



Touch It – A journey in Aalto

Before departure

A year ago, I came to Sweden from an inland city in China. I learned a lot from the totally different new environment during the first year in Sweden, like becoming more confident of my ability of adapting after going through the culture shock. I decide to apply for exchange study in the autumn semester of the second year of my master for two reasons. First of all, I want to know more about the study mode in other country, besides, I enjoy the feeling of throwing myself into an unfamiliar environment. I always see people as tree seeds--they will grow into different looks in different soil. I am also curious about what I will be in the new land.

Finland came up in my mind as the first choice when I start thinking about where to go. That's because I admire Aalto (A Finnish architect)'s design so much ever since I was in Bachelor. Aalto's designs looks so comfortable, nature, and beautiful. I want to go to the field to see his architecture during the semester of exchange, and to feel how the light and shadow are changing in them, touching the wood and red bricks that look warm. I want to understand Aalto by understanding the Finnish lifestyle and cultural customs.

Before departure, I was passionate about learning a little Finnish; however, I gave up two weeks after making the ambitious resolution for that there is no particularly good Finnish language learning resource on the internet. Besides, Finnish is such a language that completely different from English, it's quite difficult for people to learn from ABC. Fortunately, language is not a big problem, since Finland also has a very high English penetration just like Sweden, you can use English to fulfill your daily needs. I think a very important thing is that you should know a little about the history and culture of the country before you go, so it will be easier to get a sense of closeness after landing there. Also, be sure to bring some warm winter clothes. Though Helsinki is only one hour flight away from Stockholm, it is much colder in the winter time.

Upon arrival



I arrived in Finland two weeks before the new semester officially begins for that the architecture guild and AYY student union held some activities for new students at that time. Such activities contents things like helping you to do all the registration, getting to know the campus and mingling with other students. I highly recommend students who are going to Aalto should participate in those activities since they can really help you to settle down in a new place. Those activities and schedule may varies from year to year, but the tutors of the year will send you the calendar after you have been admitted to Aalto, so remember to check it.

Financials

I got most of my financial support from the Erasmus program. Although in general the price in Finland is a little bit lower than Sweden, the Erasmus grant is still not enough. The daily expanses were spending in two main part that's rent and food. Renting from school may cost around 300 Euros while renting from private owner may cost about 400 Euros. A small tip for saving money would

Photo of the campus

be that make no hesitation to join the AYY student union, a membership in student union can give you lots of discount.

Accommodation

I got my room from a private owner that is one room in an apartment which was one hours away from school. I have to say that's not the best choice. Most exchange students can get their accommodation from AYY student union, but they just have a limited number of furnished apartments so that you need to apply for it as soon as you decided to go there. I have some friends who were living in the room rented from AYY, according to them the environment in campus is nice and you can always hangout with friends in the Sauna room in every building.

University and studies

Aalto, the second big university in Finland now, has a large campus and contents 6 schools with 17500 students. I was study in school of ARTS which includes five art related department- department of architecture, department of art, department of design, department of film and department of media. The fully equipped and flexible new building for school of ARTS Varë is very conducive to communication between different disciplines. It also reflects the school's intention to encourage interdisciplinary communication. For instance, students who study architecture also have chances to take sculpture or painting courses. However it also has a shortcoming which is difficult for architecture students to adapt that is no one will has their own working place, it causes some problem sometime since you will always have to change place and find a free computer or a model table.

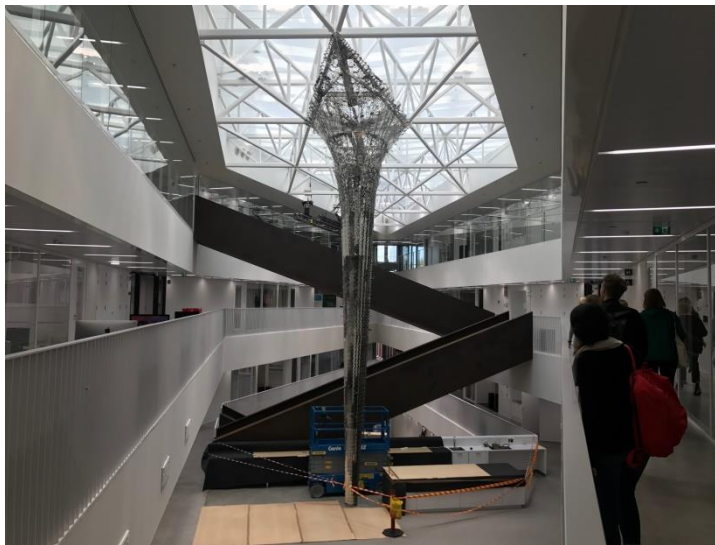


Photo of Varë

A typical day for an architecture student in Aalto may content one lecture or seminar and half day for you to work on your own project. Most of the courses in school are taught in English but there are still some courses in Finnish, so you have to check carefully before select them. The university is providing some language course including Swedish, Germany, Finnish, and English and so on. Here is an important thing that I have to mention, it's better to apply for courses you want as soon as you made your decision because some number limited courses are really popular.

Courses

I chose three lecture course and one studio course which are Nordic modernism, school design lecture, and wood in construction as well as the wood studio in my semester in Aalto. According to my friend who is doing master in Aalto, the courses Nordic modernism is fairly popular among students. In this lecture courses you will learn the history of Nordic architecture development, therefore you can have a big picture about Nordic modern architecture. The studio I chose is about how to use wood as

construction material in order to approaching the goal of sustainability. In this studio you can really gain a lot but also it requires more working load.

City and country

Culture shock is inevitable for people who just begin to live in a new country. Fortunately, Finland is a warm country. The cold weather has not made the Finns get an indifferent heart. They may have been a little shy at the beginning but they are mostly friendly.

Leisure and social activities

In my spare time I would go to activities held by the guild of architecture sometimes or go to museum with friends. There are several museums in Helsinki have open day once a month, so people who want to save money can check museums' website and make a plan. Sauna, the only way to resist the coldness and darkness, is also one option for your spare time. However, for those who has never been to sauna before may want to get some knowledge before you go. I made a stupid mistake at the first time in sauna that I forgot to take off my glasses. Later, something unexpected happened that the middle layer of the glasses made from resin expanded because of the high temperature. In the end, I have to buy a new one and the deformed old glasses will be my special collection that resembled my adventure in Finland.

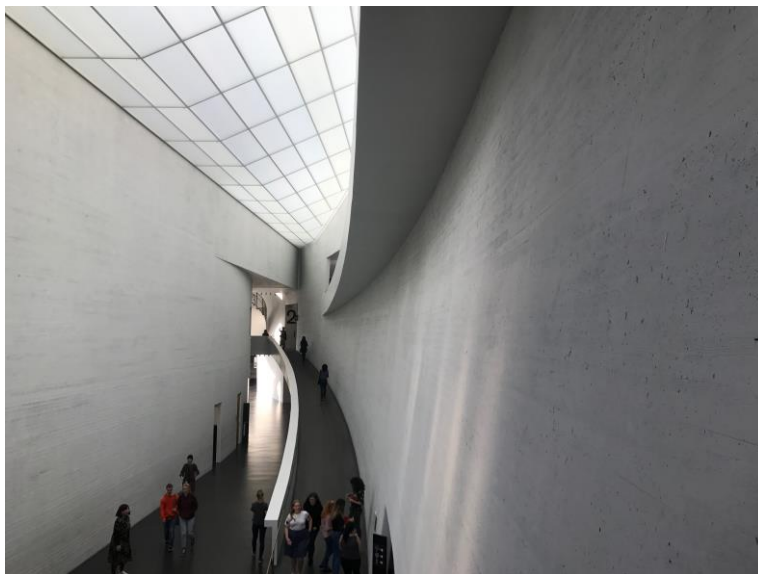


Photo of Kiasma modern museum

Other recommendations and observations

All in all, my exchange semester in Finland was very enriching and interesting. Although Finland and Sweden are so close geographically, they are quite different in various aspects. The exchange journey in Aalto is a right choice that makes me get a broader view and richer life experience.