



EXCHANGE REPORT

Name

Jiuru Hou

Year and semester for
exchange

HT24

Exchange university

Aalto University

Degree programme

MSc Sustainable Urban Planning and Design

Austere, white but welcoming warmth

Before departure

Before departure, you need to regularly check your email. Once your exchange to Finland is confirmed, you will be required to fill out numerous forms and officially submit an application on the target university's website. This process is quite similar to applying for a master's program at KTH, as it also requires a motivation letter and a CV. Make sure to allocate enough time to prepare these materials.

Before arriving in Finland, you need to check the validity of your residence permit. For non-EU residents, if your current residence permit already covers the entire duration of the exchange semester, you only need to apply for a mobility certificate through the Finnish Immigration Service for €100. This process takes about one month. However, since the year we enrolled, KTH did not renew its contract with the Swedish Migration Agency, our Swedish residence permits required annual renewal. This meant we had to spend €350 to reapply for a Finnish residence permit, which also takes approximately one month.

Upon arrival

Before the semester officially started, you will get a welcome email to join a group chat where you can get to know fellow exchange students from around the world and plan meetings and parties for. This can help you better adapt to and integrate into both the school and city life. During the week leading up to the semester, Aalto University and AYY (student organizations) will host daily orientation events. At Aalto University, you can always choose courses from different departments based on your interests. Therefore, it's crucial to attend various program introduction sessions during that week. In these sessions, faculty members often recommend ways to combine courses across different programs or even schools to gain interdisciplinary knowledge.

Financials

Like most students who go on exchange to EU countries, I received a scholarship from Erasmus+, amounting to €560 per month. This scholarship made it possible to cover the travel and relocation costs from Sweden to Finland and provided greater flexibility in the accommodation options.

Over the past two years, the cost of living in Finland has soared. Basic necessities in Finnish supermarkets, such as vegetables and bread, are approximately 1.5 times the price in Swedish supermarkets, or even higher. Due to stricter alcohol regulations, the price of some alcoholic beverages is double that in Sweden. But thankfully, Finnish university restaurants offer excellent student meals. For just €2.95, you can enjoy an affordable and delicious lunch. Eating regularly at the student restaurants not only allows you to spend less on meal, but also saves a lot of time.

Accommodation

Student housing in the Helsinki area is particularly tight during the autumn semester, especially for exchange students. Available housing options are limited, with most being shared apartments. As far as I know, over half of the exchange students could not get housing offers from university-provided platforms like HOAS or AYY. If you haven't heard back from HOAS or AYY, consider exploring private platforms such as Facebook, Forenom, or Noli for suitable housing options.

University and studies

At KTH, most students tend to choose courses listed in their program curriculum. In contrast, Aalto University places greater emphasis on courses offered by an entire school, allowing you to freely explore your interests in the fields of arts and design. Take my exchange program in Urban Studies and Planning as an example: I could not only choose the required courses listed in my program but also opt for or combine courses from other fields offered by the School of Arts, Design, and Architecture, such as film, photography, or industrial design. I prefer scheduling 1-2 lectures on weekdays and spending the remaining time in the architecture studio. This semi-formal space provides an opportunity to meet students with architectural backgrounds, engage in discussions, or study together.

Courses

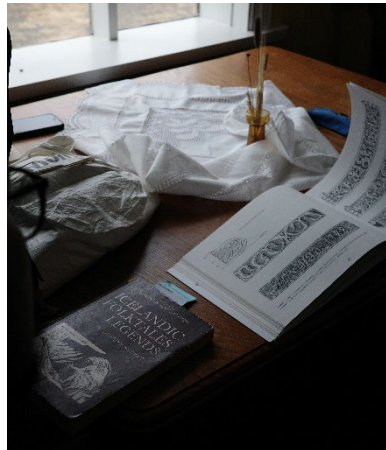
I chose to participate in the Computational Design Studio, a course offered by the Department of Architecture that explores VR technology as a medium, using Unity as the engine to construct and narrate future sustainable possibilities for different regions. I found this highly relevant to both my academic background and future interests, as the studio is a collaboration between the Professorship of Computational Methodologies in Landscape Architecture and Urbanism and an Iceland-based research team.



Moreover, the team included students from various interdisciplinary backgrounds, such as new media, photography, and contemporary art design. Their contributions helped us understand Iceland's context not only from an architectural perspective but also through diverse lenses.

In this course, I learned to use technologies distinct from traditional architectural and urban environments, such as employing C# in Unity to better construct and control scenes. Collaborating with peers from different fields allowed me to understand and use their approaches and technical tools.

The most exciting part was that our team received a travel grant from the university, enabling us to conduct a week-long field study in Iceland. During this trip, we developed a closer connection to our research subject, Icelandic Turf Houses. Through data collection and a seminar with anthropologists from the University of Iceland, we gained insights into overlooked details often missed in paper-based research. This process reconstructed our mental image of Iceland's natural and cultural environment, enriching our ability to narrate the final study.



City and country

Unlike in Stockholm, people in Helsinki don't appear as "warm" at first glance. However, if you're willing to take the initiative to interact with them, you'll often find that they are genuinely kind and willing to help. What surprised me the most when I first arrived in Helsinki was that, despite their seemingly reserved nature, Finnish people always say "Kiitos" to express their gratitude to bus drivers or restaurant staff when getting off the bus or leaving a restaurant after dinner.

Leisure and social activities

Experiencing a Finnish sauna is a must in Finland. If you're staying in a student dorm provided by AYY, you can book sauna room for free. There are also many public saunas available in the city. Saunas are the best way to warm up your body, and people sometimes use birch branches to whip themselves, promoting blood circulation. It's often a time for relaxation and open conversation.

If you're looking for a place to unwind and celebrate, the Kara OK bar is a great option. Unlike the private karaoke rooms common in many Asian countries, this is a shared stage in a bar where strangers come together. When you finish singing a good song, everyone will applaud for you.

Sustainability

In Finland, there are government-funded recycling centers like Kierrätyskeskus, which help people sell or find materials and everyday items they need. There are also second-hand stores like UFF, which occasionally hold events where everything is priced at just 1 or 2 euros, encouraging people to make purchases and promote the reuse of goods.

Other recommendations and observations

Aalto University is not located in Helsinki but in the nearby city of Espoo. Fortunately, there are convenient metro and tram lines running through the campus, providing students with plenty of transportation options. However, it's important to avoid leaving school too late, as unlike in Stockholm or Helsinki, Espoo's metro and tram services stop running shortly after 11 PM.