

My Time Spent Abroad

By Colton Fleitz

Ciao! I just finished studying abroad in Florence, Italy, completing the Applied Human Factors and Art in Italy course. I am now travelling across Europe, beginning in Portugal and working eastward across the continent for the remainder of the summer, and plan to end my journey in Hungary. The past month has been the best and most transformative experience of my entire undergraduate college career. Getting to see the way others live, conduct business, and interact with the world around them gave me a deeper appreciation for cultural diversity and broadened my perspective on global interconnectedness. Having the ability to participate and learn in a program like this was an incredible privilege that I will forever cherish.

After visiting eight small businesses in the central region of Italy, it was clear to me that there is a much greater emphasis on quality put into their products. The people of the country take pride in where their goods come from, and those who make these goods have a true passion for their craft. Below is a photo taken by me at Stefano Bremer, a local shoemaker in Florence. Stefano makes all his shoes by hand and works directly with his customers to get perfect molds of their feet, ensuring a quality fit with the purpose of having his products last a lifetime.



Custom molds for leather shoes at Stefano Bremer.

Another thing about the businesses that made an impact on me was the elevated focus on sustainability that they all share. It was clear the businesses cared deeply about the planet and that shone through in their actions. One business in particular really stuck out to me. This was a coworking space for leather designers where the leather used was 100% recycled and sustainably sourced. Run by Cassandra Kane, an expat from New York City, the space uses leather that would go to waste to create products including purses, wallets, and other common leather goods. Witnessing the mission of this business firsthand was truly inspiring and motivated me to incorporate a stronger focus on sustainability in my future engineering work.

While it's incredible to experience the art, the history, the dedication to quality, and the deep sense of community that radiates through the streets of Italy, it also made me reflect on

what we could bring back to the U.S. from these rich cultural values. It's easy to assume that implementing these changes is the responsibility of policymakers or someone else willing to take on the challenge. But that mindset won't create meaningful change. It won't guide us toward a more sustainable planet. It won't shift us away from the harsh realities of mass consumerism that dominate American life. It won't help us build communities that slow down, gather more often, and live more intentionally. As engineers, we can't sit on the sidelines. We must recognize that we hold tremendous power to shape the world for the better, not just for our own neighborhoods, but for people and places we may never personally encounter.

As engineers, we are builders, not just of bridges and machines, but of systems, cities, and futures. We have the unique opportunity to design with purpose and intention. Whether it's through sustainable materials, ethical supply chains, or human-centered design, we can incorporate values like community, equity, and environmental care into the very infrastructure of daily life through our engineering practices. The work we do does much more than just solve technical problems. It sets the tone for how people live. We should lead with vision, taking notes from communities around the world that challenge the norms of what we know in the US as typical daily life, and create solutions that honor both people and the planet. The future is not something we inherit: it's something we engineer. That was the most important takeaway that I gleaned from this experience. I feel incredibly grateful for the way my mindset has shifted and inspired me to be a better, more intentional engineer.



People gather in a park a mile from the city center to watch the sunset.

I would like to conclude this reflection by giving a special thank you to Laura Knight, Erin McCave, the UT study abroad office, and SAI programs for making this entire experience possible. It would not have been possible without their hard work, sacrifice, and dedication to seeing their students succeed.