

The Architecture of the Self: Mobility as a Laboratory for Life

"Erasmus+ enriches lives, opens minds." This official motto of the Erasmus+ Programme is more than a slogan to me; it is a blueprint for the life I am trying to build. As a student of Architecture and Urban Design, I view life much like I view a city: it is a complex, living infrastructure that needs to be navigated, understood, and at times, redesigned. My journey—from the constraints of my home in Iran, to the vibrant, academic corridors of the Politecnico di Milano, and now toward Liège—is not merely about accumulating ECTS credits. It is a vital, temporary residency that will allow me to "test-live" in a new cultural environment to see if it holds the architecture for my long-term future.

My expectations for this mobility are grounded in the necessity of experience. Before moving to a country permanently, one must first try to live there temporarily. Mobility is the ultimate litmus test for belonging. I do not view myself as an isolated actor; as the Erasmus+ experience suggests, we are socializing beings, and we are inherently more powerful when we act as a team. If I wanted to do this alone, I would do it outside the Erasmus programme. The main advantage of this mobility is the collective identity we share—a team of students testing their lives in a new place. The Erasmus+ programme is one of the most concrete expressions of the European project, enabling generations to cross borders and feel part of something larger than themselves.

During my time in Liège, I am preparing to master the art of life management—not just economically, but emotionally. I am drawn to Liège because it promises a slower, more deliberate pace than the "200 km/h" blur of Milan. In our modern, globalized world,

everything is often reduced to a blur; we rarely see the details. I am eager to "walk the life," to bike through the city, and in doing so, regain the perspective that urban speed often strips away. This desire for a slower life is not laziness; it is a deliberate effort to cultivate the "adaptability to change" (67.46%) and "social skills" (69.37%) that the ESNsurvey XV identifies as crucial outcomes of mobility.

My resilience is the bedrock of this journey. In 2021, I left my "safe house" in Tehran with no savings, borrowed money from someone, and flew to Dubai. I rented a bed in a room shared with five others. It was a terrifying, hard, and transformative start, but it taught me that I could survive in an international context. That risk-taking led me to a job in luxury retail, where I learned client-advising skills and the art of human connection. That period was the foundation for my decision to move to Europe to study architecture. Now, moving to Belgium feels like the same language of risk—a new uncertainty to embrace. I have learned that everything—sadness, happiness, life itself—is temporary. This perspective allows me to embrace mobility as a core activity that builds self-confidence.

When we discuss skills, we must distinguish between the visible and the hidden. ESNsurvey XV data shows that language proficiency (86.22%) and communication (75.86%) are the most frequently improved skills. However, the most profound growths deal with personal identity. As a person with a specific sexual identity who once faced isolation, the process of "becoming" someone comfortable in their own skin has been my greatest architectural project. Milan helped me heal, and I believe Liège will allow me to enhance this self-confidence. This "soft skill" of authentic self-expression does not fit into a standard CV keyword box, but it is the foundation of my professional value.

Institutions, however, often struggle to help us articulate this. As the EAIE report suggests, there is a 'missing link' in how universities support returning students. We are often left alone to explain our transformation. I believe universities and institutions must play a more personalized role. A student in architecture develops a unique set of soft skills—spatial thinking, collaborative design, resilience in the face of critique—that are inherently different from a medical student's skill set. But personalization must go deeper than our academic labels. My own journey—from the challenges of my upbringing in Iran to the courage required to redefine my identity—has shaped my resilience in ways that no architecture studio could teach alone. Institutions should help us clarify these specific 'soft skills' by acknowledging the intersection of our academic training and our individual, often complex, life experiences. This prevents us from falling into the trap of using generic clichés like 'problem-solving' when we actually mean 'architectural critical thinking' or 'the ability to navigate cultural displacement.'

When we know better what we are speaking about, the value is added automatically. It becomes a skill that is yours forever, something time cannot take away. Furthermore, the European Commission's "Union of Skills" report emphasizes that Europe needs to better utilize existing human capital by improving the recognition of competencies gained outside formal education, acknowledging that many individuals struggle to have their skills validated when moving across borders.

As I look toward my semester in Liège, I am reminded that the value of the Erasmus+ experience depends on our ability to recognize what we learn. My journey is a commitment to not just moving fast, but moving deeply. I am moving to Belgium to see not just the architecture of the city, but the architecture of my own future. By actively

documenting not just my academic progress, but my experiences in civic engagement and cultural adaptation, I hope to turn this semester into a narrative of growth. The future of European competitiveness depends on recognizing that the most valuable "credits" we earn are the ones that allow us to navigate an interconnected world with confidence and purpose. Institutions must now match this commitment by creating better frameworks to value the "hidden" skills that truly define the Erasmus Generation.