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The 2013 JLS Travel Scholarship provided me with an invaluable experience visiting and studying sustainability with UC Davis’ program Sustainable Cities of Northern Europe (SCONE). The cities included in this summer’s course were; (Sweden) Stockholm, Karlstadt, Malmö, (Denmark) Copenhagen, Trekroner, and (Germany) Freiburg and (Switzerland) Lucern.

Each of these cites were selected for demonstrating achievements in implementing significant contributions to renewable resources of energy, smart urban growth and planning, public transportation, as well as having excellent models of bicycle and pedestrian access.

Prior to my experiences abroad, the term ‘livability’ seemed somewhat subjective when applied to urban environments. In our study one of the most important takeaway moments for me personally, has been how tangible the term ‘livability’ actually is once the above directives are put into practice. My travel abroad experience has inspired me with the possibilities for improving the quality of life here in the U.S. by planning and designing our cities with these goals in mind. The following are highlights of each of the above sustainability objectives with an examples from my travels.

Seamlessly Connected Public Transportation

Stockholm’s example of public transportation impressed me the most. Not only were the trains, and buses scheduled frequently, on time and clean, but they were coordinated so that a traveler would literally get off of one mode of transit to find their connection ready to depart within only a matter of minutes. Since they were scheduled frequently, they were never very crowded, even during rush hour, and the ease of traveling on public transportation eclipsed that of traveling by car. Further facilitating ease of travel, Stockholm has one card which pays for multiple forms of transportation, much like the Bay Area’s Clipper card. Considering these features of Stockholm’s public transportation system, it is not surprising that the majority of it’s citizens travel by public transport for most of their trips and it does not have the associated negative connotations that we sometime experience here in the U.S. Another plus is that Stockholm’s buses are fueled by energy generated from recycled waste. While in Stockholm, I made a trip to one of the archipelago islands, Utö. by train, bus and ferry. I was met by my next mode of transport at each leg of the journey with only a few minutes wait. In a matter of two hours I went from the city center to a beautiful pristine island in the Baltic Sea.

Smart Growth

Malmö is located in the southern region of Sweden and is an example of an industrial city under transformation. Like much of Sweden, Malmö has experienced issues with limited housing, and instead of expanding out and contributing to urban sprawl, it is developing within. One example is Western Harbor, which is creating a mixed dense
use district in an a previous ship building and harbor area. The district has used the creative talents of internationally acclaimed architects to design stunning buildings such as Santiago Calatrava’s ‘Turning Torso’. Since several different architects have been commissioned to design particular areas of the district, Western Harbor’s buildings have a sense of uniqueness, as opposed to the ‘cookie cutter’ feel of many new developments in the U.S. Western Harbor is situated quite near to the center of Malmö, increasing connectivity, minimizing commuting time of residents and helping to maintain a vibrant urban core. One the exceptional features of the Western Harbor district is that it also increases access to the shoreline of the Baltic Sea, providing a dynamic experience for pedestrians. This example of waterfront development could be particularly inspiring for the Bay Area region.

Renewable Energy

Nestled at the edges of the Black forest in Germany, the city of Freiburg has been committed to increasing its usage of renewable energies since the mid 70’s. The pride in which Freiburg’s citizens take in their commitment to creating a sustainable city is palatable and I was especially moved by a community which pooled funds to purchase a windmill. Perched on top of a mountain and surrounded by productive forests and grazing land for cows, one farm hosts two co-owned wind turbines. Aside from producing energy which is not fossil fuel dependent, the farm is able to generate much needed funds selling surplus energy back to the city. This is especially important since it has become increasingly difficult for smaller scaled farmers in the region to make a profit. Freiburg also boasts of having numerous photovoltaic modules installed in many buildings. The district of Vauban has affectionately been called the Solar City, with photovoltaic modules creatively incorporated into building designs.

Bicycle and Pedestrian Accessibility

Copenhagen is undoubtably one of the biking capitals of the world, with over 50% of all trips taken by bicycles. This has been achieved by giving bikers priority on the roads with safe and generous designated bike lanes, bike stop lights which give bikers a head start before automobiles, and a higher priority for the plowing of snowy roads. During the 70’s, Copenhagen experienced a severe oil crisis and began an aggressive campaign to decrease fossil fuel dependance. Through sexy marketing and the previously mentioned strategies, Copenhagen has turned biking into a mainstream part of life.

In addition to being an incredibly bike-able city, Copenhagen is also very walkable. Many of it’s which are streets located within prime shopping areas have been designated for pedestrians only, or with limited car access. Copenhagen also has numerous promenades along its canals which contribute to a vibrant city dynamic. Aside from accessibility, these streets host artistic installations and are executed with a high design aesthetic. The result is an ever changing and engaging experience for the pedestrian.
Copenhagen's Bike path and park 'Super Wedge'

Kalvebod Bolge activity pier, Copenhagen
Langebro Canal Promenade, Copenhagen

Copenhagen's street design
Vauban's Heliotrope-Photovoltaics incorporated in building design, Freiburg
Wind turbine, Freiburg

Western Harbour development with Calatrava’s Touring Torso, Malmo
Western Harbour district waterfront promenade, Malmo

Stockholm viewed from the cliffs of Soldermalm
An aerial view of Stockholm