Our research trip through Guatemala was immensely helpful in teaching us how people live and what kinds of products and services the could potentially benefit from. It’s hard to imagine designing a product for the area without having the type of access we had. One of the most important things we learned pertaining to our water filter project was about people’s perception of water—safety and where it comes from—and how this varies between rural/urban, male/female and middle-class/poor Guatemalans.

Studying the markets, shopping in various towns and talking to people about what they buy and where they buy it helped us to create a picture of what type of venue we can sell our filter in to best appeal to our customers. Through our interviews we were also able to determine that urban people are our first market because they currently pay a lot for bottled water and they are well informed of water safety. The financial savings that our filter offers should be very attractive to them, whereas rural people have access to nearly free water and don’t buy as much bottled water.

Most people’s water sources are contaminated by either runoff, nearby waste or poor containment (e.g. animals fall into tanks). Diarrhea is a huge concern in rural areas and a lot of work is done to boil water or use chlorine when bottled water isn’t available. It was very important to see how different people in different regions lived and how there isn’t just one type of Guatemalan. Everyone we met showed us something new (which is not to say there weren’t several commonalities). We also got direct feedback on what kinds of shops people prefer, that they don’t trust door-to-door salesmen, what kinds of health care options they have and the advantages and concerns of each.

The structure of our trip was flexible enough to allow for changing our plan as circumstances changed for various projects, but it was structured enough to make sure that progress was made one each day. I would have liked to see some other areas of Guatemala to see if there are regional differences that we missed out on, since we stayed within a few hours of Guatemala City. I know, for instance, that in Santiago, Chile the water situation is quite different: people do not have running water in many areas and rely on a water truck to fill up their tanks. Their issues are with storage and filtering, where as Guatemalan’s issues are not with storage, but primarily with filtering.

It would have also been nice to see multiple Mayan villages, since we were really only exposed to Pasajquim. Previous groups made some mistakes where they took an observation of one or two homes and assumed those problems to be universal when indeed they were due to problems with the individual subjects. Seeing a broad number of people and doing deep research with a selection of them might be a good model to ensure we are not making assumptions based on inadequate sample sizes.

One eye-opening part of the trip was our visit to Julio’s home (the man who runs TPS). We saw that his home was in a dirty state, the stove was pouring black smoke all over the kitchen and the latrine was filthy. It was disheartening, but an invaluable lesson, to see the man who was running TPS with a home in that state.

I knew going into the trip that it was going to inform the project immensely and that all of the U.S. students would gain insight into how Guatemalans live and work, but I had no way of
knowing what we were going to come away with at the end and I was very happy that after just nine days we left with a great sense of the country and people and our heads full of ideas. I think it’s going to be great as we start the class and begin to ideate, we will be able to check our ideas against our trip findings to make sure they are applicable and feasible.

For me some of the greatest parts of the trips were the small, unplanned detours. Luzmi and I stopped into Anna’s home, a very poor woman outside Antigua while she was making tortillas to sell with her 3 year old next to her and infant in a hammock. Testing various water sources was very exciting because we got to see the problem firsthand. Also, getting to put the prototypes into action was thrilling after having them in our hands for many months prior to the trip. However, the most insightful part of the trip for our project was definitely the user interviews at Monica’s dad’s plant: the feedback on our prototype and what people expect in a product like this, where people shop for various goods, their attitudes on water and knowledge of filters, their medical ailments and expenses, impressions of foreign goods versus domestic ones and finally, how much they pay for water and how much they would pay for a filter and maintenance. You can not Google this kind of information and without access to potential customers we would be at a huge disadvantage.

The trip had a huge impact on both the project as well as my own personal approach to design. It is really another level of user research than we are used to in the states, because our consumers live in a different society with a whole different set of assumptions that include values, common behaviors, geographical layout, infrastructure, government, health, education and perception of community and the world. I can see that having this wider perspective will make me a better designer even when developing products for the United States. I will tend to make less assumptions and note the attributes that are American instead of considering them as the default traits. Of course, the most immediate impact of the trip is going to be over the course of this project, as we push the filter further along to being a marketable product—bouncing all of our ideas off of the trip findings will make our project much stronger. Finally, the most lasting and significant impact of the trip will be if we can get the filter into use in Guatemala where it can sustain a local business model and start to help the lives of customers as well as local business people.