

TRUC SPHÉRIQUE - STANICA

(Zilina)

"We believe that the potential for new visions is more important than any commercial or political motivations"

TRUC SPHÉRIQUE (KNOWN AS STANICA, WHICH MEANS STATION IN SLOVAK) IS AN OPEN 'PLATFORM' LINKING CONTEMPORARY ARTS WITH EVERYDAY LIFE AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT. THE CENTRE'S ACTIVITIES AND PROJECTS DEVELOP CREATIVITY, PERCEPTION AND OPENNESS TO NEW FORMS OF EXPRESSION IN THE BELIEF THAT CONTEMPORARY ART AND CULTURE ARE MORE THAN LEISURE TIME ACTIVITIES. STANICA PRESENTS A PULSING SPACE FOR EXPERIMENTING AND ALTERNATIVE INTERACTION WITH EXPERIENCED REALITY, AS A MEANS OF PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE EXPLORATION OF NEW WAYS OF COMMUNICATION. "WE BRING CULTURE FROM THE MARGINS INTO THE CENTRE OF INTEREST."

Stanica is a cultural centre in the Slovakian city of Zilina. Founded in 1998, the organisation acquired the use of the still operating Zariecie train station and this has become its permanent home since 2003. Over time, Stanica has expanded its facilities and now operates a straw bale-built venue, stacked shipping containers and a public park for children and adults on its Zariecie site. In addition, 2017 saw the launch of an ambitious new project in the centre of Zilina with the opening of a refurbished synagogue where visual arts and live performances dominate.

Stanica's operation could best be described as 'agile'. This means the organisation's method of managing and producing its programme is flexible, adaptable, responsive and fluid. While this makes understanding the way the organisation works and survives somewhat complex and not immediately adaptable to classical models of doing business, at its core this is the point of Stanica's existence: to create a different way of working that is based on people and the trust, commitment, responsibility and respect among the team, in the pursuit of common values and practices. So, how does this work? And what are the lessons learnt and possible insights that other organisations could use?

Stanica does not operate as a structured organisation and maintains a fluidity of thinking and operating that was very much part of its original founding concept. In the wider sector this is not unusual in that most independent cultural organisations start their lives in this way (spontaneous, energetic, anti-establishment, dynamic, unstructured) and, in many cases, such organisations could not have begun in any other way because no plan or business model could support such risk. However, if these organisations survive the initial phase (3-5 years), a more structured approach usually emerges, as the organisation receives funding, increases its earned income and manages ever-expanding programmes and facilities. It is also usually the case that the original founders, as they become older, have to respond to more personal responsibilities, such as families, mortgages and future planning.



In Stanica's case, what is unusual is that they have managed to preserve their original values and work practices, while growing and developing in both size and scope. How have they achieved this? By maintaining their principles in tandem with their overall expansion, which have the following qualities:

- The purpose of the organisation is to support art and artists, whose own work and practices are ever-changing.
- Stanica never actively recruits staff but welcomes people who want to work in Stanica, offering an opportunity to learn, develop and create, in exchange for help with keeping the centre operating and running. If this arrangement becomes incompatible, then it is usually the person who makes the decision to leave but it can be the case that he or she is asked to leave. In short, the system is predominantly one of self- management.
- Because all team members have an investment in the centre and what they do in the centre is partly their initiative, they also fundraise for their particular activity, so grant applications and funding is not done by one person but by many people.
- All team members receive a fee for their work but no one is employed by the company directly (except where there is specific project funding). Everyone is on freelance contracts or self-employed.
- The fees that team members receive for their work are comparable but older members or members with more responsibility receive a bit more.
- All of the team share common values and the operation works on trust between the members (there is no 'boss' or major oversight).
- Each area of operation has a large amount of autonomy and the whole organisation works on a 'cellular' basis. However, there is interaction between the cells and people help each other out when needed.
- Financial control is also 'cellular' with the different areas responsible for managing their own money. If an area doesn't have enough money for a particular activity then they simply cut back.
- Cash flow is managed through the bank accounts (there is a main bank account and then a number of auxiliary bank accounts. This differs from year to year, depending on the projects. It is also the case that different funders require separate bank accounts. There is also an account for donations. All in all there could be around 5 or more accounts at any one time).
- Because the system is dynamic and unpredictable, there is little future planning. Ideas are implemented without any real hard data or business plan and the 'testing' of the ideas leads to how income might be generated.
- Communication to the outside world is a key part of Stanica's operation, with a view to involving more and more people.

A major change for the organization was the opening of the refurbished synagogue that Truc Sphérique had been working on for quite a number of years. This was a great achievement but also threw up unforeseen challenges for the organization and its operations. The pressures of having responsibility for what is probably one of the most iconic buildings in Slovakia (designed by renowned German architect Peter Behrens) has different demands than the original alternative and 'on the margins' station site, putting pressure on the resources and the team. This has resulted in tensions within the team and questions around the ethos and values of the organization. What this indicates is that managing a large public space is very different to collectively sharing an 'agile' project, with people cooperating and creating together in a free and open environment. How this will pan out remains to be seen but Truc Sphérique is working on how to solve this phase of change for the organization and, not only that, but hopefully will come up with an innovative and alternative way of managing public cultural institutions in the process.