not know much about the young life. I stepped out of the airplane and that is really when I got my reality check of... yeah you are in Germany! It was freezing and raining. I took a bus to Hauptbahnhof and from there I waited for my buddy that I had contacted minutes after getting off the bus. He came and took me along for a ride. His name is Jan and he seemed like a cool dude! We drove around places that I really had no clue about, it all looked dead, but maybe it was because it was a Sunday. Now I know that the reason for that was due to a Sunday! So first thing we did when we arrived to my flat was set my stuff down and then went to eat döner. Yeah I must admit I had no clue what döner was, but I did know that it was one of the most amazing foreign things I had ever set my mouth and taste buds on. I ended my day with that and some cheese bread. It was quite a weird atmosphere, but I figured that it was meant to be this way at the beginning.

That same night I was just hanging out in my lonely flat, there were no people there because of holidays so it was a dead man's home, when I met Alex Gracey and Dallas Grant. They were both Americans from the east coast. Another weird thing added to my list of unusual things. Unusual because I don't think I shared more than five minutes with someone from the east coast ever. Well that was that my first day was very eventful in unusual ways, but hey, I wanted something different.

The next day was quite a rather quick rise in the morning. Meaning that I did not sleep. I only got three hours of sleep due to the amazing jet lag that I had built up. I woke up, ate some cheese bread and attempted to watch some German television. It was really pointless for me because I had no clue on what they were saying. Really I don't think that I understood one word of what was said that day. At eight in the morning we had our first day of German course. That was a rather interesting moment for me. Why so? Well I was familiar with languages like Spanish and French. I was able to understand Italian, but German... not so much. As soon as I arrived I met a lot of people. I met Lovisa from Sweden, Diana from Spain, Sarah from Canada, and Scott from San Diego. The class was quite interesting because I had no clue what was going on. The only thing I knew was that I was sitting next to a Swedish and Spanish girl. I learned something that day: *buchstabieren Sie bitte Schweden*.

The next day we all went back to German class and that is when I met more people from around the world. Met Marta and Elena from Spain, Dave, Matt, and Matt from the east coast, and also met a couple of Swedish girls, Lotta, Emma, and Karin. It was quite a lot of people to take in at one time, but it only got more complicated once we did the buddy activities. That is when I started to meet people from Finland, Australia, Poland, and France. It was truly a cluster of names that I could and couldn't remember. We did many activities that week, but my favorite had to be miniature wonderland!

The weeks to come were filled with a lot of fun stuff to do. I got to know Hamburg well and the weather, and I got to say the weather did suck, but it was a good change for me. I knew what cold was, which in reality I still have no clue, but I got a good idea. One thing that became a quick fashion to do was Monday movie night at Allermöhe with the Swedes. It was quite nice because we did dinner and Swedish desserts. Quite good stuff I must admit.

During that month we quickly got in touch with the Reeperbahn. It was something very new for me. I really had no idea that there could be so many people so late at night. It was quite funny especially for the Americans because you could tell that we were not conditioned to be up until 6 in the morning. In fact the first night that we went out as a group, I believe we started at 11 pm, I had the idea that we would be out until 2 in the morning only. Well I was quite wrong. None of the Americans had the stamina to pull off the night so we all quickly dozed off at 3 in the morning. We soon were able to get the conditioning though and after that it was no problem

After the first weeks of fun we all got into the spirit of school. For me school was the reason that I came here so I was excited to be at a campus that was filled with artists. It was quite interesting the way that the students went about for picking their classes. It was as if the professors were showcasing what the course would offer, it was quite a nice idea and a very convenient thing because there is always something different in the design world that interests me and I would like to experiment with it.

The week after I started classes and there was only really one class that I had to attend. This was my magazine and editorial class. To start off there was a cut for the class because many people wanted to take this course but only a few were admitted. I was one of them so that made me proud. And there was also another class that I attended, but this class was more like a block seminar where people would show up once every month for a whole week straight. This was my screen-printing class. It was quite a good thing that this class was being offered here because I am a t-shirt designer and I had always wanted to learn the process on how to make a screen and actually print the posters. Even though I didn't print on shirts I still had accomplished something similar to that of t-shirt printing.

Aside from those classes that I had to attend, I had two classes that I had to meet with the professor around once a week. This was one professor, but I had taken on both projects from him. In this class I was to do a music store and a magazine. I really liked the idea of how he set the project up because it was more or less like a client saying: we want a music store and we want you to design everything for it. Really opened ended for creativity, which was something that I wanted to explore. Everything from building a brand and making it look like what you make. It is a plus to have a project like that because it is difficult to keep the brand looking to the identity that you have given it. And as a designer you have to master this process. What I liked about this project also was that I was dealing with a bit of business and consumer thinking. Maybe this was because I had previously worked at a marketing firm and had developed a sense of business thinking through my design work. That was the start of my schooling in Hamburg and I really enjoyed it.

As the semester went on things started to settle down with school and Hamburg life. I was well into my projects at school. I was learning a lot from my magazine class and from my screen-printing course. The magazine class specially because it was all in German except for when the professors would translate to me. This I think made my hearing, of the German language, slow down a bit. The music store and magazine course was also carrying along well because I began to experiment with the idea of European design. In America we cluster things and have very flashy design, well at least in my opinion, and design here is much more simplistic. It was one of my main goals to really nail this. I wanted to grasp the idea of European design as much as I could so that I could bring it back with me in my portfolio work.

The buddy program was still in motion, but it was really on us now to make the best of it. And we did so. We had our groups of friends just as any other group of people. In my case there were really two groups that I had. It was the Swedish girls and the American guys and the other group was the Spanish girls. It was quite interesting to have these links because both were so different. I liked the idea of not having groups, for me it worked in a sense because when there were festivities or parties I would invite everyone in the buddy program. But like I said it worked for me and not so much for everyone else and that's why there were groups. I liked the idea of uniting everyone because that way it felt a little more international and this idea was great because you learned about everyone else's culture. This was the case with the two groups that I most hung out with.

Even though there were two separate groups, I was still able to go in depth with the nature and ideas of two primary countries. These were Sweden and Spain. I learned quite a lot from the Swedish specially. This was because before I came to Europe to study I really never crossed paths with Sweden. Really, even when it comes to talking about I had not done so. I only knew IKEA and h&m. That was my Swedish culture for my life. But really what I learned the most about the Swedes was that they were very particular with design, not just design as in home and clothing, but even in cases like food presentation and drinks. Their desserts were something that I was spoiled with every weekend. It was like a treat to go to Allermöhe because I knew that if there was dinner then there would be amazing dessert. It looked good to the eyes and it tasted good. It was everything I wanted at the end of the day. The Swedish also taught me one very important thing. You can have fun even by doing the littlest thing. As Americans, we are so used to having to go somewhere and do something big, like go to Hollywood or a beach city, in order to have fun. I mean yeah the beach is always fun and I do miss it, but for example here there is no beach, well I lie there is a "beach", but not my kind of beach. The Swedish really knew how to make the best of any day. They showed me what a typical picnic was, and this whole time I thought it was more challenging then it seemed. It was really small things that to me were nothing, in the sense of wow that took no effort to do and we are really relaxing and not doing much...and its fun! So I really learned that from the Swedish. They also pushed me, indirectly, to cook. I really wanted to give back to them what they have given to me and that was food. So I cooked for them. Even though it doesn't make up the amount of times they cooked for me, but still I can say that I cooked for three girls that were Swedish!

As for the Spanish, I also learned a lot. I learned that Spanish time is really what they mean. Spanish time is more laid back... come at ten they would say, but in reality it meant twelve! No that is just some joke, which is partially true, but they have a lot more to offer. I think the most important thing that I take from the Spanish is their loyalty to friends and family. I can say that because I was a friend with them. They will go out of their way to reach your happiness and needs. Of course this goes equally

to what you give them. I saw this from every single one of the Spanish girls, which I was a friend with, three of them. If I needed help with something they were there to help. And it is something that I prize very high because it goes to show that people are really willing to help one another out despite culture differences. It is all a matter of meeting in the middle and if that is achieved then both can do and will give everything to help one another. And of course I can't forget the Spanish food that I was introduced to! It was amazing as well and a bit different than what I expected it to be! I expected something along the lines of Mexican food, but I was quick to know that I was wrong.

There were many opportunities to really learn about others cultures, Multi Culti being one of them, but also our very own festivities. The Swedes threw a festival twice; one for Swedish National Day and one for Mid Summer. At the Swedish National Day, we learned all about cocktail drinks and about caviar and Swedish bite size foods. Quite good tasty treats. For Mid Summer it was a little more of knowledge behind the activities that are done during that day and going in depth with Swedish fun facts. There was also Cinco de Mayo. The Americans, Dave, Matt, and Matt, and I were responsible for making that one happen. Many people really have no clue what Cinco de Mayo is, even Americans don't know what it really is. A lot of people do celebrate it, but they just use it as an excuse to drink. But the idea for this event was to culture people, everything from food, games, and a bit of history. We prepared a piñata for everyone to have fun with, stuffed it with candy and fake money. Quite funny to see someone who has never hit a piñata; they really have no clue what to do or to expect. The funny thing with the piñata was that it rained, so we had to do the game inside, with a usb cable suspending the piñata. We also prepared food; beans, rice, chicken, and tortillas. Again, it was hilarious to see Germans try to roll a burrito. I thought I had seen the worst, but it wasn't until I came here that I said, wow no one knows how to roll a tortilla! I also learned that day that Spanish food excludes all type of spicy ingredients. Pin the donkey was also a big hit amongst the people who were there. In the end Cinco de Mayo proved to be a great idea and a fun one as well. Aside from those there was Multi Culti. This event was the biggest food and drink culture shock of my life. There was everything from Turkish, French, Polish, Russian, German, Italian, Spanish, and of course ours...Mexican and American. I think ours was the most culture shocked amongst itself. We had bacon dogs (bacon wrapped hot dogs with onions and tomatoes), beans, rice, and of course tequila. We also had an additional thing to our station: American drinking games. We had flip cup and the drink to go along with was something we call "jungle juice". This proved to be the most talked thing a Multi Culti. There were many people coming up to visit our station simply for this game. It was so popular we had to refill the trashcan-sized bucket we had for our drink twice. That is a lot when you consider that we were only filling the cup half ways. This game went on until Rewe closed. This had to be one of the greatest experiences I had culture wise.

Aside from events like this, I did travel. I traveled to Berlin, Rome, Pisa, San Vincenzo, Stockholm, Sardinia, Rotterdam and Amsterdam. I had already been to Berlin, Pisa, Rome, and Amsterdam previously on a five week European trip that I made two years ago, but never Stockholm, Sardinia, or Rotterdam. It was still cool to visit the sites that I had previously visited. There were a couple of things that I did do differently, for example in Rome I actually took a tour and took pictures that made it out alive! My previous trip, all my pictures were mysteriously deleted. I traveled with five friends as well and attempted to watch the Champions League final, but this was more difficult than we expected. We also went to the beach, San Vincenzo, which was a nice relaxed day. The only thing that I don't understand is that I have bad luck with Pisa. Out of all the pictures that I took on this trip I have none from Pisa, and this goes for my last trip as well. Rotterdam was also quite nice, but more or less we didn't get to see its entirety because we were only there for a day. Aside from that everything else was a new experience.

Stockholm was an amazing time. It was more Swedish culture, like Swedish breakfast, dinner, and the idea that Swedish people take off their shoes when they walk into a house. This mind boggled me because for the longest time I had the idea that it was only Asian cultures that did this. During my trip to Sardinia, I had a lot of relaxation time, mainly because I was at the beach everyday for a week, which I enjoyed a lot. I went with my Spanish friends, one of them, which happened to end up being my girlfriend, Marta Cabo. This trip was very unique to me because I had never really had a trip with someone that I can say was my girlfriend. I know many people do these things, but I just was never a fan of it, but I learned very quickly that the idea is quite a fun one. It was fun because you get to do many things with the person that you really can't do on a daily basis. If we analyze this further, it is good for long-term relationships, because it keeps both people connected and looking forward to events like this. It spices the routine times with spontaneous do what ever you can do or want to do times. For example we all went snorkeling. This was a very spontaneous thing because for one I had never been snorkeling and we had no plan to go snorkeling. It was until I said hey why don't we go snorkeling, while we were buying food for the day. It proved to be a fun thing. As you can see there were many things that I had not done before.

During my final presentations for school, I did everything possible to compete with the rest. Of course there is always one thing I learn that I don't think of. Like my magazine; I should have just printed it out and not mounted every page on blackboard. Two things I learned: economic and better presented. I also learned the same for my music store: instead of mounting things, just make them and show them. Doing this allows people to touch it and view the real size of things. Aside from this and more importantly, the project looks more professional. In my editorial class, we printed out a collection of our best editorial pieces into one book. The book turned out amazing because it was printed on good quality

paper and the student work was impressive. At the end of the semester we had an exhibition, which was quite nice because I showcased a collection of posters and my magazine work.

The semester turned out to be quite a new experience for me in many ways than I ever thought possible. The one thing that a lot of people don't realize is that when you do an exchange semester you get a lot more than what you enroll yourself into. Yeah you come here for school and to receive education at a school, but you also come here not knowing you will be educated culturally. I believe that is the most important thing about these last months abroad. Why do I say that? Well you can always get educated at a school or institution, but you can't always live first hand with people from around the world and learn so much from them and from the city in which you are staying in. Aside from learning from others, you really learn to learn from yourself. The city itself gives you things to get you to know more about yourself. It provides you with challenges, like ordering food, for you to overcome. There is a sense of appreciation that you get at the end of the day when you have accomplished something in a foreign city. To me it was a sense of appreciation to my parents. I felt that I was going through similar things that they experienced when they immigrated into America. From not knowing the language to being discriminated, I felt I had a bit of similarities. I know I did not struggle as much, but I still had culture shocks and language barriers. And you appreciate things like that because you realize how much your parents go through to give you a good life.

At the end of my semester I realize that coming to Hamburg was the best decision I could have made for my exchange semester. I got everything I wanted and everything I did not expect. I thank everyone who made my semester, from the people that I lived with to the people that I met at school. Thanks and also thanks to everyone who helped me get here. As for now and the future of my stay here in Hamburg, I will attempt to get an internship at a design firm and complete another semester. Until then I will make the best of what they call summer here in Hamburg. Tschüß!