Looking back at the last year, it’s a bit jarring to recount everything I did. Through the past year, I’ve been places I never thought I would go to, had new experiences I didn’t expect, and learned quite a few lessons along the way.

At this time last year, I wasn’t even in this continent. I was enjoying my time studying abroad in Hong Kong, immersing myself in an entirely new culture. Although I did have some fears about going, I was excited to change my surroundings and learn about a city so unlike my own. While there, I had the opportunity to begin learning Mandarin Chinese, but I think most of my most impactful learning was done outside of the classroom. The country is a diverse, stretching from an urban metropolis to remote island villages. While in Hong Kong, I learned to let go and rely on those around me more. I also had the opportunity to travel to Beijing, China and Hanoi, Vietnam while abroad. In Beijing, I gained a much deeper understanding of traditional mainland Chinese culture. While Hong Kong was more westernized, Beijing is still nearly untouched by western influence. In Vietnam, I had the opportunity to see the lives of people in a developing country. It gave me a stronger perspective on understanding limited opportunities, and heightened my interest in non-profit work that I still carry with me today.

For the portion of the summer I wasn’t in Hong Kong, I was completing a research internship with the architecture department here at UC. It was my first experience working directly under a professor for research, and it was certainly eye-opening. There was a lot of individualized responsibility that I had to quickly adapt to. Overall, it was a good learning experience, but probably not something I would do again. I learned that I’m much more of a collaborative worker, and independent research doesn’t loan itself well to that.

I ended the summer with the Design for America Summer Leadership Conference in Chicago. It provided the opportunity to meet other designers passionate about design for social impact all across the country. Our project was redesigning the voting experience, trying to increase political engagement, regardless of political affiliations. It was so topical given the looming election, and was an exciting way to engage design with politics.

After a busy summer, I returned to UC for fall classes. My two biggest challenges were the co-op search and reassuming my role as a leader in Design for America. It was difficult trying to balance classes and clubs and the job search while also maintaining some semblance of a social life. It wasn’t until I visited an old high school friend now enrolled at the University of Chicago that I calmed down and hit my stride. When I met my friend’s friends, I saw them all balancing life at a school notorious for high stress with their personal lives. It definitely taught me to just relax, and not stress over things out of of my control. In a resolve over my stress of the job search, I finally landed at co-op at Crown Equipment Corporation as a design research intern.

At Crown, I was truly thrown into the deep end. They put me on projects day one, and involved me as a truly active member of the team. My main project while there was learning how the data our lift truck fleet management software provides influences decision-making in warehouse operations. While there, I learned a lot of quick lessons on how to work in a corporate environment. Of course, I also gained a much deeper understanding of design research, and had the opportunity to work in software and services. Aside from my main project, I completed an independent research project on the safety program we use in our factories. I was looking to understand the system as well as discover design opportunity areas. Overall, it was a very well-received project, and I’m returning to Crown in July to present my full findings to the Vice President of manufacturing as well as his team.

Coming back for the summer semester, I resumed my role as a leader in Design for America and found our project partner for the semester. We’re working with Design in Mind, supporting the organization, finding volunteer opportunities, and also developing an art and design education for our visits at the Evanston summer school program. After working with Design in Mind, I feel much more comfortable implementing the design thinking process practically into community-oriented projects. This semester, I also began volunteering with Habitat for Humanity as a way to do research for my industrial design power tool project. I really enjoyed being able to give back, and it was a fun way to do research for a project.

On the horizon, I will be going to the DFA leadership conference at Northwestern again. I’ve changed quite a bit and experienced a lot in the last year. I’m excited to reunite with my friends I made last year and share our past year’s experiences. This fall, I’ll be moving to Shanghai for a co-op with CBi China Bridge. Although I’ve already been to Hong Kong and Beijing, I have a feeling Shanghai will be completely different altogether. I’ll be living and working there without the support of a university or a tour group. I know it’ll be difficult at first to fit in, but I’m excited for the challenge.

Overall, I grew a lot as a designer as well as on the individual level. From study abroad and internships to campus leadership and class projects, I truly pushed myself out of my comfort zone. I’m really looking forward to this next year. Who knows what projects will come my way next!