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Rochester Institute
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My Semester Abroad

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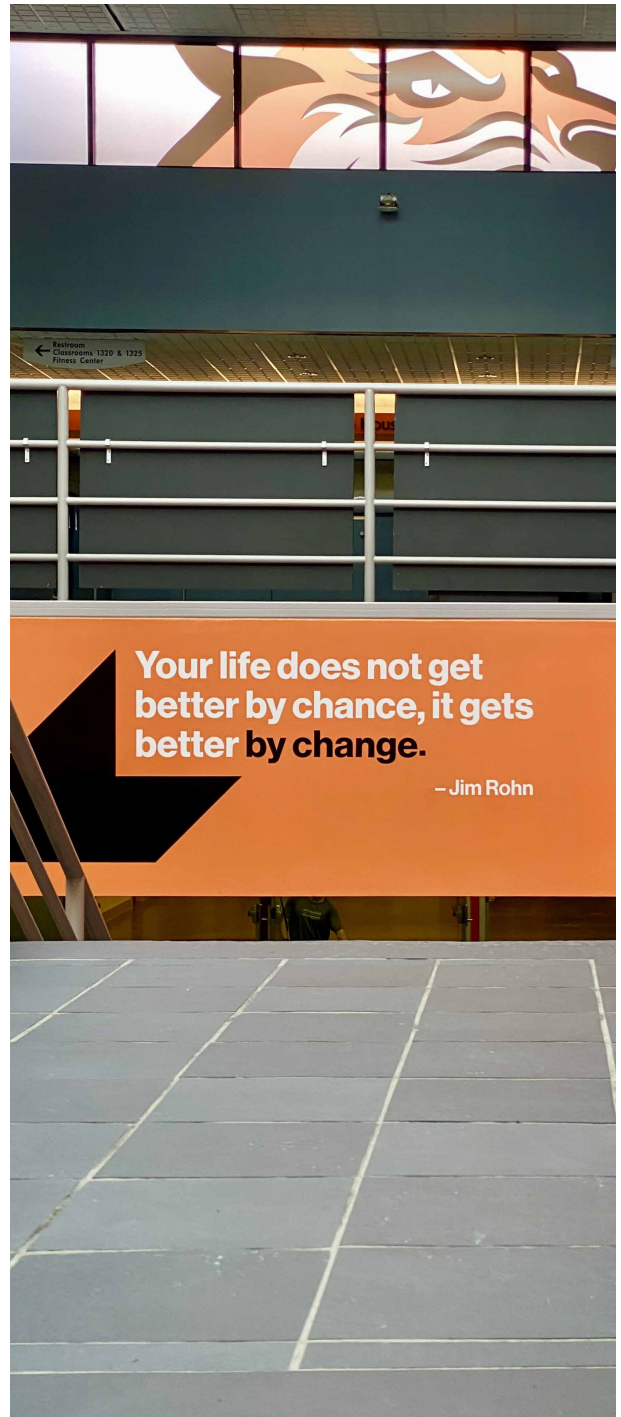
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Introduction

What, Where & Why?



Ever since I saw that my degree “Integrated Design” at Hochschule Anhalt included a semester abroad I couldn’t help but entertain the idea of returning to the US.

Right after my first birthday my parents and I moved to California. I spent a couple of happy, sun-kissed years at San Francisco’s numerous playgrounds and welcomed my two siblings before moving back to Germany in 04. Even though we visited our old home once or twice after moving, our connection soon started to fade. But I never stopped wondering what it would be like coming back as an adult.

During an information event about the “mobility semester” – either an exchange or an internship – early on at Hochschule Anhalt, I stumbled over the list of partner universities which would pose as potential hosts for a semester abroad. And I couldn’t believe my eyes when I saw, that our design program actually had a partner in the US – the Rochester Institute of Technology.

Some time passed and I started researching what RIT was all about and which kind of Design they taught. And I was positively surprised once again when I discovered the “New Media Design” program on their website. Having shifted the focus of my studies more towards Interaction Design and Experience Design the UX/UI focused “NMDE” Program seemed like a perfect fit.

After all the bureaucratic hassle I am delighted to be able to take you down memory lane on what is possibly the best decision I ever made, all the things I learned and the cultural differences I discovered.

Enjoy!

New Media Design

Program, Courses and Everything Else

In stark contrast to the “Integrated Design” program at Hochschule Anhalt (HSA) the “New Media Design” program at RIT’s College of Art and Design is designed to equip future UX/UI, Experience – and Interaction Designers with the tools and methods they need to succeed in an ever changing industry. The focus is very much set on craftsmanship and technical skills – at least in the courses I visited. To fulfill the 30 ETCS requirement posed by HSA I had to manage 15 Semester Credits at RIT. This translated to 5 courses. And what a varied selection it was. As per my preferences the college automatically enrolled me in three New Media Design (NMDE) courses:

NMDE Animation
NMDE Interaction II
NMDE Interaction III

As for the remaining two courses I was encouraged by the International Office to stray outside my regular curriculum. And so I chose the course

IDDE Human Factors Applications

From the industrial design program. For my last course I initially applied for the Electronic Music Production course. Unfortunately, because everybody else had the same idea, both courses were already full. Since I never had one before and don’t have the opportunity at HSA, I ultimately chose the

MGMT Organizational Behaviour

Course from the business major. Besides being curious about what a course from a totally different field of study would be like, I’ve always been interested in getting to know more about leadership.

Animation

The Animation Course was a second year introductory course to the principals of digital animation through AfterEffects. On the basis of three individual projects, namely an animated personal mandala, two animated quotes and a series or movie intro, we learned about animation principles, ideation, storyboarding, 2D Animation, animated typography and a lot of techniques, tricks and foundations on how to work with AfterEffects effectively. All in all it was a really good revision and a welcome deep-dive into some more advanced techniques at the same time.

Interaction II

Right at the heart of the NMDE-Program, the Interaction II course was all about designing interactive Interfaces – Interaction Design. Again, along three projects, we were introduced to prototyping interactive experiences with Figma (2D) and Spline (3D), UI Design and – to my most pleasant surprise – the basics of logic and how to use coding principles – eg. Conditionals, components, etc. – in prototyping software. First we designed a small deck of playing cards and an interface to view, add and delete cards along with it in Figma. The second project introduced us to Spline, a similar tool to Figma but in a 3D environment, where we designed and “built” an interactive, “crazy” calculator. Mine for instance ditched any sort of button and instead was a fully interactive, gamified experience – that actually works as a calculator. For the final project we combined Spline and Figma to build a fully functioning tamagotchi. And I am delighted to say, that the tamagotchi is actually able to eat, sleep, clean and play games endlessly – so long as you keep all of the values in check!

Interaction III

Where the Interaction II course was all about Interaction Design and UI, the Interaction III course focused heavily on the UX side of things. Through one project spanning across the entire semester, we went through the entire UX-Design process, step by step – Heuristic Evaluation, Process Doc, Workflow Diagrams, Mockups, Wireframes, Styleguide, Comps and Animations. I have to say that this course in particular was both exactly what I was hoping to find at RIT and more than I ever expected. It just fit perfectly with my unanswered questions about how UX-Designers actually work, what the industry looks like and how to tackle such large-scale projects. The project was about designing an interactive kiosk ordering experience for a food, beverage or lifestyle brand. I went with Jamba (formerly Jamba Juice), since I remember their smoothies from way back when and they don't use kiosks in their stores, so far.

The end result was a 120 page document going through all the minute detail, which would allow a developer to actually build the kiosk right now. Great fun, ton of work and a whole lot of learnings!

Human Factors Applications

This industrial design course was all about the measurements of the body and resulting insights into ergonomics and what that means for the design of physical objects and spaces. As it was a lecture, there wasn't a huge emphasize on projects, but we did build a GERT suit. The class was divided into small groups, each of which built one part of the suit. This was a very fun project – especially the testing part – and the lecture was very inspiring, even though slightly out of focus for me.

Organizational Behaviour

"I might be a little biased, but this may very well be the most important course you'll ever take" where the opening words of Professor McGowan, as she walked in. This lecture from the college of business was all about interpersonal relations, workplace

culture, conflict, motivation and how to improve business effectiveness, efficiency and employee satisfaction. And I have to say, she didn't lie with her opening statement, as this course made it really easy to reflect on personal experiences – both in professional, as well as personal environments – and form a new understanding of how different types of people work, what they need and how to approach them. All in all a wonderful course which should be a required course across all disciplines, as it would make working in teams so much easier for everybody.

Clubs & Recreation

In addition to the curricular courses, the campus offers over 300 clubs to pursue just about anything anybody could think of. And should the desired activity not yet have a club, you can simply establish one yourself. I myself did not join any clubs as I was busy enough navigating all of my courses, the campus, friends and the US. However, I did regularly take advantage of the vast and varied gym facilities that didn't leave anything to be desired.

To further encourage and support us International Students in getting to know each other, the International Student Services (ISS) organized three events over the course of the semester. The first one took us just outside Rochester for some hilarious snow-tubing down a slippery slope. Towards the halfway point the ISS held a typical Rochester dinner with garbage plates and soda, which was cozy and very engaging. And just before the semester ended, we went on a trip to the American side of the Niagara Falls which was truly beautiful.

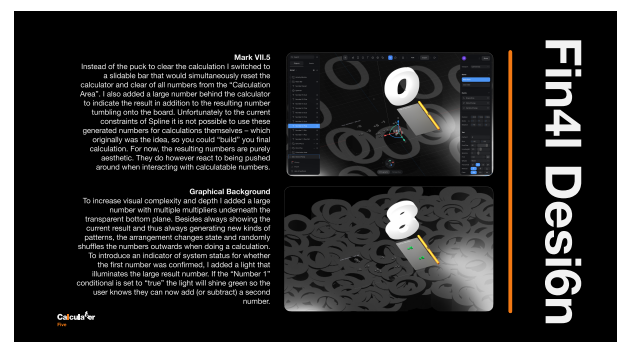
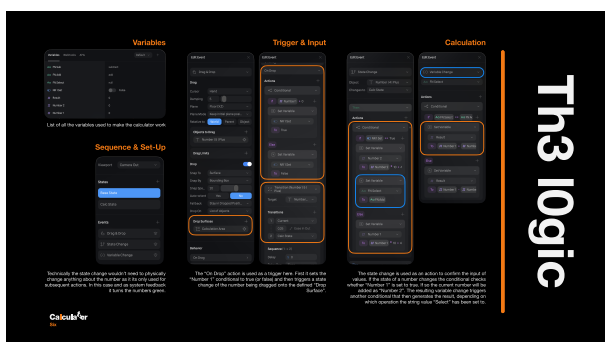
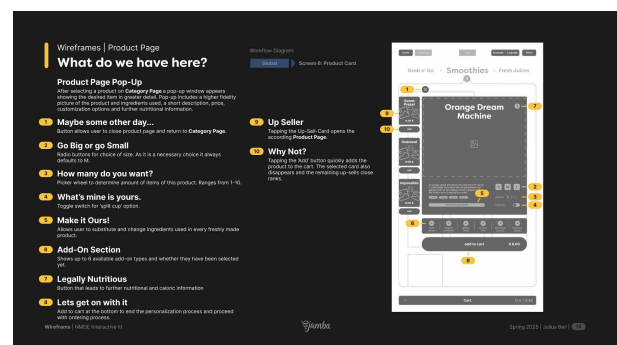
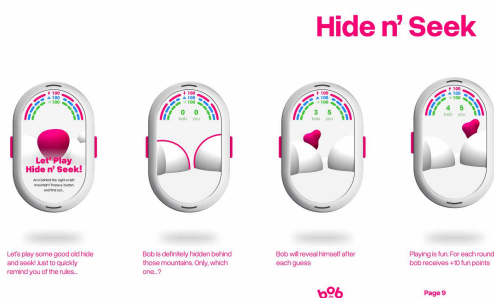
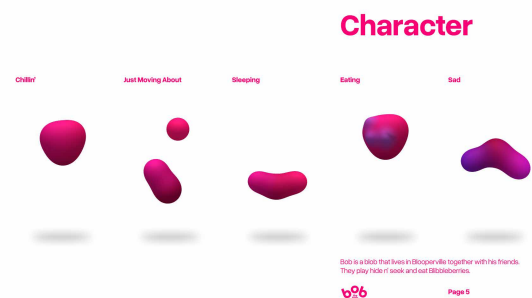
Projects

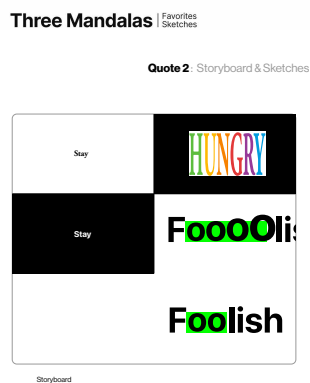
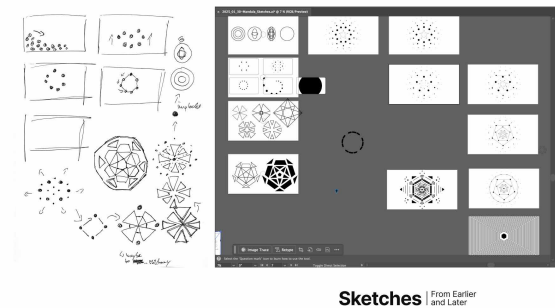
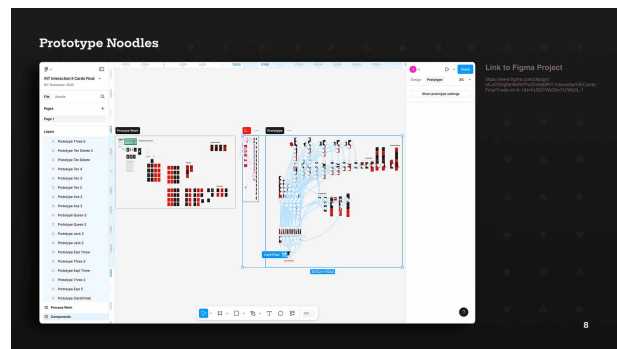
What we did in Class

Overview

For the complete overview please make sure to check out the documentation that I put together on Incom: <https://des.incom.org/project/6121>

Here you can find all of the process documents, links to clips and prototypes and a general feeling of what classes were like at RIT.





Trips & Events

What we did outside of Class

Snow Tubing

As part of the global scholar experience, RIT's international office organized a few events throughout the semester for all of the international students to come together and connect.

The first one was a collective snow tubing trip. Basically, you take a huge inflated rubber ring and just try to reach the bottom of the snowy hill as fast as you can. This was absolutely great fun and a perfect start to the semester abroad!



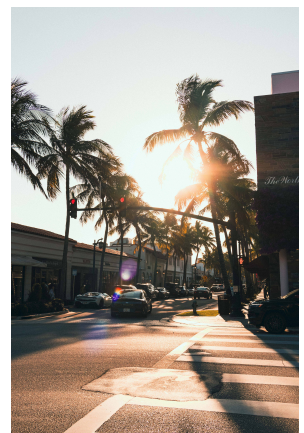
New York City

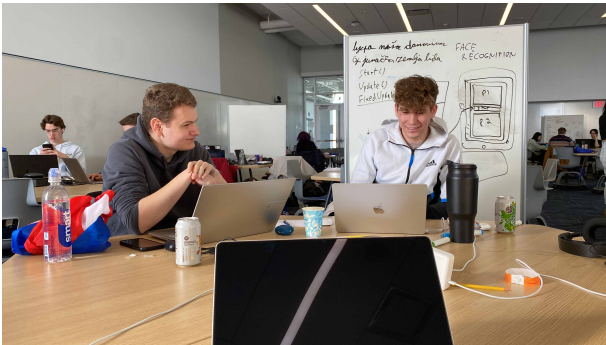
I was lucky to quickly become part of a small friend group consisting of a few internationals + Martin. Martin grew up in New Jersey and with his dad still living there, we took the opportunity, rented a car, fought a literal snow storm and spent a weekend in the incredible city that is New York. As an added bonus, the place where we were staying was located right beside the Hudson River with a jaw-dropping view of the city!



Spring Break

Since we were on the east coast anyways, a small group of fellow international students and I decided to spend Spring Break the way it was intended – in Miami baby. We flew down and stayed in a lovely AirBnB in Fort Lauderdale from where we went on a few trips to Miami, West Palm Beach and Key West. And of course we also spent some time at the beach and dove into the infamous Florida night-life...





Brick Hack

One really special event for me was a hackathon. Two of my friends who studied computer science asked me, if I wanted to take part to cover the design part. This was really cool, since I've been meaning to try a hackathon for a very long time. And I am happy to report, that it actually was great fun.

We decided to not overstate our skills and build a simple little mobile game. As a nod towards the event we called it Brick Racers. Essentially you compete against another player on the same screen on who has faster reaction times. After the countdown who ever clicks first, wins the race.

I quickly laid out the screens and designed the few assets that we needed. And then I cheered on my two teammates as they tried to build our idea with unity (even though it's a 2D game. Idk, one of our teammates was really eager to try it).

https://www.youtube.com/shorts/Z4UN_BApRKw

Even though we didn't even get close to winning something, it was still a very cool experience and one I surely will try again!



Niagara Falls

The grand finale of our semester was a trip with all of the international students to visit the US side of Niagara Falls. It was such a cool and spectacular experience to see them in person. It is actually surprising, how close you can get – and even get soaked! We had a good time and a fun bus ride there and back. It really was the perfect ending to an incredible time!

Trips & Events

What we did outside of Class

Nashville's

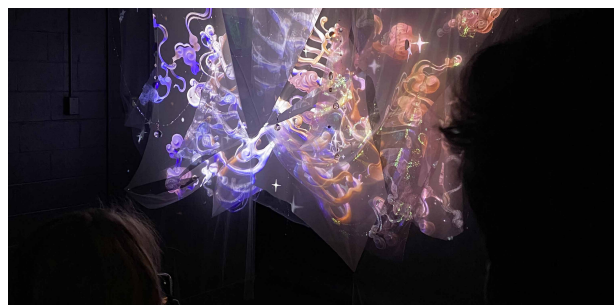
What happens at Nashvilles, stays at Nashvilles...



Imagine RIT

Imagine RIT was what the DDS is for Dessau – sort of. At the end of each semester everybody, even though mainly the graduation or capstone projects, present their work. And boy is it ever impressive when you see the entire campus on the move to show what they've been working on all semester. The range was incredible, from actually working robots and vehicles to medical illustrations and interactive games. If you ever wondered what the RIT had to offer, this would be the place to be.

The theme for this semester's capstone in the new media design department where game shows. For these capstone projects, senior students from new media design and design engineering (computer science) come together to bring actual digital experiences to life. It was so cool to see, what students who graduate from RIT can actually achieve as a team! Highly recommended to check out!



And so much more...

Of course there were many more memorable moments. I enjoyed my first actual Super Bowl all with Wings and Pizza, we explored the wondrous forests in the area... Most importantly however, I got to hang out and get to know incredible people from so many different places and backgrounds.

The Bottom Line

And a big Thank You



This exchange was, among a lot of things, a remarkable new perspective. Courses work very different from what I am used to at HSA and are much more focused on design as a craft. The integrated design program at home is much more focused on experimentation, ideation and concept-work, instead of the actual production of products. After reflecting on this, I believe a combination of both would make for astonishing and future-proofed designers. That's why, during the semester break, I stole the cards project by Mike Minerva and made it into a one week Figma-Bootcamp for students at HSA. I think everybody had a good time and judging by the results a very productive and knowledgeable few days. I believe our home campus can learn a thing or two from us exchange students and it surely would make for a more diverse education.

I, meanwhile, consider myself incredibly lucky to have been able to experience and enjoy this exchange semester in the way I have. It's safe to say that this will go down as one of the important milestones in my life and I am forever grateful for all of the support I got from Family, Friends and both HSA and RIT!

To everyone who is considering taking the leap and visit the RIT as an exchange student I can only encourage you to go for it! Everybody I met there was so helpful and kind and I am sure you will find something or someone that excites you. Go for it and tell Rochester I said hi!

