

portunity. This has led Kaapeli to expand its role in recent years, becoming more proactive in seeing possibilities for its function and its users.

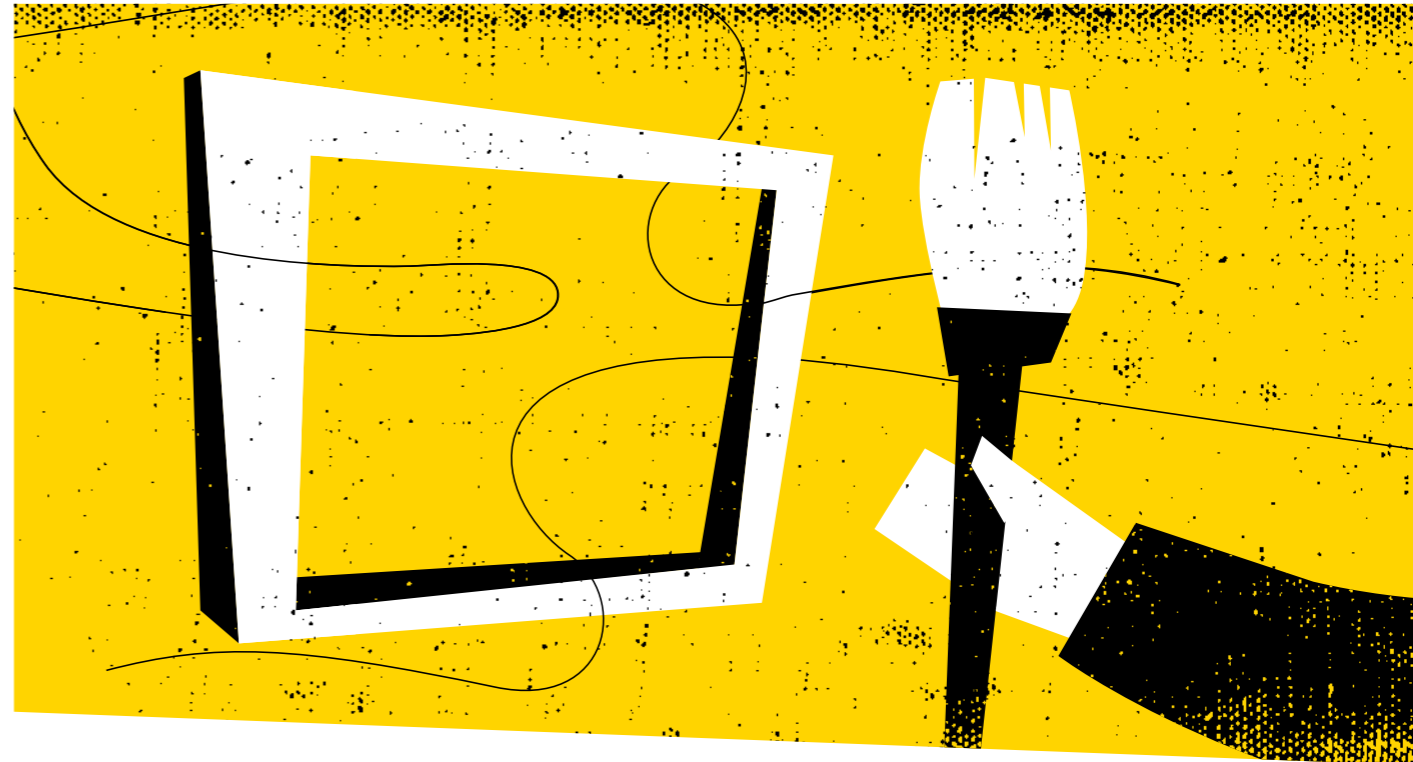
An interesting aspect of Kaapeli, as a cultural organisation, is that it receives no public funding (in fact, it pays €1 million in rent to the city for the land its buildings stand on). All of its overheads are met by the income it receives from tenants and renters of the spaces (approximately €6 million a year). But it does get involved in cultural policy, advocating for decisions that support their users and national arts organisations and smaller-scale or local arts activities. For instance, the Finnish government is changing the criteria for arts funding and there is a concern that this will impact on the quality of the Finnish arts and cultural offer, which may become less experimental and risky. Kaapeli, as a major player for arts and culture in both Finland and Helsinki, can have a role in such policy changes, at the formal and informal levels.

Kaapeli is researching and piloting different ways to support culture (examples are the Kaapeli Walks, giving the public an opportunity to see arts and culture at work and organising conferences that investigate relevant cultural issues and initiate debates) and to enable its tenants and users to become more effective in their various enterprises, be they public art or experimental performance.

The SULA conference, initiated in 2017 (as part of the Creative Lenses programme) continued in 2018 under the name LIFT Helsinki (planned to take place again in 2019), is a good indication of the future direction of Kaapeli. The theme of the conference was 'melt' (*sula* in Finnish). This was chosen to describe the melting pot of creative thinking and working that the conference aimed to provide for professional art practitioners, creative entrepreneurs, intermediaries and business support networks but it also reflects Kaapeli itself: a true melting pot of creativity, ideas, exchange and connections that looks to sustain and develop culture through providing an amazing resource, while affecting change in the cultural landscape of the city and the region. In addition to developing new capacities and experimenting with new initiatives, Kaapeli is also expanding its vision to explore and articulate a more expansive future for the organisation, which, in turn could be influential on policy making in Finland and the Baltic region and maybe for Europe itself.

VILLAGE UNDERGROUND (London)

"Freedom and creativity to reinvent the world"



VILLAGE UNDERGROUND (VU) IS AN INDEPENDENT PERFORMING ARTS VENUE AND CO-WORKING SPACE IN SHOREDITCH, EAST LONDON, PROGRAMMING LIVE MUSIC AND CLUB NIGHTS AND SUPPORTING CREATIVE PRACTITIONERS. IN 2018, VU OPENED A SECOND VENUE IN HACKNEY CALLED Earth AND HAS A SISTER PROJECT IN LISBON.

In the early 2000s, owner and founder of Village Underground, Auro Foxcroft, had a mission to try and open up the arts scene in London for young innovative and talented practitioners. What he saw as a major barrier to creative advancement was simply the lack of space for anyone to practice or develop their art form, particularly in the centre of London where rents were high and space was at a premium. In 2006 he discovered an old railway viaduct in the middle of Shoreditch, then a run-down

and mostly avoided area of the city. He was able to lease this space at a very low rent and what he did next was a stroke of genius. Four recycled Jubilee line train carriages and two shipping containers were hoisted onto the top of the viaduct, making up the creative “platforms” of Village Underground. These spaces almost immediately attracted artists, playwrights, filmmakers, architects, photographers, producers and startups. Practically overnight he had created an affordable working space for artists but also an iconic visual statement on the skyline of London that instantly became a talking point around the city. Village Underground was on the map and has had a substantial impact on the London music scene (breaking and hosting many influential artists), London street art with its mural programme, design and urban fashion supporting studio and showcases, film and multimedia ever since.

A second innovation was not long to follow. Underneath the viaduct was an old Victorian warehouse, which had been a coal store for the railway but had fallen into disrepair. It seemed logical that VU should renovate this as a venue and it opened to the public in April 2007. The proximity of workshops, studios and venue created a communal spirit fostering collaboration and the exchange of ideas, whilst the affordable rent made it easier for tenants to focus on what they really wanted to do. The whole complex, although not very big in size, became symbolic of wider potential and represented what was possible for a new generation of artists. VU was also very successful in attracting both performers and audiences to its venue, which, in turn, led a sort of ‘cool’ revival of Shoreditch, as a London destination and other clubs and venues began to open in the area. This then sparked corporate interest in hiring VU for their events or promotions, providing much needed income. But this success also led to a now familiar urban regeneration story.

Pre-gentrification, Shoreditch had many unused and derelict buildings in the area, and few shops or places to go out. As this profile changed to ‘cool’ Shoreditch, which VU unwittingly had led, high-end hotels, luxury flats, boutique shops and trendy offices began to spring up. Having been a pioneer in bringing people to Shoreditch, the wider effect resulting from this achievement was massive private investment and, ironically but common in such cases, this now presents a threat to VU’s long-term future, because of large increases in its rent (following a rent review by owners of the property, Hackney Council, in 2017 the annual rent increased from £40,000 a year to over £200,000 a year) and changes to the mix of nearby businesses and venues and the visitors they attract. This is a story that has been replicated in Berlin, Dublin, Cambridge, New York and many more cities across the globe. Initiatives that were originally based on available and cheap working and sometimes living spaces, allowing them to pursue their values related to cultural development, found that they were not social innovators anymore but loss-leaders for profit-driven gentrification.

However, VU is determined to continue its work and deliver on its vision of the arts as transformative, believing the power of culture lies in its capacity to change perceptions, people and societies. As positive proof of this commitment, the organisation opened a second space in Hackney called EartH, with the aim of creating a venue and a resource in this part of London, rooted in the local community.

Village Underground is an example of a visionary organisation that found creative ways to overcome seemingly insurmountable barriers. It took unorthodox routes to achieve its goals and was always

open to change. It did this by forming a for-profit company at the outset, with a view to making the business support the vision of the organisation. Then, establishing a not-for-profit company for its cultural development activities, it funded development through its profit-making enterprises (corporate hires, box office and bar takings). This approach is the reverse of traditional arts organisations who rely on core funding from a city, region or state authority. The reasons for VU deciding to adopt their approach were: independence, flexibility of decision-making and the decline of arts funding. Although very successful, the self-funded model has thrown up its own challenges: this success is seen as commercial and hence, the rent hike; it is difficult to apply for arts funding (project or otherwise) because funders see profits; there is a tension between the profit and non-profit sides of the operation and it is not always easy to get the balance right.

But VU is now using all of the knowledge and resources it has accumulated in Shoreditch to open its second space in Stoke Newington. This will give VU even more scope to develop its vision because of its size and the living community around this former cinema, which they opened in 2018 and renamed EartH. VU is being recognised for its mission that culture is for everyone (they have received a silver accreditation from Attitude is Everything, who lead the way in improving deaf and disabled people’s access to live music) and were early advocates of Hollaback’s campaign to tackle harassment in bars and clubs. They are committed to the London Living Wage campaign and run creative apprenticeship schemes in partnership with Big Creative Education. In addition to being a cultural centre, Village Underground is now an ecological project. From repurposed trains and shipping containers, to reclaimed sleepers, staircases, furniture and flooring, with Ecotricity providing 100% green energy and they are also an active member of the local zero emissions network.

Passionate about London’s culture and nightlife (nearly half of London’s music venues closed in recent years) VU has been working hard, not only on their own projects but as advocates and collaborators on helping to fix underlying problems. They were part of the Mayor of London’s Music Venue Taskforce, which wrote a Rescue Plan, and are now active members of the London Music Board and the London Night Time Commission, which made recommendations to the Rescue Plan, along with other initiatives including Agent of Change and the appointment of a Night Czar for London.

Further afield, the Village Underground concept has been taken up (with VU London’s approval and help) by a group in Lisbon and a VU centre is now open in that city, again using shipping containers and recycled materials. And again they are a co-working space for artists, a venue and more. There is also a group working in Barcelona looking to set up a VU in that city.

Village Underground is very much part of a new type of cultural initiative that is commerce-led in the service of cultural change and initiated by a younger generation of ethical entrepreneurs. Perhaps unlike their forerunners, they see money as a tool and have no problem with making a profit to reinvest in their passions and dreams and in having the ‘freedom and creativity to reinvent the world’.