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**UW-Platteville Pioneers journey to the past to build for the future**

Written by Christine Bellport, University of Wisconsin–Platteville

While most students spent their winter break relaxing at home, a dozen students from the University of Wisconsin-Platteville’s [Construction Management](https://www.uwplatt.edu/program/construction-management) program were tracing the arches of ancient cathedrals and examining modern Italian skyscrapers. The group had the opportunity to experience building design and construction like never before through the program’s first short-term study abroad course, Construction in Italy. The two-week immersive experience combined history, culture and hands-on learning, allowing students to explore how European construction methods—both ancient and modern—compared to those commonly used in the United States.

“This course immersed our students in the rich culture and history of Italy while highlighting the unique challenges of construction abroad,” said Gina Blasen, assistant professor of construction management and tour leader. “There were nine construction management students, two civil engineering students, one mechanical engineering student and one education major on the trip. We visited historical sites but also construction sites in Rome, Pisa, Naples and Venice.”

The course focused on the history of European building design, materials and construction techniques, with Italy serving as the perfect classroom.

“The monuments we visited reshaped the way I think about design—not just for today’s needs, but for a lasting impact on communities,” explained Miguel Martinez-Flores, a sophomore from Green Bay, Wisconsin, majoring in civil engineering. “Roman engineers built with the fear of being forgotten, designing structures meant to endure for generations. Walking through these spaces brought history to life.”

Throughout the trip, they visited several iconic cities, guided by local experts and industry professionals. Students also observed modern construction projects, comparing contemporary techniques to those used centuries ago and identifying which ancient methods have been retained and adapted for modern use.

“From a construction management perspective, the most impactful takeaway was seeing how Italian projects prioritize quality and long-term durability over speed,” observed Caitlyn Getzloff, a senior from New Berlin, Wisconsin, majoring in construction management. “Many of the projects we visited showed thoughtful planning and respect for existing structures, especially when working within historic and heritage sites.”

The program’s success was made possible through partnerships developed during an exploratory trip to Italy last January. During that visit, UW-Platteville faculty met with Benedetta Gargiulo Morelli and her team at her architecture firm, Nos Design and the [Italian Architecture Design Association](https://www.itad.it/). A special declaration provided students and professors with access to exclusive sites and invaluable professional insight.

“I strongly believe this experience will have a positive and lasting impact on their careers,” said Gargiulo Morelli. “Students gain critical thinking skills, cultural awareness and a deeper understanding of how the built environment operates within complex historical, social and technical frameworks. Many of these insights are directly transferable to professional practice after graduation, especially in an increasingly global and interdisciplinary field.”

Gargiulo Morelli said Italy offered UW-Platteville students an unparalleled open-air laboratory, and working directly on site gave students tools and perspectives that are impossible to gain solely in the classroom.

“Seeing how construction is approached in a different cultural and historical context made the experience especially meaningful," said senior Drew Polak, a construction management major from Merrill, Wisconsin. “The people at the Italian Architecture Design Association did a fantastic job organizing tours at a diverse list of construction sites. The Construction in Italy trip was such an important experience for me.”

From ancient Roman structures to modern construction sites, students witnessed how geography, available materials and environmental restrictions influence how buildings are designed.

“Students were introduced to the dome of the Pantheon in Rome, the world’s largest unreinforced concrete dome,” explained Blasen. “We learned about how the coffered rings of the dome were designed to hold the load of structure above it. It is one thing to read about these things in a book, but when you are standing inside of this Roman temple, you can experience what the people of Rome felt when entering it nearly 2,000 years ago.”

Rather than just showing examples of construction, organizers said the goal was to teach students how to interpret the built environment: to understand how buildings are assembled, how materials and layers interact, what constraints shape them and how old and new coexist.

“I was especially struck by how closely their construction methods resemble those still used in the United States today, reinforcing the importance of building with longevity, purpose and future generations in mind,” noted Martinez-Flores.

With its blend of history, modern construction and international collaboration, the Construction in Italy study abroad program has set a strong foundation for future global learning experiences within UW-Platteville's Construction Management program.