

City Cycling in Helsinki

Nora Daley-Peng, ASLA, AICP, LEED AP+



The ride continues.

From where we left off in last month's JR Viewpoint blog, we just surfaced to Helsinki's city streets after biking the Baana, a trail converted from an old railway corridor. My 2019 Jennings Randolph International Fellowship brought me to Finland to study all things multimodal. On a sunny morning in May, I joined Oskari Kaupinmäki, Helsinki's Bicycle Coordinator, for a bike ride to learn how pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure projects are enticing more walking and cycling trips. The creation of the Baana is just one part of Helsinki's transformation. On the second half of our ride, I discovered how Helsinki is retrofitting its streets to revitalize the joy of biking in the city.

Oskari is a self-proclaimed transport anthropologist/psychologist. His passion is to improve city life by re-introducing the bicycle into the urban environment. We begin our ride with a quick history lesson. Cycling has been a central part of Finnish lifestyle for more than a century. To this day, ninety percent of Finns own a bike. Everywhere you turn, you see people riding "granny bikes", a sturdy black city bike modeled on a design from the 1920s.

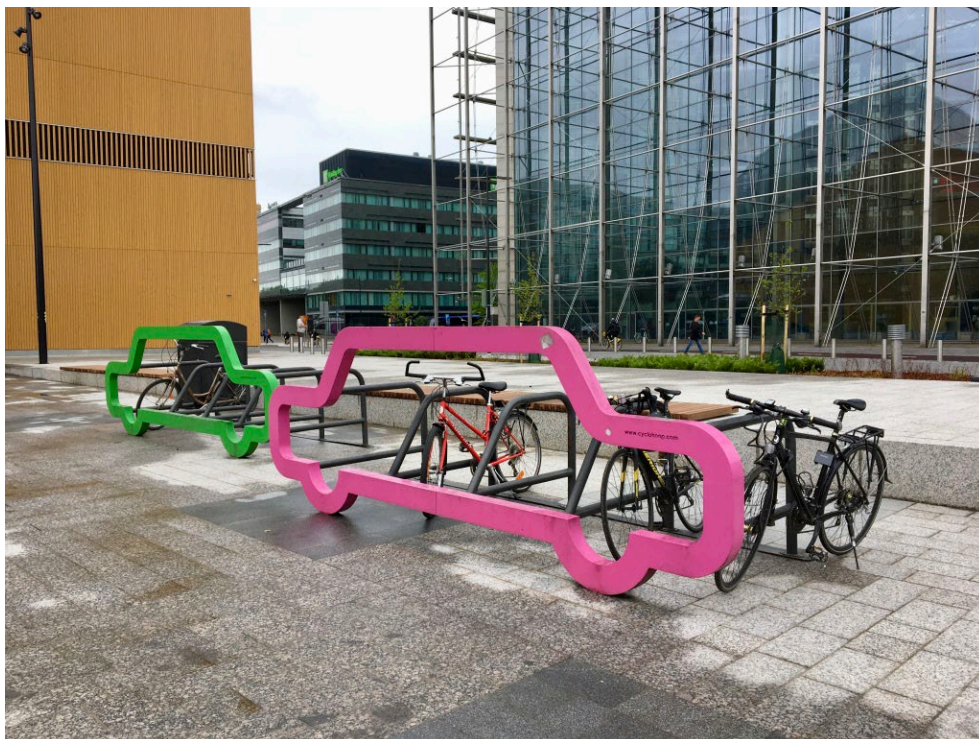
As Helsinki became more urban, cycling in the city declined because it wasn't safe and convenient. In recent years, Helsinki's investments in bike share, trails, and on-street bike improvements have spurred a resurgence of cycling in the city. To accelerate this change, Helsinki is part of CIVITAS [Handshake](#), a European Union initiative that is bringing together 13 of Europe's top cycling cities to share solutions to make cycling a more attractive and everyday mode of transportation.



The classic granny bike has been a fixture in Finnish life for more than a century.

As we pedal through the city, Oskari explains where changes are needed most based on a recent public survey. When the City asked residents what improvements would motivate them to cycle more, the top five most frequent responses were:

1. More secure bicycle parking facilities
2. More extensive and better-connected cycle paths
3. Make cycling safer
4. Provide bike detours around construction
5. Maintain cycle paths year round



This bike rack can securely park 10 bikes in the equivalent of one car parking space.

With the influx of cycling comes the need to provide convenient and secure parking. The question is: “Where will all the needed bike racks fit?” Maybe it’s a matter of reallocating space. As we cruise by Helsinki’s Central Library, I notice a car-shaped bike rack that can securely park 10 bikes in the equivalent of one car parking space.

In the City Centre, it’s common for pedestrians and cyclists to share the same sidewalk. This old system is incrementally being replaced with separate bike and pedestrian paths for increased safety and capacity. The addition of dedicated bike signals throughout the city is fostering safe and predictable traffic movements for everyone.



Dedicated bike signals create safe and predictable movements for everyone.

About halfway into our ride, we are funneled onto a tight sidewalk to avoid a construction zone. In Finland, the construction season is very short, so when spring hits, it seems like construction is happening on every corner. One area for improvement is better detours for pedestrians and cyclists around construction zones.



Better pedestrian and bike detours are needed around construction zones.

As we wrap up our ride, Oskari tells me about a pilot project to promote winter cycling by “brushing and salting” 35 km of cycling paths. He knows that providing year-round maintenance of cycle paths is one of the best ways to attract more cyclists.

My morning bike ride with Oskari has breezed by. My biggest takeaway is that when you make good bicycle infrastructure, you get better pedestrian environment, and it’s safer for everybody. I feel inspired by what I have learned and can apply to my work as a transportation planner for the City of Shoreline, WA, USA.