

Field report of Philipp Steinlechner

The time abroad in the United States of America to write my Masters thesis was an interesting, exciting and awesome time. Being able to work on-site of the projects and having an office space at the Georgia Institute of Technology (GA Tech) enabled a variety of chances to meet interesting people and their culture. The fact, that I had to have my permanent residence in Atlanta/GA and my project being located in Savannah/GA was in fact the first challenge to deal with. It made the connection to the City of Savannah and its employees very concentrated on several weeks not having the whole experience of living in and with the city of Savannah. It took me two weeks to find an affordable place to stay and another week to finally go down to Savannah on a bus ride of four hours per direction. Finally arriving in Savannah everything was prepared perfectly. One of my bosses, Peter Shonka, the Assistant City Manager, hosted me in his house and took me on a camping and canoeing trip after knowing me just for five days. I got to see the office buildings, the landfill I was having my project on and the touristy sites of the city. The weeklong trips happened only three times due to limited financial and time resources on both sides. The second time I also staid down, in Savannah, for the weekend. The SCAD (Savannah Collage of Arts and Design) had its graduation party and my second boss Nick Deffley was glad to host me with his family showing me the nightlife and finally the Atlantic Ocean after living in North America for nearly 3 months. The rest of the communication was a weekly Skype-conversation and e-mail correspondence. It made the interconnection very impersonal and limited. I would not say it had an influence on the quality of the data and the work but it definitely had an influence on the living situation and the missing community experience with the rather small city of Savannah. The last personal meeting with the city officials was to present my results and recommendations to future actions and projects.

The cultural and art experience is definitely more developed living in Atlanta/GA. It is called the New York of the south and by its diversity and offers of concerts and recreational activities it is very fitting. The dialect down south is very strong and takes time to adapt to it. The chance to work at the GA Tech campus is a great opportunity to meet engineers and students from different countries and their experiences with renewable and sustainable energy systems. The standards of the US and other countries are not comparable to Austrian standards in case of energy efficiency and specific energy consumption of buildings or transportation. The awareness that Austria is protecting their homes against the cold climate is the same process as protecting a house against hot climate is not given to most people resulting in a very high energy consumption for cooling devices. Which are very necessary because the humidity is significantly higher in the state of Georgia causing mold and other damage to buildings. I was warmly welcome at the ECE department of GA Tech (School of Electrical and Computer Engineering). The visa corresponded Peggy L Hand figured out a way to achieve the J-1 status for me. It was a time consuming process because either the visa regulations changed or were looked closer into it by the authorities. The result was the mandatory stay in Atlanta/GA nobody ever checked. Peggy also helped us with finding a host professor responsible for a working place and any inconveniences of my side. With Lukas Graber she connected me with an electrical engineer interested in sustainable energy systems and for some parts of my stay it was very good that he speaks German. Mr. Graber and his team of students met every Friday presenting their weekly progress and future tasks for the next week. Mr. Graber also informed me about educational and cultural events in the city and helped me with any problems I faced during the working time, including finding an office space. Due to the fact that I was not on a paid internship there were no funds to

provide me with a proper computer and monitor forcing me to work on my own laptop. But all in all at GA Tech I was able to attend classes about power generation from an electrical engineering point of view and made it possible to meet other students of GA Tech and real Americans.

For future students attending the same exchange program I suggest to start as early as possible to apply for the Visa and the scholarships. Not only Marshall is providing funds to this program there are others the international office should be aware of. In my case I started to apply at the end of October 2015 and finally I got my Visa beginning of March 2016. But the expected date of starting working in the USA was February 15th. So the flight I took on 15th of March, one month late, I was able to book only one week in advance. A cheap offer by STA travel still made it possible to find an affordable flight non-stop from Munich to Atlanta. Mandatory for this offer from the mentioned company was an ISIC (International Student Identity Card), so an application in advance is suggested and it is valid for one year. The short time period of Visa approval and arrival in the United States made it impossible to look for housing from Europe. Also the postponing of the turn-in date of the paper for the Marshall scholarship was necessary and luckily possible.

All in all I really enjoyed my time in the States and would recommend it to any open-minded student from around the world. Some stereotypes will be confirmed, some not and some created. But starting with a respectful and open manner everyone will show back respect and somehow understanding for other cultures. Never underestimate patriotism and its symbols of freedom, meaning do not criticize internal and foreign politics, past or ongoing. Enjoy the food!