

EXCHANGE REPORT FOR BUILD STUDENTS
TORONTO, GEORGE BROWN COLLEGE

Introduction

I am writing this report to help fellow KEA students decide whether they should participate in the exchange programme and which destination they should choose. I study Architectural Technology and Construction Management in the international line. As recommended by our mentor, I went on exchange in the 5th semester because it was the last semester of teaching before the internships. I knew that it would be a renovation project, so it was more about implementing our knowledge and not a massive amount of new material.

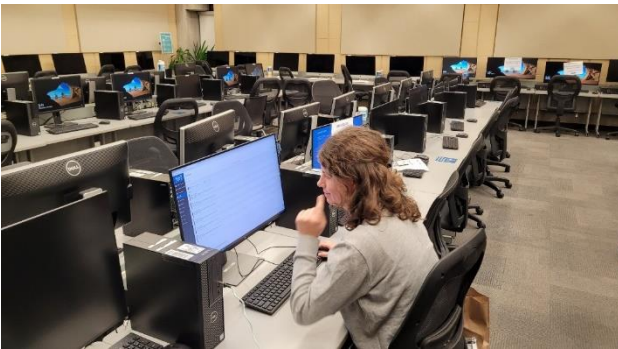
I have always been intrigued by Canada and imagined what living there would be like, so taking a semester in Toronto was a perfect opportunity to make a lifelong dream come true without having to leave my whole life behind. My expectations were high, to the point of anticipating disappointment, but my experience, in the end, was everything that I hoped for and more.



I must make one thing clear from the beginning, as it was something I found out after the teaching had already started, and it came as a surprise to us, the exchange students from KEA. The exchange program at George Brown College is called 'Architectural Technology', although it does not mean the same thing as it does in Denmark. The credential upon finishing this program at GBC is Ontario College Advanced Diploma, which is not a bachelor's degree. An architectural technologist in Canada is a person who studied Architecture but has a 'rank' below a bachelor's graduate. In Canada, unlike in Scandinavia and the UK, there are no constructing architects acting as a link between architects-designers and engineers. Therefore, what we studied in Toronto, was predominantly Architecture with a big focus on design, and elements of construction. We were often told by our teachers, that we should not be looking too much into structural details, as it is the engineer's job to provide us with such information. This came as a shock to two Constructing Architecture (not a thing in Canada) students from Denmark, who spent the last two years calculating forces and modelling rebars. Nonetheless, we were happy to be involved in the design process much more than previously for one semester. It was a nice change, the teaching was very interesting, and as we later found out, creative thinking is a skill like any other that should be practised continuously.

Experiences at the host university

The receiving school sent us a list of available courses with descriptions and told us that they would sign us up manually. Normally the GBC students build their schedule themselves and they can decide what day and time they want to attend certain lectures. It was recommended to us that we choose courses adding up to 15 credits. I initially signed up for too many courses because frankly, they all sounded interesting and valuable. Once the teaching started and I got acquired into the Canadian schooling system, I realised that doing 21 hours per week (out of a mandatory 15), was a little too much to handle. The courses are not connected like at KEA, so we would need to manage a couple of different projects at a time + write a technical report about something else. After attending a full week of classes, I evaluated that two courses are pretty much a recap of what we already learned in the previous semesters at KEA. Those were Technical Report Writing and Structural Systems. We had the option to change or drop out of courses within the first two weeks.



The courses I ended up taking were:

ARCH 3007 Architectural Technology & Studio 5

Teachers: Marlene Slopack and Hoda Ganji

This course was the most similar to the way we learn at KEA, in a way that we were given a brief and had to develop a residential project in groups of 4. The main difference is that at KEA we have one project for the whole semester and attend all classes with the same people. At GBC we had one project per course and attended each of them with different people, because of the way they organised their schedules. Creating a group wasn't easy, because we had to figure out who has a similar schedule to ours or at least attended Studio on the same days. After group formation, each member could choose to be a 'specialist' in one of the fields described in the assignment by our teachers, for example, 'Environmental' or 'OCB' which stands for Ontario Building Code and is equivalent to the Danish Building Regulations. Sets of drawings to be delivered were also assigned to each member, which I found to be a fairer system than at KEA, where we often end up with an uneven workload among the group. Our studio class was split into 3 groups, which allowed us to have a lot of one-on-one time with our leading teacher Hoda Ganji, who made sure to speak to each group individually and answered all the most important questions in emails sent after the class so that everyone was on the same page. We were provided all the useful books with Canadian standards and websites with information related to the project by the lecturers.

ARCH 3010 Principles of Building Information Modelling

Teacher: Brent Mauti

Two of my chosen courses were run online and this was one of them. To my surprise, the whole class had their cameras turned off and the teacher never engaged with any of us throughout the whole duration of his class. He was very knowledgeable and very into the subject he was teaching and he didn't seem to mind just talking about it for two hours without a break. Together with my fellow KEA exchange student, we were wondering why this course is only available for the students to take in the 5th semester, while basically being an introduction to BIM. Why don't they teach it in the 1st instead? Anyway, even though in the beginning it felt like a recap of what I've known from KEA, the whole semester's presentation had over 800 slides and I learnt a lot of new things about BIM. It would have been nice to have all that theory base taught in the early semesters at KEA, to clarify the concepts that are confusing to students about what BIM actually is.

ARCH 3070 Materials, Methods and Components 3

Teacher: Rosario Sapienza

The title of this course is pretty self-explanatory. The lectures were in form of visual presentations about building materials. We had three open-book exams throughout the semester and one group assignment where we had to deliver a set of detail drawings with annotations. This course was available to students from both the 3rd and 5th semesters (combined), so it did feel like a recap of the knowledge we had from Denmark, but it was nice to attend the classes even just for the teacher. Rosario had broad industry knowledge and professional experience. He was open to discussions not only about his subject but also about famous architects, interior design and product design.

CADE 3002 Digital Practices for Architecture 3

Teacher: Martin Radikov

One of my favourite courses, despite the deliverables being on the demanding side. It was all about Revit, parameters and producing decent renders. Every week we got assignments with detailed lists and links to videos explaining everything step by step. Our teacher was a professional architect with a strong sense of aesthetics and he expected us to deliver very good quality every time. I found his sense of humour amusing, he always let us know when he wasn't satisfied with what the class produced but I'm sure he did it as a form of pushing us to do our best. Having previous Revit experience, my KEA friend and I were top of the class, but we still learned new skills because of the intensity of the course. We could usually do extra work for bonus points.

ARCH 3019 Concentrations in Architecture 1

Teacher: Pietro Ferrari

Concentration courses can be compared to our Electives, but they're being taught simultaneously with the rest, rather than at the end of the semester. This course was taught online by the dean of our program. I was excited about it because we don't get to do much Architectural Design at KEA and I thought it would be very inspiring and mostly theoretical. Let me warn you, this was way more

challenging than I expected. From the start, Pietro made it very clear that he expects us to show up every week, with cameras on and be very proactive. He was a little intimidating but also fun to interact with. A couple of times he made each of us lead the class to keep us engaged. In the beginning, I found his course so abstract, I couldn't wrap my head around it. He made me realise how important to architecture are the words we use to describe the concepts. About 40% of the course was about finding the right words. We were assessed based on our own project statements. The final product wasn't as important as the design matching our concept. This is a great course for KEA students who are constantly thinking about the technicalities and buildability because when you get a project where none of that matters, you are forced to exercise your brain in a completely different way than you're used to. I would recommend challenging yourself that way.

ARCH 3012 Concentrations in Computational Design

Teacher: Hoda Ganji

I saved the best for the last. I never missed a single class with Hoda. The teacher who taught this course is one of the reasons why it was so sad for me to leave George Brown College. We had a set of very passionate teachers there and she was the most inspiring of them. The best description of the course itself is explained in this video [What is ARCH3012 about? - YouTube](#). In short, we were learning about Parametric Design and how to use Dynamo. Dynamo is a Revit extension that always seemed daunting to me, whenever I heard someone trying to explain how it works. My previous experience with it was that some older students were intimidatingly good at it, and their workshops showed their abilities, rather than taught us how to use it. With Hoda, we started with absolute basics. She could explain complex processes in a way that people who had no previous experience with it understood it. The class was very engaging, we were encouraged to answer her questions and find solutions together. One day Hoda brought VR glasses for everyone so we could immerse ourselves in our designs. We did 4 individual projects during this course and created a lot of good content for our portfolios.

Social and cultural experiences

The population of the Greater Toronto Area is 6.3 million (for comparison, the whole country of Denmark is 5.9M). In 2021, close to half of the population living in the Toronto CMA were immigrants. I think that plays a major role in the way you are treated as a newcomer. And that is – with arms wide open. I can't really say that I experienced any challenges culturally while being abroad, on the contrary, I connected with people much easier in Canada than I did in Denmark. There are large communities from around the world, so wherever you come from, you will find your people. During the summer there are culture-themed festivals and street parties like Polish or Ukrainian (everybody loves pierogi), and of course, you will find whole neighbourhoods, for example, Korea Town or Little Portugal, with delicious, authentic cuisine all year round.



The food variety is one of the best aspects of living in Toronto. You can go out to eat every weekend (if you are lucky enough to afford it) and not eat the same thing twice. During my time there, I developed a slight addiction to Mexican food and bubble tea. There is a surprisingly large selection of fruit and vegetables in grocery stores, many of which I have never seen in Europe.

Even if you're not the biggest sports fan, it is a good idea to attend at least one big game at one of the arenas. The tickets are cheaper outside of the season, but the excitement is greater during the season. Then you can find some cheap last-minute tickets on Gametime (reselling site) but be prepared that it's usually almost literally last-minute deals. I went to two ice hockey games at Scotiabank and the atmosphere was just insane. At the more important basketball games, you might even spot Drake or some other celebs.

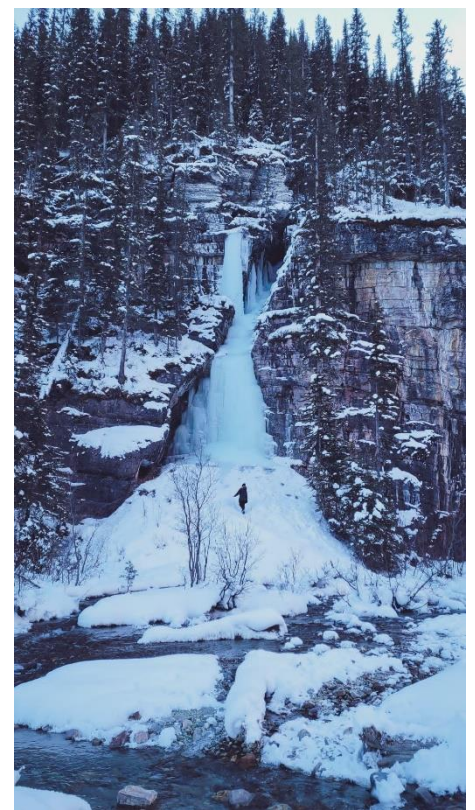
In Canadian post-secondary institutions, there is a mid-term break called a 'reading week', which is a week during a university's term where no teaching takes place, generally so that students may prepare for tests. If you submit all your deliverables on time though, which you should, you can use this time to explore Canada. I recommend you buy a flight ticket and visit other provinces. We went to Alberta which was AMAZING, experienced lots of snow and some beautiful parks and nature attractions. Another great place to visit outside of Ontario is Montreal in Quebec, where you can also get by train or bus which takes about 6hr. QC is the only Canadian province that is primarily Francophone, so you should be prepared to *parler français!*



Calgary



Banff



Lake Louise

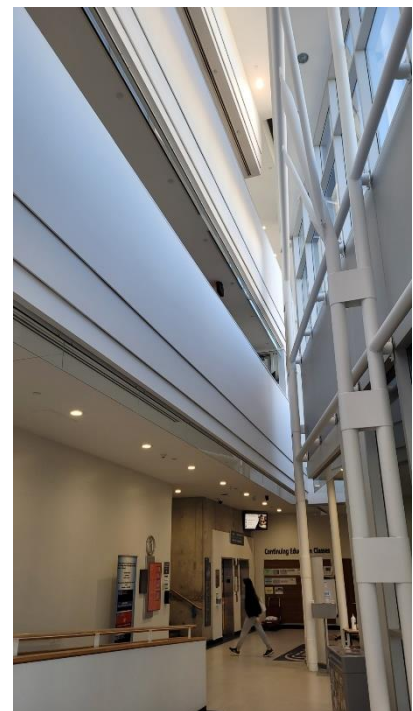
Practical experiences

After everyone got accepted to their host institutions, I sent a group email to all KEA students going to Toronto, so we could support each other in the process and maybe find accommodation together. We were looking both for dorms and private houses/rooms to rent. I know that other schools like Humber sent their exchange students an info pack with their accommodation options, but we didn't get one from George Brown College.

In my experience, everything to do with the administration at GBC was a bit of a hassle. Unfortunately, we didn't have a 'Welcome' event or even a 'buddy' assigned to us. As we quickly realised, we were the only two exchange students in our year and none of the teachers were informed that they had Danish students in their class. It was our initiative to come forward to each of them and introduce ourselves. We felt sort of thrown in the middle of a completely different schooling system, trying to find our way around a huge campus with no guide and not a single coordinator that we could speak to in person. Fortunately, both my friend from KEA and I, are not the kind of people who sit on their hands, so we actively reached out to people to figure out what is going on and how everything works. That meant sending a lot of emails to both KEA and GBC admins, talking to school staff and approaching other students.

Settling down at George Brown College took us a week or two. Finding our way around the Casa Loma campus – about a month. It has a very weird, multi-storey shape, but there are maps on each floor and if you get lost, (which will happen) the guards strolling down the hallways are your best friends, they will tell you the exact turn you need to take to get to your classroom.

Having said all that, I don't want to leave you with the impression that I had a bad experience. The beginnings in any new place are usually tough and you shouldn't expect anyone to take you by the hand and guide you through it. Once you show initiative and find the courage to speak to strangers/ask for help, you will instantly face positive interactions and maybe even make first new friends. Remember that we're talking about Canadians here - it's true what they say about their politeness!



EXPENSES

✈️ I flew to Toronto in August, three weeks before school started. The return flight ticket with checked-in luggage cost me about 5500.00 DKK.

🚌 Toronto is a large city and you will take the public transport (TTC) a lot. It will be unreliable and you will hate it but that's part of the game. Monthly PRESTO card costs \$156. It seems like a lot, but we calculated that it's worth it if you leave your house 5 times a week.

🍷 Cheap meal in the city + drink is roughly \$30 per person. Keep in mind that the prices are shown without the tax, so when you get a bill there will be 13% added to the total and of course you HAVE TO leave a tip. The card machines will prompt you to choose one of three options, usually between 18% and 23%.

🏠 Accommodation: I rented a 5-bedroom house in East York with 4 other KEA students which cost us \$960 each per month. We would pay about the same price for a dorm room. The house was advertised on Kijiji, which is a website equivalent to our DBA. We had a couple of video calls with the landlords before sending the deposit to make sure the place was legit and had a friend who lived in Toronto go there in person, for peace of mind. I'm sure I don't have to explain that you need to be extra careful with these things because it's not uncommon to get scammed this way.

I downloaded a money managing app to keep an eye on my budget. Here are the monthly averages:

🛒 Groceries: \$300

☕ Cafés: \$150

🛍️ Shopping: \$150

🎉 Parties: \$100

🚗 Uber: \$80

🏪 Drugstore: \$60

📱 Phone subscription (Chatr): \$45



Conclusion

PROS	CONS
Great teachers at GBC People are friendly and kind Everyone speaks English The city feels safe Cool second-hand shops Delicious food from around the world Opportunity to meet many interesting people Exploring different cultures in one city You can fly to New York for the weekend That 'Big City Life' feeling Maple Syrup International shows in theatres Concerts of artists who don't usually tour Europe	It ain't cheap You may get a neck pain from looking up at the skyscrapers Summers are hot and humid Possibility of getting lost in Walmart Moving around the city is time consuming Rather dangerous to cycle Racoons

All things considered, I had the best time in Canada. If I could go on another exchange, I would go right back to George Brown College. The professors were professionals in their fields and they were teaching their courses with true passion. I am grateful for the opportunity to experience living in Toronto and learn the American approach to architecture. Analysing the projects from their perspective allowed me to discover buildability issues that we don't often consider in Scandinavian constructions.

During my exchange semester at George Brown College, I gained valuable architectural knowledge on subjects that are not taught at KEA and enriched my academic portfolio with several new projects. I came back more confident in my Revit skills, better understanding of BIM processes, ability to operate a visual programming tool and insight into design architecture.

The people I've met were welcoming and made me feel like Toronto was my home, even if only temporarily. We went to exhibitions, concerts, art and design events, quirky bars, pool parties on top of skyscrapers and made many beautiful memories that will make me miss them dearly.

