SMART AND FEARLESS

GUIDELINES FOR EMERGING ARTS CENTRES IN EASTERN, SOUTHEASTERN AND SOUTHERN EUROPE

TEH STARTUP SUPPORT PROGRAMME 2018—2021 DISCOVERIES MADE AND LESSONS LEARNED

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1. INTRODUCTION

For the first two years of the Startup Support Programme, we were guided through crumbling army barracks, two refurnished factory buildings, two dilapidated cinema halls, a neglected apartment building with a large courtyard and rooftop terrace. For the next two years, during the pandemic, we enjoyed digital tours around a former prayer house with a demolished ground floor, the ruins of a concert hall, a deserted primary school, a renovated power plant, a historical building hiding its exhibition space behind locked doors, a storage hall turned into a bookshop-café and an empty newspaper kiosk serving as a contemporary art gallery.

All of these buildings are being transformed into independent cultural and social centres by crews of young, smart and fearless people who are looking for international connections and knowledge. The kind of connections and knowledge that Trans Europe Halles is eager to share. That's why we are running the Startup Support Programme (SUSP):

to help emerging cultural centres at the European borders towards a sustainable future – and towards a full membership of our vibrant network.

We are the mentors: four people who know what it is to start, run and consolidate spaces like these. **Chris Keulemans** (Amsterdam) has been there throughout the four years of the SUSP. In the Balkans, he was joined by **Irena Boljunčić Gracin** (Pula, Croatia). In Eastern Europe, by **Mykhailo Glubokyi** (Donetsk and Kyiv, Ukraine). And in Southern Europe, by **Ada Arduini** (Verona, Italy). Together, we have written this story.

This publication is a summary of the discoveries we made and the lessons we learned. It zooms in on the main challenges along the way, highlighting the centres we visited.

Above all, we hope it will serve as a guide for other smart and fearless people in these parts of Europe who want to create their own centres.

> **"THE STARTUP SUPPORT PROGRAMME HAS OPENED THE DOOR TO A WORLD OF LIKE-MINDED PEOPLE. OUR KIND OF PEOPLE. DOING THE SAME THING, ESTABLISHING OPEN SPACES FOR SELF-EXPRESSION ALL ACROSS EUROPE."**
> **— NATASSA DOURIDA, COMMUNITISM, ATHENS**

ARTA, Cluj-Napoca, Romania — Photo: Vlad Cupsa, ARTA

2. TEH STARTUP SUPPORT PROGRAMME: WHY, WHAT, WHEN, HOW

WHY

Trans Europe Halles (TEH) is a network of grassroots cultural centres, with more than 100 members in 36 European countries. We believe that creativity, grass-roots initiatives and public activism can improve our lives and societies. We are striving to bring a positive change through the cultural revival of (post-industrial) neighbourhoods and their communities. We believe that our work reinforces the future development of independent cultural and creative spaces in Europe.

We have always supported those who dare, who are curious and who have imagination. With this idea in mind, we launched the Startup Support Programme in 2017 within the framework of the Creative Europe network grant. This programme is addressing socially engaged non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that are developing emerging cultural and creative spaces in repurposed buildings. The programme focuses on regions on the borders of Europe.

Within the Startup Support Programme, we carefully look at the challenges each project is facing and set up a tailor-made scheme to move towards a sustainable future – even though we are all having to reinvent these places in times of COVID-19.

WHAT

In our vision, a startup is a civic initiative that is based in a repurposed building (industrial or otherwise) with a focus on creativity, arts and culture along with a Do-It-Yourself / Do-It-Together (DIY/DIT) approach. It may well still be in its preliminary phase, but it is already self-sufficient (either economically or due to people's dedication), although it is not yet sustainable.

The Startup Support Programme invests in bringing emerging cultural and creative spaces to their next level of development through:

– Expert consultation and coaching for their teams
– Peer-to-peer knowledge sharing involving other members of our network
– Networking activities during our conferences and meetings
– Access to TEH programmes like Capacity Building, Staff Exchange, Leadership, DISCE P2P Recovery etc
– Inspirational case studies of spaces in the startup phase.

We offer:

– A scoping visit of two international experts, who have already founded and run their own cultural and creative spaces
– Situation analysis and organisational diagnosis
– Coaching from TEH peers over four months, including a tailor-made workshop by an expert from the network
– A separate publication about each of the selected emerging centres
– Access to a vibrant community of like-minded organisations in Europe
– TEH associate membership for two years.

WHEN

In 2018, we launched an open call for emerging centres in the Balkans. Three centres were selected:

– Communitism in Athens, Greece
– Anibar in Peja, Kosovo
– Cinema ARTA in Cluj-Napoca, Romania

In 2019, we launched an open call for emerging centres in Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine. Three centres were selected:

– Korpus in Minsk, Belarus
– ReZavod in Lviv, Ukraine
– Dnipro Center for Contemporary Culture (DCCC) in Dnipro, Ukraine

In 2020, we launched an open call for emerging centres in Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia. Three centres were selected:

– Salaam Cinema in Baku, Azerbaijan
– Ta(r)dino 6 Art Platform in Baku, Azerbaijan

– Kharatian Arts Center in Gyumri, Armenia

In 2021, we launched an open call for emerging centres in Cyprus, Italy, Malta, Spain and Portugal. Four centres were selected:

– E50035 Expect the Unexpected in Palazzuolo, Italy
– DASTE La Centrale in Bergamo, Italy
– Eixo Residências Artísticas in Mosteiró, Portugal
– Útero in Lisbon, Portugal

HOW

The open calls are spread through our network and partner organisations. We receive some 20 applications every year. These are judged by a small committee of TEH staff, mentors and members with knowledge of the region. The selection is based on criteria like: Is the startup repurposing a building? Is it younger than two years? Does it have an agreement with the owner, or is at least in negotiation? Does it plan to create an interdisciplinary, cultural and social space?

Once the selections have been made, our mentors visit the chosen startups for a three-day scoping visit. We get to know the place, the crew, the city, the surrounding communities, the legal, financial and organisational situation. Preferably we visit in person, of course, but online also works. After this visit, we have (bi)weekly online conversations with the team, often with the two or three people in the lead, for a period of 3 to 5 months.

We build trust: TEH mentors are not conventional consultants, we are peers.

We focus on the apparent weak or vulnerable spots in the project and offer advice to strengthen them.
We connect the team to like-minded and comparable TEH members who have gone through similar challenges.
We organise 1 or 2 tailor-made workshops on topics the startups want to learn more about, given by experts from the network.

We write letters of support and/or attend (online) negotiations with the owners and the authorities.

We suggest (international) sources of public funding.

At the end of the programme, after an average of 6 months, we write a separate TEH publication about the startup, its context, challenges and ambitions.

By then, they will have become associate members of the network and participate in the TEH camp meetings, conferences and regional hubs.

> "BEFORE, WE DIDN'T REALISE THAT OTHERS HAVE BEEN
> THROUGH THE SAME PROBLEMS WE ARE FACING TODAY.
> NOW WE EXPERIENCE PEOPLE WHO TRUST AND LISTEN, WHICH
> GIVES US THE FEELING OF BELONGING TO A LARGER COMMUNITY,
> THAT IS ALWAYS READY TO HELP."
> — SASHA BOGDANOV, KORPUS, MINSK

3. CONTEXT

Before we dive into the guidelines for other aspiring new centres, let us give some context on the social, political, historical and cultural environment in the regions we have worked in over the past four years. We hope these will be useful both for local startups and for readers in other parts of Europe. For us mentors, understanding this context is indispensable for working with our startups. Because, although any creative startup will face similar challenges, no matter where in Europe they are based, there are obvious differences in the circumstances surrounding them – and our advice won't be of any use if it doesn't take these circumstances into account.

We apologise in advance: this short context is by definition incomplete and sweeps together different societies in statements that cannot do justice to each of their characteristics. Below, we will briefly highlight some of the aspects every startup has to deal with. Later on, we will write more about them, including tips, suggestions and case studies.

A. EASTERN EUROPE AND SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE

During the first three years, we worked with startup centres in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Greece, Kosova, Romania and Ukraine. Many of these countries were ruled by centralised totalitarian regimes for many years; some still are. Others were part of a socialist state or went through military rule.

Under these circumstances, independent culture and freedom of expression was (or is still) considered by those in power to be a threat. Only official culture was allowed. The focus lay on classic arts, grand stages, realistic visual arts, serving as propaganda for the regime. For the independent scene, there was no infrastructure, support or education. The current gap between authorities and citizens, between state cultural institutions and the independent scene, is a legacy from this time. Only recently, in a few of these countries, state policy is starting to reflect the interests of independent cultural organisations.

In countries belonging to the socialist bloc, community movements were created and controlled by the government. This caused a high level of mistrust towards independent initiatives and a lack of experience in democratic practices. As a result, many people are still not ready to invest time and energy into opening up cultural life back to the community. Having been forced to participate in state-run, ideologically orchestrated cultural events, they will at best be willing to

pay money for entertainment, but serious participation in cultural or social projects is still considered bizarre. They expect someone with more experience to come and do the work for them. They are afraid of working for someone else's benefit.

Centres that are community-driven are still rare in these regions. They don't have permanent staff, as the former Houses of Culture used to do, and it is difficult to find the right people and establish clear working rules. The lack of experience in self-government, of democratic practice, of government support and trust between citizens makes it extremely complicated to build independent social and creative spaces in this part of Europe.

Shaping an artistic identity

As well as creating a nice, welcoming, vibrant place, the independent cultural scene in these regions has the added responsibility of lifting artistic standards. (Not to mention social, ethical and moral standards.) When there is no culture of serious criticism in the local media and public sphere, these emerging centres have to create and promote their own criteria, through adventurous and ground-breaking initiatives. When opportunism and corruption rule public life, these centres can present art with a clear vision and real integrity.

Contemporary art and society

Over the past few decades, in former socialist bloc countries, independent art was often meant to question, provoke and shock existing politics and society. The general audience, used to the role of a passive observer, wasn't sure if they were allowed to watch this kind of art at all. Many forms of modern art were not even considered to be culture. Active citizenship was not regarded as a positive value. Contemporary artists were often seen as political activists and enemies of society. Still, they emerge as change-makers. And grass-roots, multidisciplinary spaces make these changes possible, by engaging new audiences.

Finding the right organisational model

The tradition in these regions dictates that national galleries, libraries and state centres for contemporary (visual and performing) arts are vertical organisations, coordinated by the central government with strong hierarchical structures and complex bureaucracy. This is also true for private art centres that are created by the founder's business structures. They are run through strong leadership and total control, draining the motivation of the employees, as their creativity gets discouraged and thinking outside of their functions is unwelcome.

As a result, there is still a lack of education and practice in team and process building, sharing and delegating responsibilities in the independent sector. But the digital revolution and the growth of freelance and remote working, as well as new funding structures, are affecting the hardcore vertical model of organisation. The independent scene, with its small core teams and wider network of co-creators, is developing skills in building community-oriented, horizontal, engaged, less centralised and more efficient organisational models.

> **"TEH HELPED ME UNDERSTAND HOW TO ORGANISE THE TEAM, DIVIDE THE TASKS. HOW TO BUILD THE COMMUNITY, STARTING GRADUALLY THROUGH POP-UP EVENTS, USING ALREADY EXISTING CULTURAL SPACES IN THE CITY, WHILE OUR CINEMA WAS STILL BEING RENOVATED."**
> **— MONICA SEBESTYEN, CINEMA ARTA, CLUJ-NAPOCA**

Working with the authorities

In most of these countries, government support for the independent arts scene is very limited, if it exists at all. Cultural organisers don't regard ministries and municipalities as platforms that represent their interests. Independent cultural actors rarely get invited to participate in discussions with authorities. They hardly ever have access to influencing (cultural) policy.

Taxation is overcomplicated and does not recognise cultural, not-for-profit uses of funding. Often, there is double taxation for international funds or international productions. Every project requires additional bureaucracy and there is always the risk of getting in trouble with state monitoring agencies. Philanthropy is not rewarded, which leads to very limited private funding of independent cultural centres.

Still, independent culture and the creative industry are key factors for the transformation of post-socialist corrupted systems into modern, free and open societies. It is high time for the state to become a reliable partner – through providing tools for building sustainable organisational models, promoting arts and culture on the (inter)national level, supporting new cultural and social initiatives.

> **"WE LEARNED FROM THE PROGRAMME HOW TO NEGOTIATE WITH THE AUTHORITIES: THAT WE HAVE TO DEAL WITH THEM INSTEAD OF IGNORING THEM."**
> **— VULLNET SANAJA, ANIBAR, PEJA**

Advocacy: campaigning for culture

When democracy is understood simply as the rule of the majority, the role of anyone outside that majority will remain fragile and precarious. Human rights and freedom of expression will be regarded as the privilege of those in power. This is often the case in these regions – and things are not improving. Policies defending the rights of minorities are weak or even absent. Cultural policy, when it exists, is often outdated and lacks transparency.

Our emerging centres do not belong to the mainstream, obviously, nor do many of the artists, participants and communities they serve. Access to city councils, the mayor's office, parliamentarians, governors and ministers is not available to everyone but depends on connections. Even when there is access, the gap in worldview and vocabulary is often

very wide, and it is unclear what happens to questions and proposals.

And speaking out also brings risks including aggression, intimidation, the threat of closure. However, even by simply presenting other voices, by giving the example of alternative ways of governance and participation, by highlighting causes that deserve more attention, these centres can show that another world is possible. Visibility and the power of the collective are tools. These centres walk a thin line between being ostracised by many and being a source of inspiration to some.
To push for meaningful changes in laws and attitudes requires long, hard work and stamina when the system is rigged in favour of nationalist, conservative and populist forces.

Dealing with the building's owner

Outside the traditional, passive or deteriorating city- or state-owned public art institutions, emerging arts centres in these regions almost always do their work in privately owned buildings that have no creative history. When a group of people decides to occupy and revitalise an empty building, this is often the first time the owner has been confronted with the concept of a self-organised cultural centre. He has no reference point. These owners – private citizens, developers, oligarchs, anonymous firms, privatised factories – can then choose to pay no attention, establish a rental fee, interfere with the daily activities or expel the team by force.

The emerging centres we work with have developed different strategies to come to some kind of agreement with the owners, or at least to prolong the existence of their centres. You can read some examples below.

Education in cultural management

For decades, the only cultural education in these regions was centred around artistic practice, not managerial or curatorial skills. After the fall of socialist regimes, capitalism also left no place for independent cultural initiatives, when people were fighting for survival.

Over the years, the situation slowly got better. Some of the educational institutions started to propose courses for cultural managers. Private schools and courses helped to build cultural startups from scratch. The greatest impact came from international cultural institutions. For years, they offered educational and capacity building programmes for cultural activists from these regions.

Cultural leaders who were educated internationally served as multipliers of knowledge, sharing what they had learned in the local artistic community. Another key factor was increasing mobility support and simplifying visa regimes (in some countries). More people can visit, learn, experience and bring back knowledge. Systematic professional education, however, is still in its infancy. Self-education remains the main source of knowledge for most cultural managers. Experts highlight systemic management, business modelling and sustainability planning

as the main missing skills for cultural managers in these regions.

Cultural decentralisation is also an urgent priority. Good education is usually unavailable outside capital cities. Fortunately, in some countries, efforts are being made to bring support and capacity building to smaller communities. This informal education is indispensable and inspires people to do bolder cultural work.

Finally: education of the audience is vital too. Because of the lack of cultural education in public schools, it is not easy to develop audience participation in cultural activities. However, now that online access to (popular) culture has risen and the economic situation is improving in some of these countries, interest in independent culture is on the rise. Especially among younger audiences, who crave new cultural and intellectual experiences and the sense of togetherness that cultural communities represent. Students form the backbone of these communities, eager to take part – and one day, join the team.

> **"RIGHT NOW, I'M FINISHING MY MASTER'S THESIS ON THE MANAGEMENT OF NGOS, WITH EMPHASIS ON CREATIVE CENTRES IN REVITALISED BUILDINGS. SO TEH AND ITS RESOURCES ARE A GREAT ADDITION TO MY RESEARCH."**
> **— MARIIA KISIL, REZAVOD, LVIV**

Finding funding

For independent cultural spaces, it is not easy to find proper funding and still stay free-spirited and open. There is almost no state support and hands-free business sponsoring is rare. Only recently, in countries that became EU members or are on their way to membership, programmes are being developed to support the local independent cultural scene.

Western European national institutes for culture (Goethe Institut, Institut Francais, British Council, Swedish Institute, EU members' ministries of culture and embassies and the US embassies or the US Agency for International Development), have been active in the development of human rights protection, democratic principles and civil society, including independent arts and culture. They often do remarkable work.

International funding became a lifeline for lots of organisations, but in some countries access is still hard. Belarus, for example, limits the work of international cultural organisations in the country and makes funding unavailable. In Azerbaijan, it is almost impossible to achieve legal status without permission from the Ministry of Culture, which acts as the gatekeeper on who is worthy and loyal enough for international collaboration.

So, ideological and political reasons can make work impossible. Fortunately, there are always shortcuts and loopholes.

B. SOUTHERN EUROPE

In the fourth year of the Startup Support Programme, we turned southwards. It was a difficult choice, because during our work in (South) Eastern Europe, we discovered so many more cultural activists and spaces there that deserved our attention. But we trust that Trans Europe Halles is now more visible in those regions and that our Eastern Hub and Balkan Hub can continue to attract more emerging centres. And now that the centres we worked with in the first three years have become associate or full members, the connections will remain strong.

Southern Europe already includes a number of TEH members, but not as many as you might expect, and there are always new potential members popping up. Some of the countries here have been seriously hit by COVID-19 and, as elsewhere, the independent cultural scene is going through a very hard time. All the more reason to reach out to new emerging centres.

In Italy and Portugal, the two countries where we are working in 2021, the authorities have always concentrated on maintaining its overflowing historical and artistic heritage, which is so precious for touristic purposes. In the meantime, independent culture has always struggled to survive, especially if focused on the avant-garde and contemporaneity. So far, it always managed to find the energy and the spaces to do its own thing. But the situation is getting more complicated all the time.

Volunteers and emerging artists

Voluntary work has always been regarded as a value in these societies. It has been at the heart of many social and cultural foundations, associations and informal groups. But this sector is now encumbered by an old and heavy bureaucracy. Moreover, volunteering has become less popular among young people because they can't easily find steady jobs. They depend economically on their families and have less free time to devote to volunteering. And all the time, volunteer-based cultural initiatives are required to become more professional, while the volunteers rarely have the chance to evolve and become paid cultural workers, so their role gets blurred and sometimes borders on exploitation.

Meanwhile, emerging artists and other cultural workers have to find other sources of income to safeguard the development of their artistic practice. They are struggling for better working conditions, social support and greater investments in contemporary culture. And now the pandemic has left them even more vulnerable.

Regional differences

The situation of independent culture varies from region to region. Some of them understand the importance of artistic research and of community art and initiatives. They facilitate its growth through tenders and public calls, through loaning abandoned spaces and through interacting with independent cultural centres or informal groups of artists, because they recognise their value for the welfare of local communities.

Other regions are totally focused on the false equivalence between culture and tourism. They prefer more conventional and traditional solutions to spaces for artistic adventure. They prefer cultural initiatives that act like a commercial business and value art and culture only if they produce income.

The pitfalls of tourism

Due to tourism and the gentrification of big cities, art and culture have been monopolised by the local political powers. This has contributed to the disappearance of part of the underground and experimental artistic circuit. Also, tourism has come to shape the way cultural activities take place here. On the one hand, it fuels independent cultural centres with income. On the other hand, it forces them to work in more business-like forms. So what starts as a valuable cultural initiative for the community risks becoming kitschy and unattractive to locals.

Balancing act

In order to survive, independent cultural centres have to find a balance: to satisfy their need to fill the many gaps of a traditional cultural landscape with new perspectives, but also to find the right language to speak with central government and those short-sighted local administrations that are slow to recognise their value and their needs.

There are exceptions. Sometimes the province – far away from Milan, Madrid or Lisbon – turns out to be the right place to communicate more easily with citizens, to launch new ideas without too many bureaucratic tangles, to involve a whole community in an artistic project that really has the potential to change the neighbourhood, the people and the cultural operators involved.

Útero, Lisbon, Portugal — Photo: Útero

4. GUIDELINES FOR EMERGING CULTURAL AND SOCIAL CENTRES

Lessons from four years of the TEH Startup Support Programme

So we are not alone. That is the line we hear most often, while working with emerging centres. All of them face daunting challenges. They feel forced to invent the solutions by themselves. Until they discover Trans Europe Halles, a network of people who have gone and are still going through the same process: to create an inspiring, active, adventurous, welcoming public space for their city and their society – one of the best and most complicated things you can do with your life.

For the next generation of aspiring cultural centres, we have mined this experience to come up with a number of proposals, tips, suggestions, rules and points of attention for each of the main challenges you are bound to face along the way. In short: guidelines.

A. CREATE YOUR ARTISTIC VISION

Art is the spark that lights up these emerging centres. They have no reason for existence without dance performances, open-air concerts, first-time screenings or exhibitions in the raw and stunning new space. And yet, to the organisers, it looks like everything else is more urgent now than the artistic work. The roof leaks, the volunteers are ill, the Wifi stutters,

the bills need to be paid. It is striking how these people whose passion for art drove them to spend day and night on creating this new space learn how to regard art as a luxury, compared to all the other more pressing issues. Even so, art remains the heart and soul of any centre that wants to survive. And creating the artistic work is the central task.

Make it clear and common

The easiest way to programme a new centre is to welcome anyone who has an idea and is willing to spend time to make it happen. This will bring new energy, but it will also create a blurry identity and false expectations among other people with ideas and time. All too often, it ends up in a non-stop series of random events that do not help to define any criteria. The result: low inspiration, intellectual laziness, a whatever-mentality, social irrelevance.

Instead, write it down. A clear and common artistic vision. One that is true to yourself and open to others. Share it with everyone who wants to join. Set the basic social criteria to which any public event in the new centre has to comply: non-racist, non-sexist, non-violent. And on top of that: a definition of the desired artistic quality. Highlight sources of (local and/or international) inspiration.

Provide some good examples yourself. Go for quality instead of quantity at the beginning. Invite the best artists within your reach. And evaluate every event by comparing it to the criteria you have put down in your artistic vision.

Make it interdisciplinary

Your new centre has rarely been built as a theatre, museum or concert hall. On the contrary: your building is often bigger, higher, rougher and colder than places that the performing and visual arts are used to. This may look like a problem, but it can actually turn out to be an advantage. When the space itself doesn't rule the arts (there is the stage, there are the white walls, there are the audience seats), the arts are free to rule the space. They are free to break loose from their own confinements and conventions. Your emerging centre can transform the absence of tradition into a playground for the interdisciplinary. Why should contemporary dance and visual arts take place in separate spaces? Why should poetry readings need another kind of stage than the DJ?
Working in an interdisciplinary way poses even greater challenges to the programmers and curators among you. In other words: it makes it even more important to work as a collective. After all, no single programmer knows everything about all kinds of arts. But once the different artistic expressions start having a conversation, across the boundaries of their disciplines, the centre strengthens its role as a borderless example to the outside world.

Programme and curate: not just the event but the whole centre

There is no academy for artistic programmers. Creating high-quality, adventurous public events is a craft you can only learn by doing it. Everyone starts from scratch, but you can always look around for others with more experience. You can learn from them (which is not the same as copying them). Learn that even the best ideas will not translate into real-life events unless you have given equal care to space, light, sound, choreography and rhythm.

Programming an event is one thing. Programming a full centre is the next level. Each event is a chapter in the story of the centre. Events will start resonating once they become part of the greater narrative, the past and the future of the centre – once the visitors start noticing that they are part of a story that didn't start today and will not stop tomorrow.

The time that the programmer or the curator was a brilliant individual is over. Today, the best art is the work of multiple voices. Curating is becoming less solo and more collective.

Part of programming and curating a centre is also developing critical voices within your expanding community. (Critical in the sense of serious reflection, postponing judgement, not unconditional praise and also not easy disqualification.) This is the added responsibility of independent centres in societies where artistic, moral and social criteria have become outdated or have even evaporated. There is no way to develop critical, independent thinking without critical, independent art. Ultimately, that's why your centre matters.

Keep the new artists coming

The new centre is a natural meeting place for local young artists and their circles. Some of them will later say: it all started here. If they trust the centre and the centre trusts them, both will flourish. Investing in their talent, providing the facilities, being there through heartbreak and triumph, but also staying away from gossip and opportunism – all this belongs to your responsibilities.

But: keep the circle open. When artists and audiences become too familiar with each other, critical thinking loses out. To keep the artistic standards high, it is always necessary to introduce talent from elsewhere. Not because they are better by definition but because variation, different sources of inspiration, new frames of reference will keep everyone alert and on their toes.

Anibar, Peja, Kosovo — Photo: Anibar

CASE STUDY: ANIBAR FESTIVAL, ACADEMY & CINEMA

It started out as a group of high school friends in the modest town of Peja, Kosovo, who happened to fall in love with the art of animation. They decided to organise an annual festival dedicated to animation film: Anibar. In a city where the summers can be long and unexciting, more and more young people discovered that animation film can be raw, honest, painful, radical and hilarious.

The artistic vision was maybe not so well-defined in words, at the start, but the festival programme soon showed a recognisable identity: it was curated with a gloomy worldview and a fierce drive to improve things. The artwork was selected according to themes like climate crisis, gender equality and power to the people.

The festival showed student work and professional work, both homegrown and international. This kept the standards high on all sides. To help local animators reach that standard, Anibar started animation academies, both in Peja and the capital city Prishtina. During the festival, it publishes a newspaper and blogs, to encourage critical reflection.

Like every festival, Anibar depends on volunteers. Schoolchildren from Peja volunteer in large numbers. Later on, they enroll in the animation academy – and sometimes end up in the festival programme.

During the festivals, the (open air) screenings are free. But the late-night concerts are paid for. These concerts are so popular that the ticket sales go a long way towards keeping the festival organisation afloat during the year.

A few years ago, the municipality – recognising their impact on local youth and public space – offered them the empty local cinema. Anibar has now renovated the place and turned it into a multi-disciplinary cultural and social centre.

Animation film is still at the heart of the whole enterprise. An artistic language capable of expressing practically everything that goes on in the world. The vision was there from the beginning. Ten years later, it still carries what is now the most popular and influential cultural space in town.

We helped them:

– transform from an annual festival into a daily centre: different mindset, different organisational structure
– curate the programming together
– divide the tasks, create a clear decision-making process
– negotiate with the municipality about support for the building and the organisation
– to keep programming when they faced the legal threat of losing their building: this helped their visibility, proved their value and increased their public support
– enter a European partnership project.

B. BUILD A COMMUNITY

Even before opening the doors, your centre can start building a community. This starts with the members of the core team. Then your friends, relatives, connections. From there, you branch out. This is vital. Visitors are important, as an audience, for selling tickets and drinks. They offer ideas and criticism. Sometimes they can become volunteers and later team members, but most of all because your place cannot exist in isolation. Your centre is a force of change in the society around you. This won't happen without a growing community.

In the future, your centre will be a self-governing organism, capable of self-preservation and growth. It starts with a small group of dedicated and energetic people. Their vision shapes the future of the community. They can see people as a source of inspiration. They want to share knowledge and energy, to unite friends/acquaintances or people from professional circles under one welcoming roof. Community needs can become a guiding light for programming the centre.

But: emerging centres usually do not have the experience and skills for proper community structure and organisation, which can lead to frustration due to not having constant members, lack of support and participation, community structure randomness and unreliability.

So here are a few steps you can take right from the very start.

Write a vision statement

A community is a living organism. It will quickly disband under pressure, if the plans remain unclear or if there is too much control. That's why you should take time to sit down with your friends, partners, renters and community members. No centre is possible without dialogue and discussion. From this, together you will create your vision statement. It has to be inclusive, regardless of age, gender, ideology, belief and it will not tolerate discrimination, human rights violations, violence and aggression. It has to engage in collective action for transformative change.

Set up house rules

Define clear and straightforward rules for using the space, for proposing community activities, for establishing direct ways of communication. Community building requires time and effort, but it pays off one hundred times once the centre is up and running.

Map the surrounding communities and their needs

The easiest way to start attracting people to your centre is to address a certain need that is not yet fulfilled in your (part of the) city. The first step is to map who and what surrounds you. This willl help you create a map of potentials, of the community's assets, capacities, and abilities (ABCD Method – Asset Based Community Development). That hairdressing or cosmetic studio around the corner? The dental office with its waiting room? The messy little park? The bar that you wouldn't normally visit?

That is where you can drop your leaflets, sit down and have a talk, discover your neighbours.

Now, start mapping the community needs. This allows you to recognise the main active groups to attract to your centre. How do they exist, what is lacking in their environment, what communication channels do they use, where do they get their information, etc? Ask them what content they would like to see and how they would like to be engaged in your centre. All this information can help you craft your community strategy, intertwining community needs with the centre's goals and values. Working within this local context can help your organisation to be seen not as a threat but as an ally in solving problems or at least highlighting local needs.

Work with the institutions and organisations around you

There are always organisations around whose members could become an important part of your centre's community. Local schools, universities, libraries, cinemas, sport, youth and senior clubs can become your friends. Most of them are longing for new ways of working with their audience, using creative practices in their work, learning from international experts. Being more formal and institutionalised. Those organisations need a special approach and common grounds for collaboration. It might take some time for negotiations and building trust with them. But then, they will bring a wider circle of visitors and participants.

Train volunteers

Centres and their communities can benefit from each other in various ways. Community members can act as volunteers during the centre's events, participate in artwork productions and can also become a part of educational programmes and then turn into artistic, cultural or production professionals themselves.

Communicate with the community

Social media (choose your favourite) is the most convenient platform for everyone to use. They can reach community members with announcements and requests, updates about the centre's work and also as a tool for community members to be in touch with each other. Communities with a strong feeling of belonging to a centre and each other will be active and open for participation in the organisation's life. Still, as soon as community members feel neglected or abandoned, they can slowly move on to something else, so it's always important to keep that connection.

CASE STUDY: COMMUNITISM, ATHENS, GREECE

The Communitism centre was started by Natassa Dourida, a civil engineer with a desire to revitalise abandoned buildings across Athens, as spaces for young creative people, who lack other opportunities. In 2017, she and her team managed to occupy a neglected early 20-century building and started turning it into a community of artists, activists, migrants, neighbours, curators, social workers etc.

The centre relies on a growing team of volunteers who do daily work, connect with the local community and organise public events. They take care of the building, improve the space, and do small renovation and reconstruction works. Community members are all equally compensated for their time by dividing the money from ticket sales, bar and rental of spaces.

The centre's programming, designed and scheduled by community members, includes parties, presentations, workshops, screenings, performances and community activities. Every year, one main, weeklong, colourful event aims to expand the community, connect to local and international artists, build connections with activists and to prove to local neighbourhoods, city government and international community the irreplaceable role of cultural centres in the fabric of modern cities.

Each year, all members elect a board from the community that commits to taking care of the administration and other central responsibilities.

Everything is guided by the Manifest, a collaborative document written to make sure that all the members and residents of the centre are working by the same principles and understand its rules and values. It describes programme schedules, organisational structures, rules of decisionmaking, funding principles and more. It is the first thing that volunteers (and later paid members) read and sign after joining the organisation. This makes sure that everyone is clear about the founding principles and that everyone follows the same inspirational and practical vision now and for the long term.

We helped them:

– to create a self-governing organisational structure, with full or temporary members, who elect a board from their midst
– to create a collaborative Manifesto, through a workshop with TEH member Gabriella Riccio (l'Asilo in Naples)
– to understand the practice of commoning
– to develop negotiation strategies with the owners of the building
– to join the TEH Balkan hub.

C. FIND THE ORGANISATIONAL MODEL THAT SUITS YOU

In the beginning, nobody really thinks about the centre's governance structure and management model. There are always more pressing issues: the roof leaks, the internet doesn't work, there is no bank account, the technical equipment is shaky. There is no time for long-term strategic thinking. However, as the complexity of daily management grows, the founders are forced to think about the best approach to keep the team together in a way that makes sense.

Defining the right structure to run your centre is not easy. It will allow the organisation to run smoothly, it helps to define its culture, values and aims. But cultural centres are living organisms that constantly evolve in response to changes in the cultural environment, trends, technology, politics and artistic practices. An organisational structure that seemed perfect yesterday might become obsolete and uncomfortable tomorrow. It's worth the effort to keep adapting. When all the processes are clear and people enjoy being part of a functioning whole, wonderful things happen.

Start dividing responsibilities

In the beginning, the founders are the core team. They are driven by creative energy. Everyone does everything all the time. Decisions are made together and on the spot. To delegate work is hard, even when volunteers start appearing. And once the centre starts growing, it is almost impossible to find enough funding to offer fair pay to separate departments for programming, production, administration, fundraising, communication etc.

So the small core team shares all the responsibilities. People with administrative skills also take the role of fundraisers, grant managers, production coordinators and even accountants and lawyers. People with communication skills work with press, artists, audiences, donors and authorities. There is no clear distinction between the tasks of the core team members, which can lead to conflicts or loss of motivation. This might sound horrifying, but these are symptoms of organisational growth. As soon as an organisation starts to grow and develop itself, people find comfortable and productive roles for themselves and expand their core team with new important members.

Take care of a good technical team (and other specialists)

Without the right technical skills, there are no exhibitions, parties and performances. And the building itself needs daily attention, to keep everything in a good and safe condition. At first, friends and volunteers help out. Sometimes it's possible to hire specialists. The best solution is to create and maintain your own technical and production team. This will cost money, but it can also be a source of income, in a market where such skilled teams are rare.

The same goes for other aspects of the work. Especially in non-EU countries, there is hardly

any infrastructure to work with artistic and cultural projects. Logistics, equipment rental, printing, payments, tax and legal support can all be very challenging. Make sure that members of your core team develop these skills or find people from outside to strengthen your organisation.

Work in a project-based way, but stick together

The diversification of income sources – grant programmes, donors, fundraising – make it more popular to work in a project-based model. Each project is executed and managed by a team that consists fully or partly of freelancers. For the centre to survive, it's important to have a pool of such experts that can be brought together and, once the project is over, dissolved.

It is vital to stay connected with those teams to make sure that everyone is on the same page, sharing the same values and goals. In that way, every project is a perfect opportunity to learn from each other, to sharpen skills and to make internal processes smooth and clear. Your centre has to be a convenient and precise tool for all the members of its team, both permanent or temporary, to achieve their personal ànd common goals.

Korpus, Minsk, Belarus — Photo: Korpus

CASE STUDY: KORPUS, MINSK, BELARUS

Korpus is an arts centre in a former home-appliance factory in Minsk, Belarus. The centre is run by the private company Bo-Promo, founded by Masha Znachenok and Alaksandar Bogdanov. In 2017, they took the chance to rent the space and started renovating it into a venue for public events.

Korpus' programme is non-stop, full of multiple events every single day. Some of the events are initiated by the Korpus team, others are external rentals.

Korpus used to work in the classic startup format. All the team members shared all the responsibilities, without specific distinctions between roles. Later they developed a clearer division of responsibilities. In order to survive, most of the team members had other jobs, but Korpus was taking more and more of their time. This led to overworking, exhaustion and loss of motivation and creativity.

During the TEH Startup Support Programme, our mentors helped the Korpus team to organise their workload more clearly and to share knowledge of project management and organisation processes with the whole team. Delegation of day-to-day work to other people helped to release some time for Masha to think about Korpus' long-term strategies and vision. The volunteer core team of the early days are now full-time employees. Meanwhile more student volunteers also joined the team, to take the workload from Korpus' shoulders and to expand the organisation's community.

Despite the Covid-19 pandemic and the political crisis in Belarus in 2020, Korpus keeps on running and is doing an amazing job supporting the creative community from all around Minsk and beyond.

We helped them:

– to create a slightly more vertical management structure, with a three-person leadership team
– to plan the programme schedule 3 to 6 months ahead
– to give more responsibilities to the student volunteers
– to arrange a better rental contract with the owner
– to work on financial strategy, fundraising and project budgeting, through the workshop by TEH member Oksana Sarzhevskaya from Izolyatsia, Kyiv
– to take one day off every week ;-)

D. YOUR AUDIENCE IS YOUR FUTURE

Can we consider all citizens of our towns as our possible visitors? Are the visitors only passive subjects in consuming the art we present or can they become actively engaged creators of cultural content themselves?

One of the greatest cultural challenges in Europe today is breaking down barriers between different circles and groups in our society. Cultural centres are the place where we can mix audiences, bring diverse ethnic, age and social groups together. The true value of a cultural experience is in sharing – since our common experiences will become the basis for shared values.

Diversify your programme and its target groups

As multidisciplinary spaces, our centres already combine a variety of programmes for different target groups. To develop different audiences we need different kinds of relationships, to foster a sense of ownership and belonging. So we ask ourselves: who are we addressing with our programme? How do we approach them? What are the unexplored zones or the blind spots in our work?

Plan your programme 3 to 6 months ahead. But always leave some space for new and unexpected ideas. These can help to attract various ethnic, age and social groups that have no affiliation yet with your centre and that you want to include in the common experience.

That's why educational activities are such a significant part of your work. They promote the integration of cultural life and the educational system. Adding informal and fresh educational approaches will enrich your programme and bring new faces to your centre.

Invite your visitors to participate

Reading a book, visiting a museum, heritage site or library, attending a concert, theatre or dance performance, it all brings individuals into contact with a variety of ideas and perspectives on the world around them. But we can go a step further.

Many of the centres we work with aim to involve their visitors in a more interactive, meaningful way. They experiment with crowd-sourced and co-creative approaches. Visitors are invited to be part of the creative process and, in time, to fully integrate into the life of the organisation. People are involved in the selection of shows, screenings and exhibitions. Or they play a role in theatrical performances. Special, safe programmes are created for the personal expression of vulnerable groups.

All of this can have a great impact on individual citizens. They discover creative skills and build their confidence. It breaks isolation. People from a wide range of backgrounds, ages and experience develop their sense of ownership. They transform from outsiders to insiders in the creative process. In this way, we are also building a more inclusive society.

Get involved in the urban or rural development around your centre

Cultural space constitutes the physical, cultural and sensory attributes that give a place meaning. Your centre can be an important instrument in the cultural development of your society. This brings serious responsibilities. Your centre is essential in increasing the cultural literacy among the people around you.

Cultural spaces deserve particular attention in serious urban planning. If we can influence the urban planning in our neighbourhood, we can contribute to the development of deep and qualitative interactions among citizens. And this will enhance their sense of belonging and identity.

It is in your own interest to think about the interest of others. Your centre can be cherished by some and regarded as inappropriate by groups that don't belong to your community. That's why it is important to campaign for the diversity and fair distribution of cultural spaces, so that all groups and individuals, each with their own taste and tendency, can choose their favourite.

Within the urban culture of your (part of the) city, your centre can identify the challenges that citizens are concerned about and find solutions. Take climate issues. Many centres offer practical solutions for improvements in energy efficiency that are continually being developed and tested. They produce food in urban gardens that are afterwards used in local restaurants. A heavily polluted former industrial plot can

be transformed into a workplace for creative and social enterprises while turning the site into a regenerative urban oasis. A vibrant, collaboratively planned neighbourhood can become a gathering space purposefully designed for cultural and social use.

Getting yourself and your community involved in the transformation of your neighbourhood is a form of public participation that encourages an innovative way to guarantee sustainable urban planning and to promote a healthy community life.

Move outside your walls

It's very easy to spend all your days and nights inside your centre. There is always so much to do. But this brings the risk of losing touch with new ideas and new audience groups. Mobile cultural programmes can break down the barriers to art often found in traditional venues. Moving out can be a good way to introduce yourself to other people or neighbourhoods, to inspire them and to make them curious about your centre. It creates fresh dialogue, it cuts through cultural, social and economic boundaries. Pop-up exhibitions and performances, travelling buses, movie screenings in parks, stadiums and other unconventional spaces offer new audiences cultural content in warm and unexpected places – which you transform into spaces of social innovation.

CASE STUDY: KULTURA MEDIALNA, DNIPRO, UKRAINE

STAGE : СЦЕНА is an experimental public space where everyone has the opportunity to organise their own events. The Stage was co-designed by city residents and a team of international architects, and installed together with future users. The space was inaugurated at Kultura Medialna's fourth construction festival of contemporary art and music in Dnipro, Ukraine. While preparing for the festival, people were asked what kind of space was missing in the city. The answers included locations where one could sing, do yoga, cook barbecues. The common thing in those replies was the lack of a cozy intimate outdoor space where one could hold various activities. So if the place did not exist in the city, why not involve citizens in building one? Thus the Stage was born. Kultura Medialna arranged a number of lectures, exhibitions, art experiments, shows and concerts. And the citizens of Dnipro were invited to host their own events.

The Stage, a temporary wooden structure, was built in Shevchenko Park at the location of the city's old amphitheatre. Next to the stage itself, there was a screen for viewings and lectures, a space for workshops and exhibitions, and numerous comfortable seats. A green space expansion supplemented the Stage, making it look like a green tunnel. A landscaping expert selected a special mix of fragrant herbs and flowers to attract butterflies. The whole structure functioned as a huge sound intensifier – a giant acoustic tube resembling the old gramophones. Imagine connecting your small speaker or smartphone, and the tube amplifies the sound, making it so loud that anyone can organise a concert for their friends, a party or birthday celebration.

The Stage was a social experiment created jointly by Dnipro residents and a team of international architects, with construction materials bought with crowdfunding money. The project builds upon the social component: the Stage was the beginning of multiple new communities. A community of designers meeting online to design it. A community of volunteers meeting in the city of Dnipro to build it. And a creative community that brought the Stage to life. Partly because of the successful Stage and Construction Festival, the Kultura Medialna was invited to take the lead in the transformation of the former army barracks in Dnipro, owned by a private investor who loves the arts and understands that the city and its (young) population deserve an attractive cultural space. So the work started on DCCC: Dnipro Center for Contemporary Culture.

We helped them:
– design the future organisational structure of the centre
– strengthen their position with the owner and the Dnipro municipality
– develop the working agreements with the future tenants of the centre
– develop a long-term organisational strategy, through the workshop with Victoria Ivanova (ex-Izolyatsia, Kyiv)
– become a member of TEH Eastern Hub.

E. NEGOTIATE WITH THE OWNER AND ENGAGE WITH THE AUTHORITIES

In all profit-driven societies, the mindset of the owner is by definition different from the artists-activists who are starting up a cultural centre in the building the owner possesses. In the most friendly situation, the owner is the local or national government, which has designated the building for cultural use and agrees to rent it for a moderate or subsidised fee.

In the most hostile situation, there is a private owner who opposes the squat or take-over of their property and will use violence. In all situations, anywhere on the scale between these two poles, the owner's business model is based on some degree of financial profit, while the cultural centre measures its profits along non-financial values.

For the cultural centre, success or failure depends on values like: artistic quality, social impact, community empowerment, audience numbers, public visibility – but the whole project begins and ends with the relationship between centre and owner.

Create a (temporary) agreement

The first step is to identify the owner of the premises, which can be complicated. This uncertainty prevents any kind of legal status – and future – for your new centre. In the absence of a transparent system of registered ownership through, for instance, a well-functioning chamber of commerce, you will see yourself forced to become a kind of legal expert in order to defend your rights. If you are fortunate enough to identify the owners and open up some kind of communication, you can sometimes reach a temporary agreement. Even these can be unpredictable and may not hold up in court, but it will buy you time to strengthen your position through ongoing, visible public activities.

In the meantime, try to raise your voice in the future development of the neighbourhood. If the owner and/or the authorities start to recognise the cultural and social value that your centre brings to the area (which is also good for real estate value) the temporary agreement can grow into a permanent arrangement.

Negotiate with the owner

When the two sides of the table speak different languages, a result is hard to achieve. Even more so, when the owner does not recognise the values of a cultural centre, because its impact is hard to translate into numbers, and the cultural centre doesn't know the business model and spreadsheets on which the future of 'their' building depends. Real negotiation would mean sharing all available information and finding a common vocabulary. This rarely happens to the startups we worked with.

In the meantime, your team will be renovating the space and improving the infrastructure, while attracting new partners and audience to the property. Once the owner acknowledges that this is raising the value of the

property, you will have a stronger negotiating position.

In case of emergency, start a public campaign

The power of these emerging centres is their visibility. Even when they move into a place without an agreement with the owner, they can strengthen their negotiating position through organising public activities and expanding their community of friends, followers and supporters. If they operate strategically, local authorities will find it hard to take the side of the angry and/or violent owner.

A visible public campaign that shows how many citizens value your centre can make a difference. It can keep the owner from kicking you out. It can result in a legal/ heritage status for the building. It can force the owner into settling for a permanent contract.

And it can lead to new legislation, allowing local and national authorities to lease their property (or property without clear ownership that has been abandoned for many years) to NGOs, including cultural initiatives, instead of letting them be sold off and privatised. That is why constant visibility and mobilising popular support is vital.

Engage with the authorities

Many cultural centres would gladly exist without ever having to deal with the authorities. But there they are: owner/subsidiser/bureaucratic obstacle/political opportunist/ impossible to neglect.

Most of the emerging centres we worked with took us to meet the mayor or the head of the cultural department at city hall. Some of these were smart and ambitious; some were clueless and incompetent. Most of them had a vague notion that the creative industry might be good for the local economy (and cool publicity), but had trouble deciding if these people fitted the bill. All in all, almost none of these startups was actually owned by the city or state, but very few of them could continue existing without some kind of approval by the authorities, if not direct support.

In most cities and countries where we worked, our emerging centres are being neglected, supported one day and blocked the next, depending on election results. They all share a sense of responsibility for improving public space in their cities. But they struggle to be recognised by the local authorities.

To strengthen your influence, which in the long term should also lead to a transparent local cultural policy, we encourage your centre to take the initiative for setting up a reciprocal, outspoken network of local cultural initiatives. This can help to resolve shared legal, bureaucratic and formal challenges as well as helping to establish long-term cooperation between municipal bodies on the one hand and civil society organisations and communities on the other.

CASE STUDY: EIXO RESIDÊNCIAS ARTÍSTICAS, MOSTEIRO, PORTUGAL

The former girls' school in the village of Mosteiro, just outside Porto in Portugal, has been transformed into a new space for dancers' residencies by the Eixo team, dancers and teachers themselves. The artists they invite for a short residency will always be asked to interact with the surrounding, mostly rural, community. Even during the pandemic, Eixo managed to create hybrid presentations, a mix of sophisticated contemporary dance and the involvement of young and old local citizens.

The old school building has been cleaned up. The main classroom serves as a rehearsal studio. For a more public presentation, Eixo can use the small but well-equipped local theatre. Still, the situation is fragile. The mayor has agreed to lease them the school building rent free, for just the costs of energy and maintenance, but only for a year. There are plans to demolish the building and build a new elderly people's home. In the meantime, Eixo will be accepted only if it cooperates in harmony with the local youth association, that also controls the theatre.

Isabel Costa, the co-founder, has grown up here. The mayor knows her family. She was part of the youth association as a child. So she has the trust of the local community. Still, an artist residency is an unknown entity in this town. Its value to the well-being of the locals, the visibility of Mosteiro and the possible sources of income and visitors that it brings, still have to be proven. This needs time. And time is not on their side. The municipality can withdraw its support from one day to the next.

We helped them:

– to come up with a proposal for a 5-year rental contract, with clear evaluation criteria on both sides
– to arrange a monthly roundtable with the municipality and the youth association, to update them and make them co-responsible
– to connect them to Nordic members of TEH and enter into a well-funded artist exchange programme
– to set up their first annual budget, in order to have an overview of the income necessary to become sustainable, including local and regional subsidies and sponsorships and local citizens' memberships.

F. ADVOCACY: CAMPAIGN FOR ALTERNATIVES

Once the team that starts a cultural centre has more or less secured a building, created its first activities and reached out to like-minded communities, it will discover that its goals and fascinations are hardly recognised by the outside world. From the very first stages, it is important to advocate: to attract public attention, to campaign, to raise awareness, to influence policies, to make changes in society. This may not seem to be the core business of an arts centre, but it comes naturally to those who believe that art – and the worldview expressed in that art – can contribute to a more just, equal, inclusive and sustainable society.

This kind of advocacy aims to strengthen not just one's own position and interests; it is motivated by working for the wider benefit of social goals and groups that are marginalised and go unacknowledged.

The very character of an arts centre, which is visible by definition, can be mobilised to raise public awareness and influence the social and political environment.

Campaign and lobby

Your centre is a platform, both inside and outside the building you inhabit. It has the power to mobilise, the visual talent and the knowledge of what goes unrecognised. If direct access to policy-making circles is not available, concentrate your energy on public campaigns. In the best case scenario, your inside programming and outside campaigning don't contradict but strengthen each other.

A public campaign – for a decent cultural policy, for minority rights, for a fair public space – works best when accompanied by a political lobby behind the scenes. Within a centre's circle, there will always be more people attracted to the first than to the second. Campaigning is hard but exciting work. It moves from one visible action to the next. It is all about focus, adrenaline and a sense of togetherness. Lobbying, on the other hand, requires more sophistication, patience, the study of laws and regulations, an understanding of political processes. There is no immediate gratification.

Present alternatives

Advocacy is more than protesting against injustice or incompetence. It includes developing and proposing alternative models. When the ruling bodies aren't capable of even maintaining their own set of standards, as is often the case in these regions, they certainly won't be able or willing to come up with more decent, fair and inclusive alternatives. Those alternatives will have to come up through civil society – of which independent cultural centres are a vibrant part.

TEH is a network with many resources: innovative organisational models, systems of operating that are responsive to the surrounding communities. These resources, mostly developed in Western Europe, are available to the emerging centres the SUSP works with. But they have

to be translated and adapted to the circumstances here. This is also true for the art of advocacy. Once a confrontation with the ruling powers happens, your centre should come prepared: you will have to know not just what you want, but also how it can be achieved and implemented on the legal, political and social level. It's about educating the powers that be, breaking up the status quo and providing a blueprint for the future.

Call for change

Keeping your centre up and running is immensely hard work. Defending the rights of those around you is even harder. Both are hopeless if politics and society turn against you. In order to create your own space, it is vital to change whatever you can in the power structures. A cultural centre is a great place to challenge patriarchy, xenophobia, intolerance and empty consumerism. First inside your own doors, then outside them.

This requires massive research, preparation and strategic effort. Setting goals, creating visible campaigns, mobilising people outside your own circle, familiarising yourself with existing laws and regulations, developing alternative blueprints, creating access, holding negotiations, writing letters, inviting stakeholders, targeting supporters in other domains of society.

The only way to keep it up is to understand that it is all part of the same story – the story your centre is based on.

Ta(r)dino 6 Art Platform, Baku, Azerbaijan — Photo: Emin Masthers, Ta(r)dino 6 Art Platform

CASE STUDY: SALAAM CINEMA, BAKU, AZERBAIJAN

They certainly have not changed Azerbaijan into a paradise of human rights yet, but the people behind Salaam Cinema in Baku have started creating an oasis. They are movie-makers and lovers of cinema to begin with, but they easily branch out into visual arts, poetry, gardening and music. Their community is based on equality and inclusivity. Everyone involved contributes what they can at every level of the work. And from the beginning in early 2019, this has been a place where people from the LGBTQI+ community could feel safe to express themselves.

It is all the more remarkable that Salaam Cinema is creating this safe space in a very visible, well-known heritage building in the city centre. It is inevitable then that they immediately ran into trouble with the shady owner. Having survived that confrontation, through a loud and swift public campaign, they went on to negotiate their way to a legal status. This allowed them to stay in the building, for the time being, renovate its seriously deteriorated floors and ceilings, and expand their activities for communities that have very few spaces to meet in public.

Because of the pandemic, Salaam Cinema has been shut down for most of the year. On top of that, last year's war between Azerbaijan and Armenia created a militant hysteria in the country and brought cultural life to a virtual standstill. It is an almost impossible situation for this pacifist and inclusive centre.

Still, behind the screens, they have been working on (inter)national connections with like-minded partners and networks. And there is hope that the newly reshuffled ministry of culture might have a bit more understanding of the values that a place like Salaam Cinema represents.

The team has developed promotional materials, including architectural plans and artists' impressions of what the building will look like after renovation. The material looks professional and even glossy, in order to speak to the authorities, but stays true to the founding vision of Salaam Cinema.

Advocacy for minority rights starts on a small scale here. But considering the odds are stacked against them, every small step is a giant leap forward.

We helped them:

– discuss strategies to deal with owners and authorities
– set up cooperation across boundaries
– clarify their organisational structure, while staying 'cool and horizontal' as they said, through a workshop with TEH members Gabriella Riccio (l'Asilo, Naples) and Natassa Dourida (Communitism, Athens)
– look beyond their own circle to strengthen their team.

Salaam Cinema, Baku, Azerbaijan — Photo: Salaam Cinema

5. CONCLUSIONS

Reading through these guidelines, setting up a new cultural and social centre must look like the most difficult thing in the world. It isn't. It is basic work, day by day. And it's a priceless enterprise. It's like an academy of life. The experience will stay with you forever. On the golden nights that you make happen, you will discover art that shakes up your worldview and make friends who will make you understand that all this effort is worth it. Because without spaces like these, your city would suffocate.

As mentors, we have created trust, shared knowledge and forged bonds that survive well beyond this programme. Many times, when confronted with problems that seemed impossible to us, the teams behind these centres have amazed us – time and again, they come up with solutions that we could not have imagined. Which just goes to say: no matter the wisdom and experience we offer, these centres are living organisms capable of finding a way forward that cannot be captured in fixed methodologies.

Of the 13 emerging centres we have worked with so far, none has disappeared in the meantime. Some have expanded, some are teetering on the edge during this pandemic. When some of the founders leave, new faces enter, ready to reinvent the place.

We have been proud to work with the TEH Startup Support Programme so far and we're looking forward to the next chapters. In the meantime, it has been a great pleasure to welcome these centres and their smart and fearless people into our network.

DASTE, Bergamo, Italy — Photo: DASTE