

My Homelessness LiA at Y-Säätiö, Helsinki.

I chose Helsinki, Finland for my LiA. As one of the most successful and civilized societies in human history, Finland may not strike you as a place worth investing 6 weeks in for a LiA. However, just as Rome wasn't built in a day, homelessness, violence, famine, and all other horrors and injustice of human life won't be ended in six weeks. Long-term thinking was in the back of my mind from start to finish.

I secured a place at Y-Säätiö (Y-Foundation), Finland's largest non-profit landlord and heart of their national homelessness policy for the past 40 years. I chose to continue my focus on homelessness from my first summer of research due to the centrality of housing in people's lives, and how the commodification and capitalist-feudal provision of housing since the 80s has led to intermittent housing crises and homelessness across the globe.

Setting the Scene

To reflect on why it was worth investing my time in Helsinki, rather than somewhere with more widespread homelessness or other social challenges, context is key. The history of homelessness in Finland is an expression of their grit, determination, and keen eye for justice. Its success reflects the best practice developed in Finnish society.

Postwar Finland saw huge demographic change. The burdens of economic reconstruction combined with soldiers returning from the front, and refugees from lost Finnish land led to housing crises and homelessness as people flocked to urban centres. Throughout the 50's over 50% of the population were still employed in the primary sector. By the 80's Finland had over 20,000 homeless people.

In 1985, Y-Säätiö was founded as part of a national programme to resolve the homelessness epidemic. Almost 40 years later, Finland has reduced homelessness to around 3300 people. This was done through dedication and innovation – not the cost-free silver bullet we are becoming increasingly infatuated with. In an era of cheap promises and short-sighted policy, Finland's approach to homelessness has been not only revolutionary, but a testament to the importance of long-term thinking and leadership.

It was with this background that I entered Y-Säätiö, which has by now become a modern-day housing provider, maintaining its position at the forefront of social policy through a blend of financial management, research production, and leveraging an impressive international presence. I was placed within the sizeable development and research team.

Working at Y-Säätiö

I normally hate a cliché, but it would be no exaggeration to say that the six weeks I spent at Y-Säätiö have been life-changing. Creative freedom, at hand support, and trust meant that I could engage with a range of projects and events. I found it advantageous that there was no set in stone project goal – this meant that I had more flexibility to slot into and engage in the current activities of the research and development team. Whilst I had a number of things I planned to do whilst at Y-Säätiö, such as site visits, the central objectives were to listen, learn, and find out how my time could be best utilised. The outcomes of this approach were, I believe, greatly successful.

I was directly involved in international affairs and ongoing research. I joined the research team for their trip to the FEANTSA Homelessness Conference in Budapest, and aided presenting

researchers with their presentation style, content, and delivery. I met with the Dutch Ministry of Housing and Spatial Planning, ensuring that communications would be continued into the future. I also engaged with ongoing research. I produced a literature review on the concept of 'Fidelity' in Housing First provision, conducted economic impact evaluation of Y-Säätiö's international presence, and wrote and presented a report on the rental rates of their affordable housing amidst a sharp and disproportionate rise in the cost of living.

Living in Helsinki was a blessing. I found great reward in the slower, quieter lifestyle, which provided me with opportunities to reflect. Being half-Finnish, my intermediate language skills were both a blessing and a curse. I found great joy in improving my Finnish, but sometimes struggled from burnout from speaking a language I wasn't completely comfortable with just yet.

Reflection

Whilst the work I conducted whilst on placement was somewhat important, by far the most critical lesson for my development was seeing with my own eyes what long-sighted, dedicated, and socially minded policy can achieve. I visited several supported accommodation units for ex-homeless people and had the privilege of talking to residents. I also saw the effects of the nationalist neoliberal government which had been elected in 2023. Sweeping cuts to social services and safety nets are threatening the future of homelessness in Finland. It is from seeing the panic and concern in my colleagues that my final and most significant lesson was learnt. Social justice is a goal with no end. It is a constant struggle over what is easy and what is right.

The impacts of my leadership in action placement will be sustained because they must be sustained. There is no silver-bullet 6-week intervention that will make the world better in the long run. It is only through changing the way that society is organised that change will last – I have learnt that that takes a lifetime.