My semester abroad in Hong Kong has surely opened my eyes and renewed my passion for design. Coming from the small studio of twelve in DEA, I suddenly found myself in a sixty-person studio at the School of Design in Hong Kong Polytechnic University. The course curriculum sounded similar to DEA’s, but the method of teaching was vastly different. With so many students in the studio, the instructors who we called “tutors” have limited time for each individual. Yet they provide valuable knowledge that comes with practicing professionals. More valuable, personally, was what I learned from my peers throughout the semester, both inside and outside of the classroom. With diverse interests, skill sets, and experiences, they showed me what design students are doing in other parts of the world. They are motivated, hardworking, and curious, which all the more inspired me to discover my own interests in design.

The School of Design provides a valuable environment that exposes students to a variety of design disciplines, from interior design to product design, advertising, digital media, etc., all within a single building. I was able to take classes in product and publication design—opportunities I didn’t have at Cornell. The school’s location near some of the busiest commercial districts of Hong Kong provided the convenience of sourcing materials and visiting exhibitions. With a diversified design course load, I was having a blast. I realized my interests in product and graphic design, but I was more excited to see how I could bridge various design disciplines in future projects.

Over the semester, I have grown a new appreciation of Hong Kong. It is no doubt a culturally rich city that one needs to take time to discover. It is so easy to get distracted by neon lights, the sea of tourists, and giant shopping malls, that we overlook the underlying culture that is the character of Hong Kong.

The city can be overwhelming, with busy streets towered by buildings on all sides, double-decked buses that come too close, and subway trains that pack you right up against your neighbor, but the city is also friendly once you learn to navigate. It is always bustling with excitement, a city that never sleeps. I am very grateful for the opportunity to spend a semester studying design in Hong Kong. I can still clearly remember the Hong Kong skyline from the Kowloon waterfront. I will be back for sure.
The few months I spent on exchange were by far the best few months of my life. The wealth of opportunity to learn both inside and outside of the classroom was unlike any experience I have ever had the benefit of having. I took classes unlike those offered at Cornell, engaged in local activities, met fascinating exchange and local students, and explored Asia in a way that I never thought possible.

During my time abroad, I studied Fashion Design and enrolled in Knitwear Design and Fashion Visualizations & Presentations. Hong Kong Polytechnic University (HKPU) has truly remarkable facilities that allow its students to experience fashion from a highly industry-focused perspective. I had never seen such comprehensive, advanced equipment provided to students before, so this was a unique opportunity for me to not only be exposed to various machinery, but also actually learn how to use it. In addition to fashion design classes, I enrolled in Elementary Mandarin and Culture & Costume Studies. My courses gave me a nice range of class types, from lectures to labs, and I had a richer classroom experience because of this. Additionally, the teaching staff at HKPU made a great difference in my exchange experience. My professors were incredibly welcoming, helpful, and knowledgeable. Their talent and expertise in their specialties was a great asset to my learning experience.

Another highlight of my exchange experience was the dorm life. A 10-minute walk from campus, my dorm was located in a convenient location near many restaurants. All exchange students lived in the dorm, making socializing and event planning very easy. Being in such close proximity to both exchange and local students was by far one of the best parts of being abroad. I met people from literally all over the world, each with a unique international background. This opportunity to share cultures across such a large amount of diverse people is something that can never be replicated. I feel very fortunate to have met such fascinating, passionate people, with which I still keep frequent contact and look forward to visiting at some point in the future.

The local students also contributed to my exchange experience with their kind, hospitable nature. All local students I encountered were always more than happy to show me around Hong Kong so I could immerse myself in the local culture. I really enjoyed getting to know the local students through exchange student events, such as a food tour, calligraphy class, and other fun activities. I am looking forward to seeing them next time I am back in Hong Kong or if they visit the United States.

In addition to seeing the city with locals, I was excited to have had the opportunity to do the various tourist activities I read about in travel books or heard about from friends and family. Hong Kong itself has a really rich, vibrant culture that cannot be thoroughly explored in just a couple weeks. My friends and I were able to visit classic sites such as The Peak, but also explore Hong Kong’s more off-the-beaten-path areas. One of my most memorable weekends in Hong Kong was spent camping, hiking, and swimming around Sai Kung Island, which was less than an hour bus and ferry ride from Kowloon. Other surrounding islands we visited included Llama Island and Lantau Island, both of which were within a half-hour ferry ride from Hong Kong.

On top of the traveling we did within and around Hong Kong, fellow Cornell exchange students Lea Freni and Marisa Cirlin and I traveled to Shanghai, Beijing, Xi’an, Thailand, and Malaysia. We were able to visit popular sites, such as Xin Tian Di, the Great Wall of China, Forbidden City, Terracotta Warriors, and Mekong Delta. It was exciting to see countries I had only ever heard about.

My experience in Hong Kong is one that I will never forget. I have learned so much from my time abroad, both from my classes and about myself. Hong Kong is such a unique place unlike anything found in the United States. I strongly recommend this program to all students looking to participate in a student exchange. It is a truly one-of-a-kind experience.
Lea Freni

Cornell University, Class of 2014 Fashion Design Major (FSAD)

Spring Semester Exchange at Hong Kong Polytechnic University

Sitting amongst a sea of strangers with a common destination, I was suddenly confronted with a simple question: “Why?” On the plane from Vancouver to Hong Kong, I had been chatting with my neighbor, a middle aged Chinese man who was bewildered as to why a young fashion student would leave New York, one of the fashion capitols of the world, to spend the semester studying in Hong Kong. Why? For exposure to fresh cultural perspectives and aesthetic values, to meet new people and to step out of my comfort zone in a part of world I had never experienced first-hand, not to mention Hong Kong Polytechnic’s incredible apparel facilities. At the time, I didn’t know what to expect but my experience abroad offered me all of these things with many surprises along the way.

It quickly became clear that Hong Kong was a very exciting place to be. The view of the skyline along the harbor soon became one of my most beloved aspects of the city. I enjoyed my new routine of being immersed in the energy of the street markets, bustling crowds and food vendors and watching people practice tai-chi each morning on my walk to class. Observing simple aspects of daily life in Hong Kong was always engaging. From ordering food to classroom etiquette, it was always interesting to compare and contrast the practices I was used to with what was going on around me. Boredom was impossible.

One of the unanticipated benefits of studying in Hong Kong was that it provided me with easy access to nearby islands. I had the chance to visit Lamma Island, Cheung Chau Island, Lantau Island, and SAR Macao. All were a simple ferry or subway ride away and made for exciting weekend outings, often accompanied by other exchange students eager to visit the “Big Buddha” or nearby temples.

I was particularly pleased that I chose to visit Hong Kong in the Fall because my visit coincided with the Lunar New Year. The scale and importance of the holiday were unlike anything I had ever witnessed and local students and teachers were happy to explain the many preparations and customs associated with the Lunar New Year.

In celebration of the Year of the Snake, I took a calligraphy workshop (one of the many free cultural programs offered through PolyU) where students showed me how to write wishes for the New Year to give to friends and family. The practice of elders giving money to younger relatives and family friends in little red “lai see” packets was a favorite among my peers and my roommate’s family very sweetly included me in this custom. I liked seeing how the holiday united the city, the streets were awash with red and gold and there were so many events to witness and take part in. From the overwhelming crowds and smells of the flower night market, the spectacle of the night parade and the pageantry of the fireworks to taking part in the wish-making traditions of the well-wishing festival, there was so much to take in.

PolyU not only made it very easy to for students to feel immersed in the New Years celebrations but also did a phenomenal job of helping exchange students feel welcome and integrated into the University and local culture. There was a wealth of resources available to exchange students and meeting and connecting with both local students and other exchange students was very easy. PolyU students led food tours of the city, offered a variety of cultural workshops and each exchange student was paired with a local “buddy” to guide them through their time abroad. This was in my opinion, the strongest aspect of the program as it provided me with a network of people who were as eager to hear about my culture and experiences as I was to learn about theirs.

The exchange student network at PolyU was large and incredibly well connected. While there were students from all over the world, most came from Europe. Spending time with people who shared my experience of being immersed in unfamiliarity but came from different backgrounds led to a lot of interesting conversations and realizations and provided me with exposure to a variety of perspectives.
In many ways I felt like I was getting to travel Europe and Asia. I had many opportunities to practice my French and German, something else that I had not expected from my exchange in Hong Kong.

A large group of the foreign exchange students were also in the Institute of Textiles and Clothing program. Like many of them, I had chosen ITC largely in part of the facilities available and we were not disappointed. In addition to several design studios, computer labs, a photography studio, 3D presentation space and design library that doubled as a gallery, there were several rooms dedicated to knitting, weaving and dying equipment which essentially amounted to the equivalent of a small factory tucked away on campus. One way I took advantage of this was by taking a knitwear class. Being able to learn about knitwear production processes while actually using the machinery made the material so much more relevant and tangible.

In addition to the on-campus facilities, PolyU organized several apparel factory visits around Hong Kong and Mainland China. I participated in one such visit to a Sun Hing Industries Holding Limited, a lingerie materials factory in Shenzhen, China that is known for their “green manufacturing” practices. Here, we were guided by a former PolyU professor who worked for Sun Hing. He explained various knitting techniques and wastewater treatment practices as we toured the facilities. This was a great hands-on learning opportunity enabled by choosing to study in a place so close to major manufacturing centers.

Proximity and accessibility to Mainland China and nearby countries was definitely the highlight of my time abroad. Travel was usually inexpensive compared to the US and Europe and I was able to experience a tremendous amount of cultural and geographic diversity. I traveled to mainland China three times, touring the factory in Shenzhen, admiring the diverse architecture in Shanghai, visiting the many cultural and historical sites in Beijing, witnessing the overwhelming scale of the terra cotta army in Xi’an, and the astounding natural beauty of Guilin, not to mention climbing the Great Wall. Visits to Vietnam, Thailand and Malaysia were equally fascinating and the process of planning and executing travel in countries where I did not speak (or read) the language was always challenging, exciting and certainly where I learned the most during my time abroad.

From the city, the welcoming local and exchange students and the classes, to the incredible opportunities for travel, I value my five months on exchange in Hong Kong as one of the most stimulating and diverse periods in my life. Upon returning to New York, I found myself taking nostalgic trips to Chinatown and being struck by how things that once seemed so foreign suddenly seemed so familiar. Travel has a way of making the world feel much smaller and more accessible but also providing a new lens through which to view the things you have grown accustomed to in your native home. This was one of the many unanticipated answers to the question of “why” to study in Hong Kong for which I am very grateful.