Who knew that Finland could be so beautiful and enjoyable to visit! If you are reading this and are part of the Urban Studies program or are in general, passionate about city planning and transportation planning, then I highly suggest exploring Helsinki and Aalto University when time permits. If it can’t happen soon then follow along as I provide experiences from when I was preparing for the 1 week course in transportation planning, the special moments as they happened, and reflections post-exchange.

Preparation for exchange

When planning for the Summer School on Transportation in Finland, the information that I would have found most valuable is how convenient it is to get to the host campus; that lunches, coffee, and pastries are provided; that you should pack light because everything you need can be found in town and reasonably priced; and finding accommodation well in advance in the city centre would be beneficial for touring around. Being flexible with accommodation or only booking accommodation for a few days at a time is also important to consider. Typically, for a longer trip it would be smart to choose one location close to the university for example and stick to it. However, with only a week duration in my case at the Summer School of Transportation in Espoo, I found it would have helped to diversify my stay a bit, to experience the various neighbourhoods around the campus and the city centre.

Another pre-exchange preparation item of note would be prior to attending the exchange in Helsinki there are two streams of application approval that need to be completed. Everything is done through the SFU Study Abroad exchange process but once all steps are complete on SFU’s end you also need to submit similar requirements to the Host campus (Aalto University) for confirmation and verification of enrollment. So be sure to have all the necessary documents including an official transcript, preliminary study plan approved by the home institution, and curriculum vitae up to date to complete both the home and host requirements. The SFU exchange process also ensured that you have valid passport identification even before acceptance of application is considered. To be a part of the exchange program references are required so make sure you keep in touch with past professors who might be able to help with being a reference. Another thing to do before the application process is complete is to sign up for as many relatable scholarships that are available at the time. What I found was that you need to apply early due to the scholarship and/or bursary deadlines being fairly early in the year leading up to the summer semester abroad.
Because the program is only one week long, it allows for other small travel trips along side a stop in Finland. Travelling to Europe for more than one week makes more sense since it's a long way to go so you might as well make the most of it and tag on other adventures. If this is the case, be sure to check the visa requirements for other countries ahead of time and also the local currency that is in use in case it is a necessity. Once you've completed the SFU registration process and been confirmed by the host institution, you are ready to start researching about the things to do around Helsinki. Although most of your time will be spent in class it is always good to be prepared with some ideas as to the local tourist attractions that you might want to see. Therefore, research a few things first before even considering the program so that you are not completely oblivious to what Finland is all about.

Researching the one week course was easy enough as Aalto University has refined it's method of providing information on the university website that allows for a glimpse into what the program (broken down by day and hour) could be like. Having a draft program schedule helped me a lot and allowed me to plan my week out ahead of time to ensure that I booked the necessary accommodation in Helsinki. When I was first informed of the exchange opportunity I asked Professor Anthony Perl about his past experiences of attending the program and based my research off of his input, the emails he provided and the curriculum set out on the Aalto website.

Getting to and from the Helsinki airport is very easy and straightforward as a subway/train takes you right to the city centre. Signage is mainly in Finnish, Swedish and English. To gain a sense of direction in and around the city, it might be useful to remember certain landmarks rather than relying on street names as the names are very long and look alike. Once I situated myself to where my hostel was in relation to the train station and other landmarks, exploring the city was a lot easier and found myself less dependent on technology. Getting a sim card is optional and dependent on the person, but without it finding your way around town and having access to wifi at certain points was manageable enough to make sightseeing more comfortable.

**During Exchange**

Upon arrival to the designated building at the Aalto University campus we were greeted by a welcome reception with a reception desk where we signed in, picked up our booklets and were provided with coffee and snacks. The start of the program was lecture heavy but the breaks in between each lecture enabled conversations between each of the students, visiting professors, and staff to get to know each other and network. There is no grading or
course assignments due during the one week program, but a variety of lectures, group workshops and group discussions make up the entirety of the academic curriculum. Most days a lot of the class wanted to be social and do outings to explore the city of Helsinki after class which was a great way to connect with the program cohort. So a word of advice: be open to venturing around with others and try and get people together, because it makes the experience a lot more memorable. A few attractions that students went to included: the island of Suomenlinna (Image 1), the central Oodi library (Image 2), the Temppeliaukio rock church (Image 3), Helsinki Central station (Image 4), Loyly sauna (Image 5), waterfront cafes, and the Toolo tower (Image 6) known to be the tallest building in the city centre at 13 storeys. There is so much to see and do that makes it hard to see everything, especially for a transportation planning enthusiast. However, the great benefit to having a group of internationals together was the enjoyment of exploring the unknown. Some fellow students were also studying at Aalto full-time and were very helpful and knowledgeable about the best things to see and do in and around Helsinki.

The program itself is very flexible with time and the coordinators are very approachable if you need anything that is not provided. One of the highlights of the program is the day that is spent out of the classroom on a group walking tour (Image 7). The main workshop evolved around learning about a suburban neighbourhood north of Helsinki and analyzing how boulevardization could potentially make it better. The time of year was very pleasant and at the early stages of summer in Finland, which meant long days of sunlight. This allowed for a more focused spring/summer lens of the neighbourhood and less so for the dark winter months. However, through listening from the locals we were able to gain ideas of how all seasons could be accommodated. A lot of the workshop was conceptualizing and brainstorming but also was a nice opportunity to provide real feedback to the working professionals of the City of Helsinki local government about potential ideas that they might have not thought about (Image 8). At the end of the program the class ideas were also shared with the NECTAR conference, a transportation conference that was held right after our program ended. This sharing allowed for increased awareness of the program which I thought was a pretty neat and a wonderful conclusion on the work we did in class.

Reflection After Exchange

The SFU experience at the Aalto Summer School in Transportation was better than anticipated. I was pleasantly surprised by how accommodating the people of Aalto were once we arrived to begin the one week program and how receptive everyone was to exploring the city of Helsinki and its surrounding neighbourhoods together. The program and curriculum was well organized and ensured a nice balance of both classroom based activities and outdoor excursions, including walks to the various lunch halls and end of
program celebrations (Image 9 and 10). The challenges that I faced, like many things in life, is getting used to a new setting, culture, and people. The best thing to do is to be social and enjoy every moment you can because unlike other undergraduate semesters abroad you only are gone for a week. In terms of advice for future exchange-ees, do not buy any transit passes before getting to the campus as you'll be given a transit pass that lasts the entire week that the program occurs. Only purchase what you need to get yourself to your accommodation and then to campus. Once you're there follow up with the program coordinators if necessary. After the exchange ended it felt like time flew by because I pushed myself to be more social and outgoing and it paid off with connections for life. These connections might not be used all of the time but the shared experiences make it easier to reach out to someone halfway across the world. I am very grateful and pleased that I took a chance and pursued this exchange opportunity and hope others will too.

The quintessential image of Helsinki living. Walking the streets among the most pedestrian friendly and placemaking type of transit, the street car.

Appendix
Image 1 - The ferry to the island of Suomenlinna
The ferry ride was about 15 minutes and time on the island could be 1 hour - 4 hours.

Image 2 - The Central Oodi Library
It's more than just a library, it's a cultural place for everyday activities.
Image 3 - The Temppeliaukio Rock Church
Religious or not, this place is special and a must see when visiting Helsinki.

Image 4 - Helsinki Central station
The focal point of the city centre and an architectural style that drives the Helsinki identity.
Image 5 - Loyly Sauna
A perfect place for an afternoon snack and the sauna.

Image 6 - The Toolo Tower
The best view of the city is at the top of the Toolo tower. Drinks aren’t cheap but still fun.
**Image 7 - The Neighbourhood Walking Tour**
We started our observations of the neighbourhood proposed for redevelopment at of course, the train platform.

**Image 8 - Concept Plans for Neighbourhood Boulevardization**
The best concept plan is one that uses imagery and simple diagrams to explain the changes.
Image 9 - The Aalto Campus Lunchhall Food
One of the best surprises of the program was the quality of food options available to students. Every day of the program we were provided buffet style lunches.

Image 10 - Final day of the Program and Dinner Celebrations
On top of the lunches we celebrated the end of the program in style at Kappeli Restaurant.