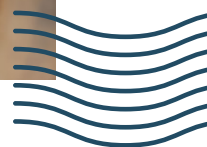




TEK

SAFA

Arvind Ramachandran



Architect in Finland



A quick guide to international working life
in the Finnish architecture field

About the author

My name is Arvind Ramachandran. I am an Indian architect based in Helsinki. I have lived in Finland for about 10 years as of autumn 2024. During this time, I have had a chance to experience the Finnish architecture field from multiple perspectives: as an international Master's student, early career worker in a mid-sized architecture firm, employee representative for a diverse group of colleagues, founding member of an architects' collective, deputy member of the architects' association's general council, and most recently, as part of the committee advancing the interests of architects in the labour union.

Over the last decade, I have also been active in various initiatives that aim to promote diversity, equity and inclusion in Finnish society. I find it crucial that our profession becomes more welcoming to people from different backgrounds and life situations, and hope this guide will contribute to the architecture field in Finland better reflecting the diverse society that it serves.

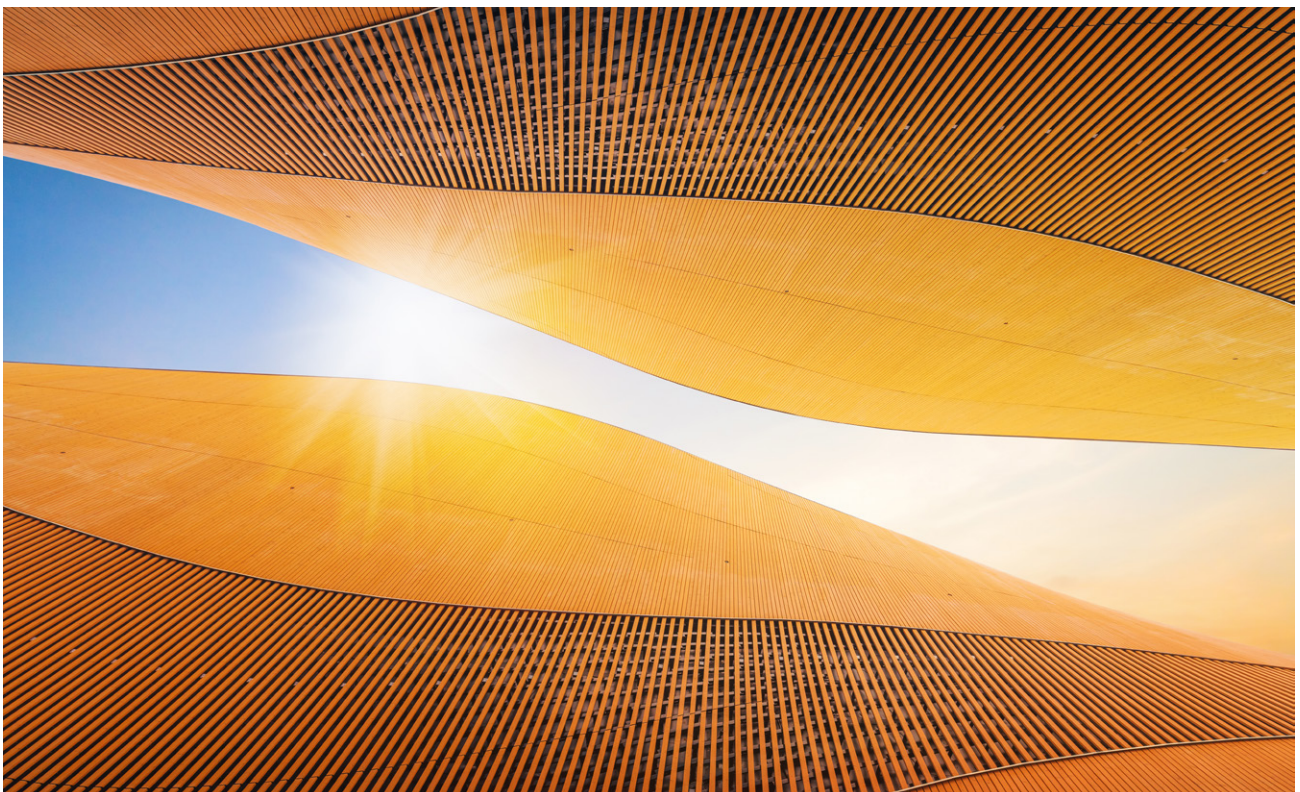
How the guide came to be

A few years ago, after having worked in Finland for a while, I began helping architects who had moved from abroad in their attempts to get a foothold in the Finnish architecture field. My then employer suggested it might be a good idea to have a local version of the guide for international architects that some colleagues in Sweden had put together. It did indeed feel like the time was right to combine information from different sources to make working life in the Finnish architecture field easier to navigate, both for newcomers and locals alike. The Finnish Association of Architects, SAFA, agreed, and generously provided me with some funding.

to an internet survey sent out in 2022, as well as from multiple conversations with colleagues from different backgrounds and life situations, with an aim to better serve the needs of our rapidly internationalising profession.

If you have found the guide useful, please do share it forward with others who might benefit. And if you find something that needs correction, have ideas to share for the next update to the guide, or just want to get in touch, please feel free to send me an email: arvind@arvind.cc

What began as a vague idea in 2020 grew into a larger project over the years. The contents presented here were developed based on responses



Acknowledgements

Finland is a country like few others. Life here as a newcomer can surprise even those of us who did our homework before making the move to the cold north. During one's journey here, the value of helpers, both locals and internationals who took the same route earlier, cannot be underestimated.

This guide wouldn't have been possible without the support of multiple architects who went out of their way to help an international colleague. They showed interest in my work towards a more inclusive profession in Finland, and were generous enough to share their own experiences. Many of

them also continue to put in efforts towards ensuring that having an international background is no longer a barrier to working and growing as an architect in Finland. These are the people who go beyond the bare minimum, and work tirelessly in academia, the profession, the association and the labour union, to make the architecture profession in Finland welcoming and inclusive.

It is to them that I wish to express my biggest thanks and gratitude.



Before you begin using the guide

Despite having lived in Finland for a while now, and having had the chance to engage with the profession from different positions, I realise the tips offered here are by no means exhaustive. Each person's situation is different, and there is simply no way to be able to offer advice that would be applicable to everyone. For example, since I moved to Finland to study towards a Master's degree in architecture at the university, and then stayed on to work, my knowledge of the procedure for getting professional degrees from abroad recognised in Finland is limited.

Despite the limited scope of this guide, written from one person's personal experience, supplemented by colleagues' inputs and a couple dozen responses to an internet survey, I hope all readers are able to find something of use in this guide. By readers, I mean both international architects who have moved to Finland, as well as local architects who wish to make their workplaces more welcoming to their international colleagues, or simply want to get tips about working as an architect in Finland

that they might have missed. I encourage readers to take the suggestions here as a starting point, and ask further questions from colleagues and relevant organisations. By doing so, one can ensure one is getting the most relevant and up-to-date information. For example laws, collective agreements, certifications and employee rights are all seeing considerable changes these days, and it would be best to be doubly sure that one has the latest information received from trustworthy sources.

I also hope readers will bring their own tips to possible further editions of the guide. It would be wonderful to have updates made as a collective effort of the rapidly growing group of international architects based in Finland. Our new LinkedIn group formed towards the end of 2024 could be a great platform for this work.

Thank you for reading, and most importantly, thank you for doing your bit to make our profession more friendly!

Need for a quick guide

“How do you like being an architect in Finland?”

A seemingly simple question, but one with no easy answer even for someone completing a decade living in this small and unique country in Northern Europe. As a foreigner working in the globally respected Finnish architecture field, while simultaneously dealing with the unpredictability that characterises the construction sector, the most honest answer I can give is: “It depends.”

If the question is asked by someone I just met, I usually tell them how wonderful it is to be able to work with extremely skilled colleagues. I often also mention the pride I feel being able to participate in creating beautiful, functional and resilient built environments, in a society where the profession is respected and valued.

But that would only be part of the whole picture.

For every story of gratitude and fulfilment, the unfortunate truth is that much like most other fields of work in Finland, the architecture profession in a country with a small population and correspondingly narrow palette of opportunities is not the easiest of settings to build a career, especially for someone moving from abroad. Disappointments are way too common if one is a beginner, newcomer, or both, and there are moments where even the most steadfast of us wonders if the struggle is worth it.

As many colleagues can attest, it is surprisingly common to not know where to start, who to reach out to for help, and how to proceed when faced with seemingly insurmountable career obstacles. It is also unfortunately still far too easy to meet dead ends, and become disappointed about how demanding the road is to not just survive, but to excel as an architect in Finland.

With this quick guide, drawing from my and multiple colleagues’ experiences, both positive and otherwise, I hope you, dear reader, whether you moved here recently, have been looking to gain a foothold in the field for a few years, or are someone who is a local and wants to make the field more inclusive to newcomers, will find useful and practical tips.

At the cost of repeating myself, I wish to once again remind readers that I am by no means an expert in all the topics presented here, nor am I suggesting that the information in this quick guide is all that one would need to progress in the profession. I am also aware that the challenges that I elaborate on here are the only few among the ones that you might come across in a rapidly changing field and world, and there is only so much a short guide can offer in terms of help. What I do hope is that this document provides some tools to make your work and life here easier.

As a final disclaimer, while the Finnish Association of Architects, SAFA, was generous enough to provide me with welcome funding for this project, the words and viewpoints contained here are my own, and in no way reflect the position of the organisation.

The architecture profession in Finland

For a person who grew up and qualified as an architect in a large and diverse country, the first thing that struck me about the Finnish architecture field was how small and tightly-knit it was. Everybody seems to know everyone, and it can often seem difficult, if not impossible, to get connected to ones already operating in the field.

I had the privilege of starting my architectural journey in Finland through an international Master's programme in architecture at the University of Oulu. This meant I quickly got to know fellow beginners in the architecture field, both local and international, as well as teachers and professors, many of whom had strong connections to professional practice. This proved to be a great advantage later, since I was able to land my first summer internship in Finland with financial support from the university and guidance from a professor. This internship in turn led me to my first job after graduation in the same office, and the stability it brought allowed me to learn the language, improve my skills, build connections and progress in my career.

This is not to say that those whose first step in the Finnish architecture field doesn't begin at a Finnish university are faced with an impossible task. But attempting such a start directly into working life makes it more likely that one needs to be proactive in getting those first contacts, meeting the people who might know someone who might be able to offer you a job, and letting the field in general know that you are ready and interested in becoming their new colleague.

The small size of the architecture field, composed mostly of local graduates from one of the three Finnish universities offering professional education in architecture (Aalto, Tampere and Oulu),

combined with architectural practice being restricted mostly to projects within Finnish borders, means it can be difficult to find that first job, and get one's career in Finland started. However, the small size of the field is also advantageous from the perspective of it being quite straightforward to acquire contacts and progress quickly, once one has gotten a foot in the door.

As can be expected in a welfare state with a large public sector, a considerable number of architects in Finland work for municipalities, often in roles related to city planning and building permits. Such jobs almost always require fluent levels of either Finnish or Swedish, and sometimes both, and are hence rarely the first jobs that international architects in Finland get offered. The situation is changing though, and many English speaking applicants have been successful in landing summer internships or short term project based contracts in municipalities as well.

Finland has, at least until very recently, been a country where small architecture offices have been the rule. Individual architects and small studios have been able to carry out even large commissions, with project based collaborations with similar sized offices used as a way to tackle projects that a smaller office might not be able to handle on their own. This means the owners of the offices, who are in many cases the founders themselves, are often the ones making employment decisions as well. So in order to get one's first job in the Finnish architecture field, whether one is a local or a newcomer, one needs to be able to convince studio owners that one brings skills that do not already exist within the small group, and will be able to work well within the strong and close-knit work culture of the office. This is often a task that is more than a little challenging, especially if the situation in the construction sector is not the best,

as it has been over the last few years as a result of multiple global uncertainties.

Small offices run by the owners themselves are however no longer the norm. Takeover of Finnish architecture offices, by larger local and international consulting firms offering engineering services as well, and mergers of smaller specialised studios into larger multidisciplinary architecture offices, have led to what can be described as an increasing corporatisation of the field. This has brought with it changes in recruitment practices, work culture and job descriptions as well, opening up opportunities that might not have existed in a smaller studio, especially for those with specialised expertise gained elsewhere that is not yet common in Finland.

At the same time that professional practice is undergoing a wave of consolidation, academia in Finland is becoming increasingly international. The increase in the number of courses and programmes available in English has coincided with an increase in teaching and research positions which do not require local language skills as well. This means short-term contracts, and even longer term jobs in academia, can be a starting point for one's career in Finland, making available the crucial contacts and experience from Finland that potential employers often look for. The line between academia and practice is also being blurred, with it no longer being unheard of for international researchers to pursue their doctoral education in a Finnish university, while working in an office to develop their skills and widen their career options.

The kind of work that Finnish offices are engaged in also varies greatly. Some focus on building luxury homes and holiday cottages for individual clients. Others focus on large scale urban planning projects, where municipalities and developers are often the ones commissioning the work. Firms might also focus on specific typologies, such as hospitals or institutional buildings. Offices focused on conservation and restoration are also often

different from the ones engaged in large new construction. The increasing focus on environmental goals in the construction industry, as well as the increasing adoption of emerging technologies like BIM, parametric design and artificial intelligence, has also led to a growth in offices that focus on certain ways of doing architecture, rather than specific typologies or scales. The diversity in types of offices is something newcomers would do well to familiarise themselves with. One can increase one's chances of landing that first job in Finland by focusing efforts on offices that do work that one is interested in, and can benefit from the specific skills that one has to offer.

Being a sparsely populated country, with growth being restricted to the urban centres, geographic location plays an important role in the kind of work that is available to architects. It is not to say that one necessarily needs to live in the capital region or in one of the other larger cities to have a fair chance of landing a job. But the concentration of offices in the larger cities, which also tend to be more international and welcoming of newcomers, makes finding work in the urban centres much more straightforward. At the same time, competition might be less in smaller towns where skilled workers might be in short supply, so if you live in such a place, there is no reason to stop yourself from finding out if a local architect working as an independent entrepreneur might appreciate having an employee join their studio.

Job search

If there is one word that I wish someone had told me would be important to remember when I began my architecture career in Finland, it would be “flexibility”.

As I mentioned, we are dealing with a small country of about 5.5 million inhabitants, with correspondingly limited opportunities to work as an architect. The construction industry here is also quite sensitive to external influences, such as the geopolitical events of the last few years, making it challenging to find one’s ideal job in the ideal firm in an ideal location right at the start. Being flexible, if one’s life situation affords the privilege, can go a long way in preventing the dreaded multi-year job search phase.

As anyone who has applied for work in Finland can attest, it can take many tries before one gets responses from potential employers. Whether one is sending in an application based on posts about open positions on offices’ social media channels, job openings published on the architects association SAFA’s website, word-of-mouth knowledge, or simply submitting an open application, one needs to be prepared to wait. Even interview invitations, let alone job offers, can be hard to come by, especially in periods where the field is experiencing a slow-down. The importance of patience and perseverance in the job search cannot be overemphasised.

By patience and perseverance, I do not mean that one needs to keep applying to the same firms over and over again, but that it helps if one is ready to invest time and energy, not just in the application process, but in improving one’s skills and abilities as well. Sending a few well written applications that convince the receiver that you would be the right fit for their firm, instead of a number of generic emails to multiple firms, goes a long way. So does having a local friend or experienced colleague look over your application, including your CV and

portfolio, so that you are able to highlight skills and competencies that Finnish offices might be looking for.

While waiting for responses to job applications, it could be useful to both develop existing skills and learn new ones, both through self learning and participating in courses. Whether it is learning a new software programme that Finnish firms use, practising your local language skills, or enrolling in a project management course, prospective employers appreciate applicants who have kept themselves active and connected to the field while waiting to start working in it.

Some colleagues decide to enrol in for example two years Master’s programmes in Finland to improve their chances of finding employment afterwards. The efficiency of this approach depends on personal situation, including one’s previous education, work experience and even nationality and immigration status, with results in no way guaranteed on graduation. But if a new degree from Finland feels like the right solution, and your life situation allows it, there is no reason to not consider enrolling in university while looking for work in parallel.

In addition to participating in courses, submitting entries to open competitions can be a great way of demonstrating your skills, since Finland has a strong culture of architecture competitions. In addition to European, local competitions with sites across Finland, and typologies ranging from kindergartens to urban masterplans, are also increasingly held in English. Even if success in these competitions can feel like a long shot, your entry can serve as a great way to showcase your interests, abilities and willingness to learn more about the Finnish context in your portfolio, especially since employers are often already familiar with the sites and competition briefs.

Networking

Job applicants might have heard from Finnish peers who are already employed that networking is extremely important when trying to find work. Anyone who has attempted to grow their networks in Finland as a newcomer has also probably realised that this is easier said than done.

Joining SAFA and demonstrating your interest in participating in the architecture profession in Finland by attending events, joining lectures or even organising them yourself is one way of getting to know local colleagues. Those living in cities where architecture education is offered at the university have the added advantage of being able to attend open lectures and conferences organised by these academic institutions. The concentration of architecture offices is also much higher in the larger cities, providing far more opportunities for getting to know the people who might be able to help with progressing in one's career.

While the environment in Finland has not been the most conducive for newcomers to the field to network, even with fluency in the local language(s), things are getting better as challenges faced by internationals looking to network are increasingly recognised by key actors in the field. Professional organisations, the Museum for Finnish Architecture, Information Centre for Finnish Architecture Archinfo and other institutions are increasingly offering events in English, most of which allow remote participation. While this has considerably lowered the threshold to get to know local architects, a lot of work is still expected from the individual.

Joining local chapters of the Finnish Association of Architects SAFA, and volunteering in events around architecture such as film festivals, guided walks and conferences, can create opportunities to get closer to the local architecture scene. One can also be proactive, for example by suggesting

and organising events where one shares one's own experiences of studying architecture and practising the profession elsewhere in the world. Asking for suggestions from local SAFA chapters about relevant social media groups to stay up-to-date about the field can also help grow one's contacts. These groups can be especially useful to those living outside the architecture hotspots in the large cities, and looking to participate in current discussions about the profession.

The importance of networking in a country and field where defining career paths is almost completely left up to the individual cannot be ignored. Even if one has already landed one's first job as an architect in Finland, the uncertainties the field is subjected to make it crucial to keep expanding one's networks. Those who have spent at least a few months as a student at a Finnish university, for example as part of an exchange or international Master's programme, are once again at an advantage here, since classmates are often employed in other offices or even sectors (such as the municipality or university), and are a great source of information about possible opportunities. Platforms like LinkedIn are a good way to bridge this gap, since more and more architects based in Finland are happy to connect and share expertise with international colleagues as well.

It can also be useful to participate in networking events that are not just meant for architects, since interdisciplinarity is starting to be recognised as an asset in many sectors. Firms that are not engaged in architectural design, such as those producing furniture, designing industrial structures or offering advice to homebuyers, might still be able to benefit from the services of an architect. Especially in challenging times for the construction industry, such as what the early 2020's have brought, thinking creatively about which networks to tap into, combined with flexibility around choice of workplace, can go a long way.

The Finnish Association of Architects, SAFA

The Finnish Association of Architects, shortened as SAFA, is a professional association which represents the interest of architects working in Finland. Members of SAFA range from those working in the public sector to those running their own offices, those engaged in research to workers in private firms, those studying architecture in university to those looking for work after studies abroad.

While taking full advantage of all the services SAFA offers its members often requires Finnish language skills, the range of services available in English continues to grow every year. In addition to discounts on various services, ability to rent vacation properties, eligibility to apply for grants, and possibility to participate in professional conferences, training sessions, events, networks and gatherings, SAFA membership includes a subscription to the Finnish Architectural Review, a bilingual (Finnish and English) magazine. The magazine serves as a great window not just to get to know Finnish offices and their work, but to also get to know current trends in the profession, and how your skills might be useful in work that responds to them.

SAFA also has local sections that members are automatically part of. Especially in smaller cities, membership of such a local chapter can serve as a great way to get to know architects in the vicinity and familiarise oneself with local offices. Local sections organise events like tours of interesting buildings in the area and member meet-ups, and are often able to accommodate those who prefer communicating in English. In addition to local sections, there are theme based sub-sections of SAFA, such as one focusing on ecological architecture or one focusing on conservation of built heritage. Participation in these sections and activities is up to individual members' interest, and all of them serve as great platforms for getting to know colleagues.

In addition to providing members these direct benefits, SAFA plays an important role as the representative organisation for the architecture profession in Finland. SAFA comments on proposed legislation related to the built environment, coordinates with the ministries in questions related to architectural practice and education, and in other ways helps ensure that Finnish architecture is able to flourish. SAFA's work is guided by a general council elected by members to a three year term, and its day to day operations are carried out with the help of a board and various committees composed of members of the association. While participating in SAFA at this level requires Finnish language skills that might not be available to those just starting out in the country, it is good to remember that members can influence the association's focus areas in many other ways.

The advantages that SAFA membership brings are worth considering, even if one doesn't use all the benefits in the beginning. It is also worth remembering that employee architects can have a membership of the labour union TEK included in their SAFA membership at no extra cost. Membership fees for professional organisations like SAFA and TEK are tax-deductible at the time of writing this guide, and discounted membership fees are available to students, recent graduates and those looking for employment.

You can access SAFA's constantly expanding English language pages at www.safa.fi/en.

SAFA

The labour union, TEK

TEK is a labour union for academic engineers and architects in Finland. While SAFA is the organisation representing the architecture profession as a whole, TEK takes care of representing the interests of those architects who are working as employees, whether for the state, municipalities, educational institutions or in the private sector. As a labour union working towards protecting employee rights, TEK, through the negotiation organisations YTN for the private sector and JUKO for the public sector, is involved in negotiating the collective agreements with the organisations that represent the employers. Architects working as employees in the private sector are for example usually part of the collective agreement for senior salaried employees in the architectural design sector, negotiated between the Federation of Professional and Managerial Staff YTN, the Service Sector Employers Palta and the Association of Finnish Architects' Offices ATL.

As a labour union, TEK also does important work in representing the interests of its members at various levels, including by communicating members' concerns to the Finnish government when changes to legislation are being considered. TEK, much like SAFA, has a council elected by members that directs its operations, a board that oversees the implementation of the programme agreed on by the council, and employees with expertise in law, career advice, statistics etc. who serve the thousands of members across the country. Since TEK serves many other professions than just architects, the union's footprint across the country is substantial, and especially when faced with challenging situations at work, there is no better organisation to turn to for help and advice.

Belonging to a labour union is quite common in Finland, and especially since TEK membership is available for free with a SAFA membership, there is very little reason to avoid joining. Being a member of TEK also ensures one is able to use many services

that are simply not available elsewhere, including career advice, help with work contracts, salary recommendations, legal support, mentoring and so on. TEK also plays an important role in supporting shop stewards or employee representatives who look out for the interests of the employees in the workplace.

A common misconception is that one needs the services of the labour union only if one is in trouble, for example at a risk of losing one's job or is in disagreement with one's employer about the conditions of work. A TEK membership brings with it much more than help in times of crisis, in the form of discounted access to various services, networking opportunities through regular events, online training sessions on topics of common interest and so on.

TEK is also increasingly focusing on advancing equality and non-discrimination in Finnish working life, and has been working to make sure those belonging to minorities are able to have rewarding careers in their fields of choice. TEK has also been working to increase the range of services they offer in English, and recently welcomed a Project Manager on International Experts with the aim of including international members more closely in their work.

As mentioned earlier, membership of TEK is included in a SAFA membership, with student membership being completely free. More information from www.tek.fi/en



The unemployment fund, KOKO

Many of us, both locals and newcomers alike, know that Finland is considered a welfare state, where those looking for work are eligible for unemployment benefits. At the same time, it is unfortunately common to not realise that to be eligible for more than just the basic unemployment benefit that the social security organisation KELA provides, one has to be a member of an unemployment fund. Architects are usually part of one such fund, KOKO, the unemployment fund for the highly educated.

In the unfortunate event that one gets temporarily laid off or loses one's job, having been a member of the unemployment fund for a certain amount of time while being in paid employment, and having earned a certain minimum amount while employed, are requirements to be eligible for the full unemployment benefit. In other words, people often realise they should have been a member of the fund only when they are in need of the support, and by then it is too late to join.

The rules concerning unemployment benefits that the fund offers have seen considerable change in 2024 due to legislation changes. While unemployment support is in most cases lower than before,

and eligibility requirements have been tightened, anyone working in Finland for more than a couple of months stands to gain immensely by joining the fund. Especially with the slowdown in the field after in the early 2020's, the advantages of being a member of the unemployment fund have once again become important to remember.

Membership of KOKO is possible either directly, or by signing up when one applies for SAFA membership. Both require a separate annual payment to KOKO, and joining the unemployment fund is highly recommended as a bare minimum to ensure some level of support, even if one does not wish to immediately become a member of the professional association and/or the labour union.

More details about the benefits of joining an unemployment fund, and how to go about applying for support are available on KOKO's website.



Registration, Certification and Recognition

Membership of the Finnish Association of Architects SAFA is completely optional, and unlike in some other countries, it is not a requirement to go through a licensure procedure or be a member of the professional association to be able to work as an architect in Finland. In fact, the title of “architect” is not protected by legislation, and it is hence possible to provide architectural services even without holding a specific professional qualification to do so.

There are however ways to get one’s expertise certified in Finland, currently through the certification service offered by FISE, which SAFA coordinates for architect applicants. These certifications are especially important if one wishes to serve as the responsible building designer or the principal designer of a project, even though building permit authorities at the municipal level have so far required architects in such positions to deliver proof of education and work experience with building permit applications anyway.

The certification and qualification processes are currently undergoing changes with the implementation of the new construction law on 1.1.2025. The most significant change is that membership of a

public register is set to become mandatory for those wishing to serve in the roles mentioned above, with levels of certified expertise based on previous education and work experience. The aim with this change is to standardise the criteria required to design projects of varying complexity across the country, without the designer having to apply separately to each municipality’s building permit authority as part of the building permit application as is the case now. SAFA provides the most updated information about these changes.

To become a member of SAFA, and more importantly, to increase your chances of finding work in the architecture field in Finland, you often need to have a degree equivalent to the Finnish five-year professional architect’s degree. In some cases, foreign qualifications might require recognition in Finland to prove this equivalency. It is recommended to get this done as soon as possible, in case you have a degree from abroad that is not automatically recognised as equivalent in Finland.

Building your architecture career

Like many of us starting out in the architecture field in Finland know, getting the first job, however challenging or otherwise it is, is only one step in a long journey. Whether one wants to take on more responsibility and rise up in the same office, find work in a different office, move to an academic career, or even found one's own studio, the importance of consciously drawing up a career plan and utilising it to direct one's professional progress cannot be overemphasised.

Finding work, if one is a recent graduate, has moved from abroad, or both, can be challenging, especially in times when the construction sector is experiencing a slowdown. It is understandable in such situations that one's first priority is not planning what happens next year, let alone in 5 or 10 years' time. Uncertainties related to moving to a new country and staying for longer also often come in the way of how much energy and resources one is able to spare to map out how one wants to advance in one's career.

It is still a good idea, if one is in a situation to do so, to consciously think ahead about what one's future would look like. It is then possible to map out smaller achievable goals at set timeframes, and work towards those, both as part of work and in one's freetime.

One might for example want to improve one's skills in building information modelling with the goal of becoming a BIM manager, and be able to enrol in certificate courses with support from the employer. Alternatively, one might want to grow into an expert in low-energy building design, and participate in training and competitions with that aim in mind. One might also be interested in the social effects of built environment design, and benefit from joining a reading circle with researchers and practitioners dealing with the topic.

The operating environment for architects continues to grow at a rapid pace, and being able to offer the employer skills and expertise that other employees don't have is almost a must to excel in the field. Topics like artificial intelligence, climate change, social inclusion and even safety and security continue to gain importance, and anyone who is able to consciously improve their competence in a topic that both interests them and is of benefit to an architectural practice is sure to find more opportunities for work even when times are difficult.

It is also possible to take a more laid back approach to career planning, seeing what comes along in one's workplace, and discovering new niches to work with and skills to acquire as one accumulates work experience. While this has indeed worked for many international architects in Finland, and many colleagues have found themselves becoming passionate about certain types of work within the field they wouldn't have ended up in consciously, it is still good to have a career plan, even if it ends up being a plan B that might never get used.

More experienced colleagues are often happy to help with ideas, and share their own experiences, if making a career plan feels challenging. Mentoring programmes, like the ones SAFA organises, can help find these experienced colleagues who have navigated the Finnish architecture scene for a while, and are open to sharing tips to help newcomers on their journey.

Despite all the help available, it is important to remember that you alone know what your values are, what you are passionate about, and where you want to be as an architect working in Finland. So I encourage you to boldly chart out your own future course, even if it looks different from that of those around, or doesn't directly match what the field requires right now.

Language skills

People in Finland, especially in architecture offices in the cities, usually speak English well enough for international colleagues to not have to speak the local language when they start. It is also possible to live in Finland for years without speaking the local language, and that is indeed one of the reasons many people choose to move here. There are colleagues who have built successful careers communicating with their co-workers exclusively in English, especially if working in international offices and living in the capital region or other large cities. However, I am yet to come across a situation in work life where better Finnish (or in some cases, Swedish) language skills wouldn't have been an advantage.

Progressing in the field, for example from a team member role to one with more responsibility, such as a team leader or project architect, often requires communication with clients, external consultants and municipal authorities. While there is always the private client or small company that is willing to accommodate international colleagues' requests to communicate in English, the more complex the project, and the more the number of collaborators involved, the greater is the expectation that all team members are able to communicate in the local language.

It is also of great help to be able to go through relevant laws and building regulations, understand competition programmes, and simply be more "present" in the workplace by being able to communicate in the local language.

While the advantages of speaking the local language are undeniable, it is also a fact that Finnish is not the easiest of languages to learn. Juggling work and personal life can be challenging enough for someone just starting out in the field, an intense language learning that can demand years of commitment might not be high on the list of priorities.

However, once you have settled in a little, and find yourself thinking about continuing to work in Finland for longer, I highly recommend checking out the options available for learning the language. Websites like finnishcourses.fi for example present a variety of courses from different service providers in one place. For those unable to attend language learning in person, online options are available as well. A small but growing number of employers are also recognising the importance of supporting international colleagues in gaining language skills, so it might be a good idea to check what your options are and choose the one that best suits your life situation.

In case you are currently looking for your first job in the Finnish architecture field, or are between jobs after having worked in English for a while, improving your local language skills is one of the best things you can do to improve your chances of success. Knowing even just the basics goes a long way in assuring the employer that you are committed to living and working in Finland, and that it is worth getting you on board. Since it is much easier to improve one's language skills at the workplace through continuous practice, building a foundation by attending a few courses as early as possible is highly recommended.

Working in Finland

An important reason for many people to look forward to working in Finland is the work-life balance that is on offer. While there does exist a difference among architecture offices in how much flexibility they expect from employees in terms of work hours, employee's personal lives are taken into consideration in Finland far more than in many other countries.

InfoFinland has some great resources to help newcomers get used to working in Finland: **www.infofinland.fi/en/work-and-enterprise/finnish-working-life**

Workers in Finland are entitled to longer annual leave than is common elsewhere, paid time off to care for newborn children, sickness allowance, occupational healthcare and other benefits that might not be familiar to everyone. It is recommended to take some time to understand these well in advance, so that surprises can be avoided later.

If you find yourself in a situation where it feels like your rights as an employee are being challenged, it is good to discuss with colleagues or friends who have more experience with working in Finland. Many offices also have shop stewards or employee representatives, whose job is to make sure employees are being treated fairly and in accordance with the law.

The labour union TEK also has experts who are ready to help with matters related to work life. They provide members services in English as well, and communication is free and confidential. There is no reason to hesitate about getting in touch with advisors at the union. Topics can for example be lack of clarity in the work agreement, upcoming lay-offs, overtime compensation etc.

Peer Support

As most people who have lived in Finland even for a short while know, there is a tendency among the locals to keep to oneself, often for fear of coming across as rude or intrusive. It is assumed that those needing help will ask for it, leaving newcomers to feel that help is not readily available. Many locals, on the other hand, have not been in situations where they are working with or managing diverse teams, and seemingly obvious challenges might go unnoticed. It is always better to ask and be honest, so that solutions that improve working life for everyone can be collectively developed and implemented.

However friendly and helpful colleagues are, nothing can replace sharing experiences and asking for advice from those who have been there before or going through the same. Whether you moved to Finland from elsewhere, or otherwise belong to a minority, it is a good idea to build relationships with colleagues in the field outside of your workplace from a peer support perspective. This can involve something as simple as meeting up once in a while for coffee, for example with an ex-classmate or acquaintance. Tips about job openings, vacant apartments, and even interesting events are all surprisingly dependent on word-of-mouth, and one never knows what a random conversation can lead to.

Especially in challenging times in the field, bouncing ideas off of someone who has dealt with or is dealing with similar questions can give crucial hope and optimism. Again, the key is to boldly reach out and ask people if they are able to meet, provide advice or otherwise support you, and take it from there.

A big step towards enabling peer support for international architects in Finland was taken in autumn 2024 with the founding of a LinkedIn group “International Architects in Finland - A group for supporting each other”. The rapid growth in membership to almost 200 participants within a few weeks proves that there exists an unmet need for giving and receiving support outside institutional frameworks. The group is run by members on a voluntary basis, and is not associated with any organisation. Membership in the group is open to anyone in Finland who is an international architect or studying to become one. I hope readers both make use of the opportunities the group provides, as well as actively contribute to the community by providing help for colleagues facing challenges.

Useful Links

Linkedin group for international architects in Finland. This newly formed group offers free help, advice and peer support, and is especially useful if you live in places without a large international architect presence: www.linkedin.com/groups/10015485

Workbook by labour union TEK targeted towards students and recent graduates, with valuable suggestions about entering and succeeding in Finnish work life: www.tek.fi/en/news-blogs/workbook-2024-offers-job-search-advice-for-students

The Finnish Association of Architects SAFA is constantly adding to the services available in English. Membership is discounted if one is a student or yet to find employment, and is worth considering: www.safa.fi/en/safa-membership

SAFA has a popular mentoring programme for members that is available for participation in English as well. Both mentors and mentees with an international background have found the experience useful: www.safa.fi/en/mentoring

Travel guide to working life for architecture students and recent graduates (in Finnish), published by SAFA and TEK: www.safa.fi/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Arkkitehtiopiskelijoiden_opas.pdf

SAFA's checklist for newly graduated architects (in Finnish), includes useful links also for those who don't speak Finnish or have graduated less recently: www.safa.fi/uutiset/vastavalmistuneen-arkkitehdin-muistilista

Presentations from SAFA's professional practice afternoon, first organised in spring 2024, provide a lot of useful information for international architects in Finland. www.safa.fi/tapahtuma/professional-practice-afternoon

The Museum of Finnish Architecture organises guided tours, lectures and panel discussions. These events provide a great platform to meet like-minded colleagues: www.mfa.fi

General guide to working life in Finland www.infofinland.fi/en/work-and-enterprise/finnish-working-life

Abbreviations and terms

SAFA Suomen Arkkitehtiliitto - Finlands Arkitektförbund, The Finnish Association of Architects

TEK Tekniikan akateemiset TEK, the labour union for university educated engineers and architects

KOKO Korkeasti koulutettujen kassa, the unemployment fund for the highly educated

KELA Kansaneläkelaitos, the Finnish social security organisation

YTN Ylemmät toimihenkilöt, The Federation of Professional and Managerial Staff that negotiates many private sector collective agreements on behalf of the labour unions

JUKO Julkisan koulutettujen neuvottelujärjestö, The organisation that negotiates many public sector collective agreements on behalf of the labour unions

ATL Arkkitehtitoimistojen Liitto, The Association of Finnish Architects' Offices, which represents the employers, for example in the collective agreement negotiations

Concluding remarks

Architecture isn't the easiest of professions anywhere in the world. Even in a country where the field enjoys relatively good social standing, and aspects like equality, non-discrimination, worker's rights and work-life balance are in better shape than in many other places, those beginning their journey as architects in Finland can still end up facing multiple challenges.

Thankfully, some of the skills that architects have, such as problem solving, dealing with complexity, creativity, flexibility and teamwork, also come in handy when trying to advance in the architecture profession in Finland, whether one is beginning their career, or hoping to continue one started elsewhere.

For all the challenges mentioned in these pages, the Finnish architecture field has rapidly diversified over the last decade, and there is nothing to

suggest this will not continue. This transformation has brought with it a noticeable change, both in colleagues' and in Finnish society's willingness to expand the understanding of who is seen as capable of being an architect here.

As I mentioned in the beginning, while the intention of this guide is not to provide solutions to all the challenges those starting in the architecture field in Finland might face, I do hope some of the tips shared here help you build a career and thrive here. I also hope that you are able to find possibilities to share your own tips and tools with others who could use them.

Thank you once again for reading, and all the very best!

