

Spirit of Life Feature

If someone had told me a year ago that I would find myself in the heart of London, England doing work for an accomplished architect, standing in the middle of King Henry VIII's private chapel, walking through streets of the design industry's finest companies, and standing in the Great Hall of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, I would have laughed. I would have also wondered if maybe my Hogwarts letter was late after all, and I was destined to be some sort of design-savvy Harry Potter. All wondering aside, my curiosity and love of my study pushed me into a month-long study abroad experience I will certainly never forget, and I am happy to share a little bit about my time in the UK.

Interest in Study Abroad

My journey technically began well into my first semester at Maryville University. I had just warmed up to my studies in Interior Design, made a few new friends, and gotten to know my professors when the study abroad conversation started making an appearance in my classes. My interest was piqued because I knew I wanted to study abroad at some point in college, so I attended some meetings. Contrary to any worrying I might have done at this point, everything began to fall into place. One of my professors was teaching an Architecture and Design class in London, and with a little persuading,

the directors of the program set up the first ever Design Practicum for Art and Design students to take as well. Soon after, my dad introduced me to the Spirit of Life Scholarship, through Frontier Community College, which I was very thankful to have received before I embarked on this trip of a lifetime.

Summary of Experience

The primary function of this month-long trip was to broaden the horizons of students through experience-based learning, which in turn made my classes a mixture of on-sight architectural critiques and up-close encounters with the design industry; however, I did not miss any chance to explore London on my own time.

The most exciting opportunity as a design student was participating in the Design Practicum. Six of us Art and Design students met once a week with architect Nate Kolbe, founder of London based firm Superfusionlab, and he assigned and critiqued a project that focused on exploring the relationship between a building's exterior facade and interior realm. The deliverables of this assignment included tangible research about a building in London, plans and sections of the building, plans for new public and private entrances, and sketched interior and exterior views of the building containing the new entrances. We chose the Royal Festival Hall, researched its history and observed how the public interacted with the building. After concluding that the public entrances were too hidden, and not well marked, we started pitching ideas for moving the entrances and

making the building generally more interactive with the public. Every week we showed Nate our ideas and tentative plans and listened to his feedback and advice until we had formulated a final project that we then presented to him and our professors.

My Architecture and Design class was centered around excerpts of the book *Chambers for a Memory Palace* by Donlyn Lyndon and Charles Moore. We discussed the power of space, how humans are psychologically connected to it, and how we can use elements of design as intellectual equipment that enhances the human experience. As we read, we had to identify the elements mentioned in the book (such as Axis that Reach, or Markers that Command) as we walked through London, sketch them, and write about their effects. We also chose different architectural elements, anything from doors to lights, and did sketch-studies of the different designs we saw throughout the city. I found this class both interesting and enjoyable because our assignments truly challenged us to look closely and critique the buildings we passed, as well as fine-tuned our abilities to communicate visually through sketch and translate those ideas into words.

Additionally, we were able to attend Clerkenwell Design Week and tour firms like HOK London to learn more about the industry. Clerkenwell, a showcase where furniture, flooring, and other design-centered companies display their new products for designers to see, really opened my eyes to the details of the interior design industry. I saw what trends were popular, and looked into the showrooms of famous companies like Steelcase, Haworth, and Toto to see their collections and talk to the designers about

anything from product design to the making of porcelain tile. On the other hand, touring HOK, and their new brand Rainlight, allowed us to see what work in the industry looks like. We viewed (classified) presentations of Rainlight's new furniture line, and upcoming HOK projects, and talked to architects and interior designers about their jobs, their creative processes and what they look for in good designers. Both of these experiences were invaluable, simply because I have a clearer picture of the design industry moving forward.

Learning Achievements

This trip was definitely filled with learning experiences for me, sometimes in a classroom setting or an industry setting, but also just by the virtue of being in the UK. Through the Practicum, I learned how the creative process functions in the context of teamwork. As a group, we spent hours brainstorming ideas and communicating them through sketches, which, prior to design school, I had never done. As a designer, it is crucial to be able to convey ideas to others as clearly as possible because the objective is to create what does not yet exist, and I found that practicing my own design-communication skills, as well as trying to understand the ideas of the team, was a great way to experience that aspect of the process. Furthermore, working in a team requires the giving and receiving of critique. A lot of our work consisted of tearing our ideas apart, thinking of ways they wouldn't work and ways they would, re-designing them, and combining ideas and including elements we had seen in London Architecture.

This Practicum was a practical lesson in the art of not taking criticism personally and having the courage to defend an idea, or conversely, scrap an idea if it wasn't the absolute best. We could not shy away from each other's judgment in this process, instead, we had to work together, forming ideas for the good of our project and the hypothetical public that would inhabit it, because Design is not a selfish job, even if an idea never leaves the pages of a sketchbook.

I also learned how culture drives design. The most evident example of this concept is the abundance of parks and green spaces throughout the city. Both due to the value of leisure time in the UK and the city's environmentally-unfriendly past, London has placed a large amount of importance on becoming greener. While there, parks were constantly full of people doing everything from studying to yoga, and the amount of thought put into the landscape design was evident. Even benches were created with play in mind, made with curves and slopes for children to run and climb on, and fountains were also a staple. These elements come together to offer opportunities for relaxation to increase the well-being of the public, and for the city to improve air quality. Disability compliances are also less common, partly due to the abundance of old buildings that cannot undergo such heavy changes, and partly because more actions have not been taken to enact those regulations. We saw so many buildings with elements that would not be possible to recreate in America because of our stricter ADA compliances. These differences in culture are reflected in the design of London's parks and buildings, which is a fascinating and necessary aspect of good design.

Most importantly, I learned more about the design industry. Touring HOK opened my eyes to exactly what Interior Designers do, how they work, and what they value. I witnessed presentations given by one of the founders of HOK's London branch along with a group of designers and architects where they explained the new projects they were working on and highlighted details of their creative process and concepts used to explain their design decisions to clients. I also got to see the working atmosphere of the firm: how designers sketched and prototyped in order to test their ideas. I was blown away by the amazing projects I saw in the works and the magnitude of energy, creativity, and strategy these people put into them. HOK proved to me that the design industry, at its core, is really focused on solving the problems and meeting the needs of their clients. I could not help but think of how easily people can write off a profession in design, when in fact the purpose of design, specifically in architectural and interior design, is to make the human experience better and more efficient through the spaces we inhabit. The privilege of getting to see one of the world's largest firms in action was eye-opening and exciting, and I feel more prepared moving forward in my education because of this experience.

A great aspect of this program is that I could also explore the city and surrounding areas in my free time. Some of my favorite memories are from these escapades. One Saturday, three friends and I took a train to Brighton to see the beach and the town. I could have spent all day looking for sea glass on the pebble beach, and I loved seeing the Victorian style railing on the pier juxtaposed with modern fashion and technology.

We also browsed boutiques and sampled some very delicious gelato. Brighton was so nice, and I am glad I was able to spend some time outside of London as well. We also toured Hampton Court Palace, where Henry VIII lived and saw the beautiful gardens and architecture there. The Chapel Royal was by far one of the most beautiful places I have ever stepped foot in. Additionally, I went with friends to tour Warner Brothers Studios, where the Harry Potter movies were filmed. I got to explore the Great Hall and see everything from the original sets to models and concept art for the characters and buildings. These are just a few of my favorites, but these experiences were just as fulfilling and informative as my academics.

Program Strengths and Weaknesses

I was incredibly happy with my study abroad experience through Maryville. The program exceeded my expectations from the moment my professors started working on a customized Practicum for Design students to participate in. They were willing and ready to meet all of our academic needs with this trip, and I am very grateful for the enthusiasm they showed in doing so. The only instance that stands out as a weakness for me is that, while we had been given directions on how to obtain Oyster cards and travel on the Tube, once my friends and I got into London, the directions they gave us proved to be more vague than we expected and we struggled a bit to actually get our transportation passes. All in all, I found that strengths greatly outweighed weaknesses for this trip.

Impact

Going forward I have a much clearer picture of the career I am studying for. I would love to work in an Architectural firm like HOK, or maybe in a smaller firm. I also love the design culture in the UK and I would not mind traveling in my future career, or even just implementing different cultural elements in my own work. I also plan to maintain a better sketchbook, to better understand my own creative process and become a more productive designer. I feel incredibly prepared to tackle my work in the coming semesters and create and curate a portfolio that I am proud of. Furthermore, I would highly recommend studying abroad to any student interested, because being in a different country will open your eyes to so many different ideas and viewpoints that you will not leave without having learned something important about yourself, your study, and the world.



