

Final Reflection on My 2025 Summer Enrichment Experience at Syracuse University Summer College

By Margaret Davis

I am Margaret Davis, and I chose Syracuse University's pre-college architecture program. Going in, I had three goals: explore architecture as a career, learning design software, and building physical models. By the end of the three weeks, I checked off all three and did a lot more.

Before the program started, they posted a schedule of what we would be doing each day. I remember reading through it and feeling overwhelmed. I was nervous that I would not be able to keep up with the work. Once I arrived, everything made sense. The program was very structured in a way that made everything clear and easy to follow. It felt like a sped-up version of an architecture student's first semester. Much of the studio work was independent, so I grew more confident in my own process. When I needed help, I also learned how to listen to feedback from my teaching assistant (TA), classmates, and professor, and then apply it on my own. The projects were all hands-on, which was my favorite style of learning, and the days went faster than I expected. I definitely overthought my decision to join the program, but now I am glad I did; it confirmed that I want to pursue architecture further.

One thing I appreciated was how the program gave me a glimpse into what college life might be for an architecture student. During the week, we were not allowed to leave campus, and the architecture program's work schedule did not leave much free time. That might sound a little strict, but for me it kept me focused. I found it motivating. The peaceful studio setting made studio time feel therapeutic. Being away from home and surrounded by people with the same goals in a building dedicated to studying architecture fueled my excitement about my work; I started looking forward to projects instead of seeing them as stressful. I was thinking about and looking at buildings in a new way. I was even dreaming about designing structures. The work was independent, hands-on, and time-consuming. After morning lectures, the rest of the day is studio time dedicated to finishing our projects. I skipped some of the planned social events to avoid falling behind, but it was worth it. There were other pre-college programs at the same time

as Architecture, but they did not require or need as much time outside of class to complete. The architecture students had more work to do.

Despite my constant time working, I used what little time outside of the studio to have fun. When studio time was over, one person out of my friends group hosted a movie night. The movie nights happened at least three times a week. All the movies we watched felt good, lifting the mood from the tiring day. I also watched TV shows with one of my friends. It was a relaxing time to bond and build connections. During lunch break, we were given two hours. During those hours, we made time to go to the Barnes Center (recreation center), where we rock climbed. I have rock climbed, zip-lined, and done rope courses before. Heights never have bothered me, but I guess it was a bit nerve-racking as I have never climbed on their rocky ledges before. My friends and I also signed up for some of the fun events from the program, such as ice skating. I have roller bladed but never ice skated. Despite multiple falls, I am glad I tried it. We also went to a state park beach to swim. It was nice to cool off after the week of record-breaking heat. I felt proud that I tried something new, and these experiences became great memories. Overall, I managed to find balance with my time outside of the studio and keep myself on task for my class work.

The pre-college experience also helped me grow personally. I was nervous about being 13 hours from home, but within a day, I found friends and felt comfortable. All of my friends were from different states throughout the country. One from Syracuse itself. I loved that she had a great knowledge of the campus. It made walking around the campus feel like a tour with her speaking random facts about buildings or streets. Two were from New Jersey, one was from Pennsylvania, and one was from California. Another one of my friends was from West Virginia, but she mentioned she traveled a lot, from living in New York City to living in Europe. Her parents worked for Spotify and were ethnically Russian. I felt my friends really showed how rich and diverse the program was. The friends I made during the program were incredibly sweet and funny. They were also incredibly supportive of each other. I felt with them, I was thriving during the program. I am really glad I made friends with these people, and I hope to see them in the near future, whether from going to the same college or working together at firms. I

learned to live with a roommate, balance work with fun, give myself alone time, and stay motivated even when things got stressful. I realized I can be independent and still maintain strong friendships. Knowing that about myself, I hope to continue growing to become a better version of myself, especially as a person and in design. Most importantly, I learned to manage my time without burning out. I became patient with myself, others, and the design process. It is okay when things take time.

One of the most rewarding parts of the program was my final project. It pulled together every skill we had practiced: model-making, drawing, and Rhino software. I was proud of how much progress I made in such a short time. The most valuable technical skill I learned was using Rhino; many first-year students arrive at college without the knowledge and struggle. I had tried Rhino in another summer class, but this time I used it with real intent, creating sections, elevations, plans, and perspectives. That strong foundation will definitely make future projects easier.

I also loved learning about different architects. I became interested in minimalist design, especially the works of Japanese and Korean architects like Kazuo Shinohara and Go Hasegawa respectively. Minimalist buildings look simple but are actually thoughtful and complex. For part of my final project, we had to make a miniature model from a list of architect buildings. I chose Kazuo Shinohara's Tanikawa House. I remember adding the smaller details and the professor going around to check our work. He remarked that it was "annoyingly perfect." By the end of the program, I gifted the model to him, and he gladly accepted it. He was going to take it from me before, but I stopped him as I needed it for my final presentation.

Before the program, I mostly wanted to renovate old buildings in my own style. I still do, but now I see the importance of exploring many design styles instead of locking into one. I would focus only on ancient Greek or Art Deco buildings, but now I appreciate modern minimalism too. My professor told us that good architects constantly evolve, advice that struck with me.

Part of the course was how to put together a portfolio, which is a valuable skill for a potential architecture student and Architect. I now understand what colleges want in their architecture portfolios. One lecture explained how to set one up: keep work recent and document the process, not just the final

product. I now take progress photos to show how my ideas develop. This will help when I start applying to college programs.

Even though I gained a lot of knowledge and experience in New York, I decided Syracuse is not the school for me. I did not feel like the right fit, and that is okay. The heat there during those weeks was unbelievable; to make it worse, the dorms did not have any air conditioning, making sleeping troublesome. The stairs up the hill to the dorm buildings were also intense. Our dorms were located on an area of campus called Mount Olympus. It was three flights with no means for a break. There was only one path, and some days I went up and down multiple times. The heat and the stairs made some days absolutely miserable. If the heat was not an issue, I would still hesitate. I realized I would really like to attend school in a large city.

For any GFF student thinking about architecture, I would definitely recommend this program. It shows what an architecture student's life is like: long studio hours, morning lectures, and lots of independent work. It is also a great way to decide if this path is right for you. Looking back, I am thankful I joined the program. I gained clarity on my future, improved my skills, and learned it is fine not to have a fixed style yet. What matters is staying open to new ideas and pushing myself to explore. I will carry these lessons into future projects, whether for school, my portfolio, or personal growth. Overall, this program was an important step for me. I am incredibly grateful for Garwin sponsoring this program.