

Cory Mattheis
Scan Design | BIG Internship Evaluation Report
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My interest in the BIG internship began from an email sent out by Peter Cohan, announcing that Scan Design would be offering a six-month stint at the office. I had been familiar with the work of Bjarke Ingels for years, and had recently considered applying at the office after finishing grad school. Also, returning to Copenhagen had been on my list ever since finishing a study abroad experience there during my undergraduate education.

Having followed the work of the firm, I knew that I was getting into an office whose work mentality and skills were rigorous. Bjarke spent some time working with Rem Koolhaas at OMA and definitely adopted the intern culture from the Dutch firm. My expectations from the beginning were very different from that of my study abroad experience. This time I knew that I was there to work for BIG and learn as much as possible, not to see the city and travel. My expectations were met. This was my first experience working internationally, although during my education I had studied in both Copenhagen and Mexico City. In this case, the difference between architectural office culture and academic studio culture was not so distant.

My schedule at BIG was demanding to say the least. This is typical of a firm whose work primarily is in the competition circuit. The company has about 100 people working at any given time, split (not evenly) between offices in Copenhagen, Faroe Islands, New York City, and formerly Kazakhstan. Out of the 100 employees, there are about 40 architects, 40 interns and 10 administration and business folks. The turnover of employees is rapid, with most interns staying only six months to a year. The architects also turn over quickly, but I estimate the average time to be between 1-2 years (purely my speculation). Work is divided into project teams, usually headed up by a lead architect or two and several interns. This group works under the supervision of one of five partners at the firm. On average there were four groups working on projects in the development phase, and five groups working on competitions.

Work begins at 9 am, but most people trickled in between 9 and 10am (depending on the night before). The mornings are usually filled with meetings and getting into the swing of things, lots of coffee and such. Lunch is served between noon and 1 in the cafeteria. Everyone eats together and enjoys good company. After lunch work resumes and everyone returns to their teams and assignments. Most people stay through dinner, which is served at 7:30 (catered and free of charge for interns). The decision to stay late depends on the project which you are working on- Some teams leave at 5 or 6pm and others stay until 2 or 3am. Usually, the most demanding schedules are competitions. During my competition period I averaged around 80 hours per week, working 6 or 7 days a week.

The type of work expected of me was within my skill set, but challenged by time. Pressure at the office is high, with an emphasis on production. Digital and physical models are the primary tools for exploring design, and for a typical competition there

maybe as many as 50 models. Most of the model work is placed on (and enjoyed by) the intern population. Experience in digital modeling with Rhino is a necessity. All design projects are conceived in Rhino and realized in physical foam models. This work is actually quite fun, and gives an opportunity for interns to be involved in the early design phases of the project. The opinions of everyone on the teams are heard and considered, with the final decisions being made by the partner in charge.

During my time at BIG I worked on four different projects in various stages of development. My first task was to complete a large presentation model of the Danish Maritime Museum in Helsingor. The project had been in the office for several years already, and the design was for the most part completed. The task was to make a model to bring to the ground breaking ceremony for public viewing. Next, I was assigned to help a competition team meet the deadline for an Olympic Master Plan in Munich. This was an extremely demanding week, with several all nighters. After Munich I was transferred to a team developing a skyscraper in Shenzhen. This project was in design development already and scheduled to begin construction in the Spring of 2011. My role on this project was to design the landscaping and plaza around the building. I worked under the direct supervision of an architect and friend to develop the scheme from the overall concept down to fabrication and construction details. I also worked on material specifications for the building. This project had a much more stable schedule, with work hours from 9:30-7:30 Monday through Friday. I was on this project for about two months, in which time I was able to get out and enjoy the city. My final project was a competition in Hamburg. I worked primarily with one other architect to complete the conceptual design for the project. The timeline was a total of 5 weeks and maintained a very rigorous schedule throughout. This project was particularly interesting because I was very involved in the design process from the first day through the final submission of the competition.

Highlights of the whole experience were definitely working on so many different projects. At other firms I have worked at, I would stay on a single project for the entire duration of the internship. Also, the people at the office were great! Most people were in their late 20's or early 30's and very excited to be working at BIG. Everyone brought a unique skill set to the office and maintained an open source mentality on sharing and learning from each other. The collaborations between people and across groups were amazing! Office parties and extra curricular activities were regular occurrences.

Living in Copenhagen was great. It was especially nice to return to a city that I was already familiar with and see good friends that I had not seen in a few years. The network of Scan Design students from years past is strong, I was surprised at how many friends I had made in the first week! Meeting friends of previous Scan Design students was a great way to plug into a network of Danish students (I would suggest it to any future students). Upon arrival I stayed with a good friend in Osterbro and wound up staying there for one month. After this I used the basic online resources to find housing for the next few months in Frederiksberg. Finally, I ended up in Christianshavn in the spare room of a previous Scan Design student. All of the living arrangements were more than adequate. The process of worrying, searching, finding, and acquiring housing was actually an

adventure I enjoyed. Especially if you have never been to the city before, I would recommend shopping around in the neighborhoods before getting into a lease.

Culturally, the experience was great. I really enjoyed working in such an international office. I would not say that the experience was necessarily Danish, but more multi-cultural. Most folks at the office come from all over the world- South and North America, Japan, China, Korea, Russia, Czech Republic, Poland, Germany, Italy, Spain, France, Turkey, Sweden, Norway, and even a few from Denmark! The fact that the office is in the heart of Norrebro also contributes to the diversity of cultural experiences. My “Danish” experiences came primarily from my friends at the University and their families. I spent Christmas in Copenhagen with the family of my good friend and got to experience all of the different customs associated with that. Dancing through the house and everything... I did enjoy the design culture that seems to be so ingrained through all Danes. An appreciation for the careful and deliberate creation of spaces and objects is not something that all Seattle-ites share.

My interaction with the Scan Design coordinators in Copenhagen was extremely limited. This is not because they were not doing their job, but because my schedule did not really align with many of the activities. I did get the chance to go to a few dinners and a retreat to the beach house. Both of which were absolutely wonderful. I do wish that I had committed to making it to these events, even if that meant leaving work early.

Students who are considering applying for this internship need to be extremely dedicated and diligent workers. The interesting thing is that this office is not necessarily the best fit for the type of students that UW is producing. However, I do think that this is exactly the type of experience that could greatly supplement the more traditional approaches taught at the UW department of architecture. The office uses a highly experimental design process, which often departs from the rational and practical processes taught at UW. The student needs to be adaptable to change and open to new work flows. On the technical side the student must be very fluent with Rhino 3D modeling, all Adobe programs, and Autocad. These are skills that are more likely to be developed in the option 2 M.Arch students. English is the common language platform, but fluency in other languages is of great value as most of the projects in the office are taking place outside of Denmark or the US. A further recommendation is that the student spends some time in Copenhagen either before or after their time at BIG. Because, most likely they will not have much time to spend in the city or traveling. Perhaps this time could be structured into the internship duration somehow, either before or after the 6 month period at the office.

Overall the experience was amazing. It was just what I was looking for- a real world, intense architecture office dedicated to design. This has been an invaluable experience that will certainly influence my career. The opportunity to be part of an office on the cutting edge of architectural practice is something that I have wanted to experience since starting grad school. My expectations were met and exceeded. I would highly recommend this experience to any dedicated architecture student who is curious about high profile competition firms.

