First and foremost, I want to thank those who made the Wallenberg scholarship possible. It is one thing to feel like you were successful in your final project and another to be given scholarship money for it. I am extremely grateful for the scholarship and without it, this experience would not have been possible.

I suppose my experience in Tokyo could be considered unique from the “normal” Wallenberg winner’s use of the scholarship. After studying abroad in Tokyo with Blaine Brownell in the summer of 2007, I knew that was exactly where I wanted to go back. Between the culture, the architecture, the transportation system and the people themselves, I love everything about Tokyo and the country as a whole.

My trip started off in Tokyo. After landing, I was able to drop some things off with a friend living in Saitama (where I would later stay). A wonderful thing about Japan is the Shinkansen Rail Pass. As it is only available to foreigners, I took full advantage of it. I purchased a two week pass that allowed me to travel the entire country with an unlimited amount of trips on the bullet trains.
First on the list was Kyoto. Unlike Tokyo, Kyoto’s transportation is predominantly busses. I spent several days there getting to experience the more quiet, historical and religious side of Japan (much different than Tokyo). I was able to see all of the famous shrines and temples: Kinkaku-ji, Kiyomizudera, Heian Shrine, and several others. The gardens in Kyoto and the landscape in general, provided some of the most vibrant greens I have ever seen in my life.
After my stay in Kyoto, the next destination was Naoshima. Sometimes known as “Ando Island,” Naoshima is home to some incredible architecture, including one of my favorite buildings in Japan: the Chi Chu Art Museum. At the island I was greeted with SANAA’s welcome center where I rented a bicycle to travel around the island. Along my bike ride, I stopped at the Benesse House and the Art House Project. The final destination (other side of the island) was Yayoi Kusama’s giant yellow gourd.
The following day was a much more somber journey to Hiroshima. Although I had the opportunity to go there on my previous visit, I thought it necessary to go back. Despite the city’s horrific past, today it stands out as a very beautiful part of Japan. I got the chance to revisit the Peace Memorial Museum and Park, Atomic dome, and Kenzo Tange’s arched Cenotaph. What always touches me is how the response through the harshness of the US actions was of peace. Everything in the city emits a message of peace in hopes that a war tactic this severe never happens again.
Although Hiroshima tugs at your heart, I left the city looking forward to the next journey that was only a short boat ride away: Miyajima Island. As we pulled into the island there is the nonstop view of the island’s highlight: the floating Torii Gate. Wild deer (very friendly), walk around as tourists buy food to feed them. After taking countless photographs of the torii gate, I made my way up the hill to get on the sky car that takes you to the top of Mount Misen. What a view!! Atop of Mt. Misen there were a handful of “domesticated” monkeys who were more than willing to be photographed.

After making my way down the mountain, I stopped off at a local riyokan that had several private onsen (hot baths). Absolutely amazing. Hot tubs and spas aren’t even on the same level as a true Japanese onsen. The tub was made of large rocks, the sulfuric water made them extremely smooth. After getting out I amazingly more refreshed (but exhausted), so I made my way to the boat back to Hiroshima.
The next morning I made my way back to Tokyo to spend some time with my friend Andy who is currently teaching English in Saitama, Japan. I ended up living with Andy for the remainder of my trip. Before I won the Wallenberg Scholarship, I had been granted two unpaid internships in Japan. Because I had somewhere to live, I knew I would have to pay for my food, transportation and flights myself. Thankfully the Wallenberg scholarship covered most of these expenses, and for this I am very thankful. The second part of this write-up is in regards to my experiences with Sou Fujimoto Architects and Kengo Kuma + Associates.

First and foremost, I want to preface this by saying that I think what I did should be suggested to all Wallenberg winners. Very rarely will recent graduates be hired as PAID interns by any foreign firm, therefore we are constantly facing the option of working for free, paying for living out of our own pockets. By using the Wallenberg scholarship to not only see the country and experience all of the incredible architecture of Tokyo and Kyoto, I was able to work first hand with two of the most modern day famous architects in Japan.
My first office was Sou Fujimoto Architects where I worked for 7 weeks. On the 6th floor of a building with no employee elevator was a fairly large space packed with models. Fujimoto bases most of the work through a highly iterative, model based process. The atmosphere was very similar to that of student-professor than employee-boss (which changed at Kuma’s office). I had the opportunity to work on a competition project for a new university campus in Egypt. What was fantastic was getting to present my work directly to Fujimoto and receive feedback. At the same time I got to work with people from all over the world: France, Denmark, Italy, Ireland, Bulgaria, Portugal and Switzerland. It was really great to get to see how people from different cultural/educational backgrounds go about their architectural process (although sometimes quite frustrating :)). My time at Fujimoto’s office was very memorable and our competition actually won 3rd place winning the office $40,000! Unfortunately we did not see any of that money, hahaha. But I was presented one of his new books as a token of his appreciation.
Between my time at Fujimoto’s office and Kuma’s, I had to renew my tourist visa. To do this, people usually fly to a nearby country, stay for a few days then return. My friend teaching English and another TCAUP student who was also interning at Kuma’s office and I decided to travel to Seoul, South Korea for 4 days to visit friends who were working there. At first glance, Seoul is much like Tokyo, but after being there for a few hours you see the small differences: no landmarks (many similar towers), the people were less passive, food was MUCH more diverse (much American food and traditional Korean), and way cheaper than Japan. We spent one day just walking around Dong Dae moon and Nam Dae Moon (local markets), as well as local “green” architecture in the city. Another day was dedicated solely to walking around the Seoul University Campus – OMA’s Theatre was fantastic, followed by a short trip to Kyoung Bok Goong Palace. South Korea was a great break from Japan and I was ready for my next experience at Kuma-san’s office!
My second office was Kengo Kuma + Associates. For me, this office was much more professional and the quality of people and the work was much better. Much of their team had extensive backgrounds (Harvard GSD, Yale, working for OMA, Chipperfield, etc, etc). The interns were fantastic as well. Here I had a similar experience getting to work with people from all over (Spain, China, Bosnia, Australia, Canada and the UK). To top it off, I arrived at one of the best times for the office. Kuma’s work was being exhibited in Gallery MA, which only chooses one architect a year for a personal exhibit accompanied by a new book being published! Because I was an employee, I was allowed to set up behind the scenes, take pictures where nobody was allowed, etc, etc, all the fun things associated with an exhibit. Transporting models on the train was not as exciting, though!
Unlike Fujimoto’s office where he was ever present, Kuma was rarely seen. He is constantly flying around the world meeting with clients and giving lectures. At Kuma’s office I was put on a really awesome commissioned project slated to start soon. Because of my LEED accreditation, I was asked to determine many important design factors including overhang depth based on positioning (the building wrapped about 320 degrees), drainage systems, shading systems through diagrams and sections. I also built a 1:200 scale model and was responsible for the main 3D Rhino model of the buildings. I was VERY busy for those 5 weeks! To show their appreciation for their interns, they threw me a personal going away party and gave me a Kuma book that everybody signed. All in all, it was a fantastic experience that would have been hard to afford had...
After I finished my internship at Kuma’s office, I took a week to revisit some of my favorite places in Tokyo; Shibuya, Shinjuku, Omotesando, Kamakura, Ginza and Roppongi Hills. Though intimidating at first, the rail system in Tokyo is incredibly easy and efficient. Besides being packed like a sardine during the morning rush hour to work every morning, trains were surprisingly present as most people keep to themselves reading or playing games on their phone.

Finally I kissed Japan goodbye and headed home in early December. 3.5 months of a fantastic experience that I was able to keep slightly over the $5,000 thanks to a generous friend who supplied me with cheap rent (if only the food came at a discount! J). As I said before, traveling to a country is one thing, but getting to really immerse yourself in the culture through work is something everyone should try once in their life. I left with invaluable experience for my future as a designer and architect and this opportunity from Wallenberg helped make that possible. THANK YOU!! :)