




# **It's not just about opening the doors**

Three lessons we learned  
when opening a space for  
citizens' use

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**Cities are filled with unused and underused spaces and at the same time there is a great need for public or semi-public space from NGOs, citizen groups and cultural organisations. In the context of Cultural and Creative Spaces and Cities (CCSC) project, we began at KAAPELI – a cultural centre operator based in Helsinki – opening the doors of our largest event space, a former industrial hall of 3148 square meters, to the free use of citizens. We learned that opening the doors is not enough.**


During the past fifty years European cities have undergone a tremendous change. Accelerating urbanization and globalization have pushed industrial production out of cities or even out of the continent and with the expansion of the service economy many of the former industrial sites have remained empty or underused. Yet, there is a great need for space for citizen-led activities in our cities ranging from neighbourhood gatherings to cultural activities and to various kinds of use by non-governmental organisations (NGOs). One of the goals of the CCSC project was to involve citizens in the opening of empty spaces. This is exactly what we set out to do at KAAPELI.

**KAAPELI – A financially self-sustaining cultural centre operator and a cultural enabler**

KAAPELI is a cultural centre operator running three cultural centres in Helsinki, Finland. From 1991 onwards, we have been operating The Cable Factory, a former factory that produced electric and telecommunication cables from early forties until late 1980's. The Cable Factory represents approximately 57 000 square meters of space and houses roughly 300 tenants ranging from individual artists, to cultural organisations, band rehearsal spaces, creative industry companies, NGOs and to museums. In addition, the centre has ten event spaces that it rents out on a short-term basis. From 2008, KAAPELI has also ran Suvilahti, a former gas and energy plant with 17 000 square meters of indoor space and a 2,6-hectare open field, turned into a cultural centre that houses 50 long-term tenants and hosts numerous outdoor festivals every year. In December 2019, KAAPELI bought a third site. N10 is a former pharmaceutical factory of 17 000 square meters that houses some 250 long-term cultural tenants. All in all, the KAAPELI operates a little bit less than 100 000 square meters of space dedicated for cultural use and roughly 1,5 million people visit its centres annually.

From the legal point of view, KAAPELI is a limited real-estate company owned by the city of Helsinki. It is financially self-sustaining and receives no public-subsidies from the local government nor from the state. The combined turnover of its centres in 2019 was approx. 7,2 M€. The company owns the buildings it operates and has thus a strong balance sheet (roughly 45 M€ in May 2020). As the owner of the company, the city expects return for its investment in the form of higher real-estate value and increased cultural offering for its citizens. The city does not expect financial profit in the form of dividends, meaning that the company can reinvest its gains back into its activities. The key performance indicators (KPIs) of KAAPELI are measured by financial performance and by maximizing the use of its spaces. The company needs to stay profitable and reach at least an occupancy rate of 95%. KAAPELI has reached its targets continually in both categories.





At KAAPOLI, we consider our mission to be an enabler of cultural activity. Although we do produce some events on our own, the overwhelming majority of the cultural content produced inside of its premises is done by our tenants. Our job is to facilitate their processes by offering space, support and making it easy for the audiences to find our venues and cultural offerings of our tenants. Together with them, we strive to make life better with culture.


### **A low-hanging fruit and benchmarks to follow**

Despite our overall high occupancy rate, we have in our event spaces year around some odd days when the spaces remain empty. These days fall in between two productions and are therefore impossible to fill commercially. For many years, we have had a tradition to allow small creative industry companies to use our spaces for free for photo shoots etc during these days. The CCSC project triggered us to think about opening our spaces during some of these days also for citizens' use, in order to serve a wider group of people. They were a low-hanging fruit waiting to be picked.

We started the project by inviting both researchers and practitioners of citizen participation in a roundtable to think about how to invite citizens to use our spaces. The roundtable identified two alternative approaches: curated use and wild use. Curated use referred to a strategy where we invited an outside citizen group to curate the use of the space for a specific purpose. In contrast, wild use referred to a strategy where citizens were merely invited to use the space in whatever way they wanted. The benchmark for this model came from a Parisian cultural centre le CENTQUATRE-PARIS that is known for opening its doors to Parisians every now and then to use their space in whatever way they want.

After reviewing both approaches with our team, we decided to disregard the curated use approach because it came so close to our regular short-term renting procedure. It would have become difficult for our sales team to explain why some customers would get the space for free and others not. Thus, we decided to try out only the wild use approach. In addition, wild use sounded much more exciting and adventurous. Our roundtable experts identified, however, two potential problems with the wild use approach that needed to be tackled before going forward. First, someone needed to take responsibility for the event. Secondly, even a wild use event, would result in some sort of expenses that someone needed to cover as there was no revenue stream incorporated in the idea.

Both observations were to the point. We needed to hire security personnel to make sure nothing hazardous could take place (children climbing on ladders or similar) and we decided to cover the costs attached to security and to the cleaning from our own budget.





## **A Leap of Faith**

The wild use experiment was scheduled to take place on 14th December 2019. We chose to use our largest event space, Sea Cable Hall, which has 3148 square meters of space, for the purpose. It required a leap of faith, as we had no idea if anybody would show up.

By chance a couple of weeks before the event, one person in our community posted a video on his Facebook page where he danced at le CENTQUATRE in Paris. In his post, he asked wouldn't it be possible for us at KAAPELI to do something similar. We, of course, took the opportunity to use his post as a way to advertise our wild use initiative that we had labelled "Take over Cable Factory!". The Facebook exchange received quickly numerous likes from people in the dance community and gave us assurance that we would reach at least some people with our idea. Finally, approximately one hundred people, mostly dancers and circus performers came to use the space. The feedback that we received from the participants was unanimously positive and they urged us to renew the experiment. Thanks to this encouragement, we organised Take over Cable Factory Vol 2 on February 22nd, 2020. This time the event attracted a much wider group of people and citizen groups. In addition to dancers and acrobats, martial arts enthusiasts, a pop-up cinema, performance artists and a music video crew joined in. The event was covered by the main commercial TV news broadcast and viewed thus by hundreds of thousands of Finns. The success led us to make these events a permanent part of our programming.

## **Three lessons that we learned**

In the course of the project, we learned that in opening empty or underused spaces for free citizens' use, simply opening the doors is not enough. In addition to having the permission from the landlord to use the space, at least three things need to be considered: 1. Someone needs to take responsibility for the event. In our case, this meant thinking about basic safety but in other contexts it could mean following more specific security protocols or taking care of the needed notification for authorities etc. 2. Even the smallest costs can become a problem if not addressed. The costs of our events due to security personnel and cleaning services amounted to just some hundreds of euros per event. They could be easily covered from our basic funding because the activity was aligned with one of our key performance indicators (maximizing the use of our spaces). However, even such a small cost would have been difficult to cover from any other source. 3. Empowering citizens to participate is key to success. Despite the evident need for spaces, it is not evident to empower citizens to seize the opportunities to take over spaces. When launching our first event, we were lucky that we could ride on the idea launched by one person in our community. If we would have launched the idea by ourselves it wouldn't have benefitted from the bottom-up feeling that it had thanks to this lucky coincidence and it may have died down because no one would have found it or appropriated it. Citizen participation cannot be forced.

