

# FINNISH DESIGN YEARBOOK

2014 – 2015



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**A city by  
co-design**

On Thursday, 8 August 2013, the parks, market squares and courtyards of Helsinki were full of dinner parties feasting on meals brought from home or a neighbour's house. It is estimated that as many as 2,000 people participated in the second-ever *Dinner under the Helsinki sky* event.<sup>1</sup>

Dinner under the Helsinki sky is one of many communal events that have created a new, freer urban culture in the city. Urban farmers are turning abandoned railway yards and disused parks into vibrant green areas, time banks are providing an organised framework for reciprocal service between neighbours, and DIY-restaurateurs put up food stalls on four days each year.

"There are no rules against dining in the park, yet it is something that feels strange to many people. When a larger number of participants becomes involved, the activity suddenly feels normal and acceptable. At the same time, this shared urban space gets a new meaning. You can see new possibilities for what we can, or what is allowed, to do there," explains **Jaakko Blomberg**, Founder and Producer at Yhteismaa ry, the organisation behind Dinner under the Helsinki Sky.

Over the coming decades, the 464-year-old city of Helsinki will grow faster than it ever has before. It is estimated that the population of the city will increase by approximately 10.5% between now and 2030.<sup>2</sup> This has led to a feverish search for space for new construction, and housing in particular. The city's two major ports have already been moved to the eastern suburb of Vuosaari. The vacated port areas and railway canyons have offered Helsinki residents a new environment where different rules apply

than in the normal urban space. The waterfront Kalasatama district near the eastern city centre, for example, has become a stage for temporary urban culture that radiates energy to the rest of the city. Temporary urban space and buildings awaiting new use have become platforms for small businesses and cultural activities.

### A communally developed city

Although the city is under rapid planned development, the new Helsinki will, above all, be created through the joint efforts, actions and shared experiences of its people. Urban gardens, time banks and street festivals have been largely produced by volunteers. New financing models, such as crowdfunding, are becoming increasingly popular. Projects based on volunteering sow seeds for new business ventures: coffee roasters, coworking spaces and restaurants.

This rising culture of doing is built on Finland's strong tradition of "talkoot" (often translated as community effort) and third sector organisation culture, while new technologies, such as social media, have revolutionised the organisational aspects of volunteering.

"Volunteer work is nothing new. What makes today's community efforts different is the capacity for quick, broad and inexpensive organisation facilitated by new technology," says **Tanja Aitamurto**, a Visiting Researcher at UC Berkeley exploring the societal impacts of collective intelligence, such as crowdsourcing, co-creation and open innovation.

This includes placemaking and "lighter, quicker, cheaper" (LQC) projects to turn urban spaces into meaningful places using limited resources and little time.

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LQC projects give anyone the opportunity to become a “designer” of their living environment.

Even small projects can have far-reaching societal impacts. “For example, solving the problems of a given district in collaboration with other residents can lead to stronger social cohesion,” Aitamurto explains.

## Designers as agents of change

So who exactly is designing the city – and does it matter? The line between professional and amateur is becoming blurred. As **John Thackara** wrote back in 2005, “Designers are having to evolve from being the individual authors of objects or buildings, to being the facilitators of change among large groups of people.”<sup>3</sup>

Self-organised projects are complementing long-term urban planning and creating life in the city in the here and now. This new emphasis on activity is also changing the relationship between citizens and governing bodies. Tanja Aitamurto talks about ‘the democracy of making’: “it means citizen participation in the surrounding society by making, building the new and adapting the old. Ideally, the democracy of making also involves public administration as an enabler of activities and a magnifier of positive impacts.”

From the designer’s perspective, the question is how to best facilitate these types of projects and scale up best practices. The focus is no longer on designing the end product, but rather on creating a *platform* that enables activity.

Designing a new, facilitatory public sector is an interesting future challenge for design. This involves combining two different operating cultures: agile, local

and experimental ad hoc activity on the one hand, and slow, public interest-focused and risk-avoidant administration on the other. We must strive towards a city and state that is a reliable, stable and open organisation while also providing a good platform for the development of bottom-up creativity and vitality.

## Redesigning governance?

Governing bodies at both the municipal and national levels have begun to show signs of valuing self-organised projects. The City of Helsinki supports local democracy pilots<sup>4</sup>, while the Finnish government is experimenting with citizen’s legal initiatives and even crowdsourcing the drafting of legislation.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, however, many volunteer projects and small businesses are wrestling with the rigid bureaucracy surrounding permits, for example.

There has been talk of how bottom-up projects complement top-down governance. But what if we move from bilateral cooperation towards an iterative cycle? Could society at its best operate as an open process, in which small-scale local projects and experiments are reflected in the broader goals of society; practice and governance would feed off and learn from each other.

This opens up new roles and career paths for design professionals. Designers can already participate in the culture of crowdsourcing and the creation of that culture as doers and activists, as well as through providing stewardship for creative collaboration.

Furthermore, the contemporary designer can be seen as an agent that operates between the different stake-

holders in society, providing methods for fruitful cooperation and the resolution of potential conflicts. **Bryan Boyer, Justin W. Cook** and **Marco Steinberg**, the three men who were in charge of Sitra's Helsinki Design Lab, put it this way: "As strategic designers, we often find ourselves acting as the 'glue' that binds together multiple types of expertise, multiple approaches, and multiple forms of value in a team working towards a coherent proposition."<sup>6</sup>

Design can also provide stewardship for organisations or systems on the path to change. Design tools, such as interactive and human-centered design methods, are useful for the development of exactly the processes and operating models that would ensure better cooperation between a city or state and its residents. One pressing challenge is integrating these methods in practice into the operating culture of public organisations.

Another interesting challenge is how to design better and more effective public services, taking the needs and wishes of end users into consideration.

What constitutes 'a service' can be defined in many ways. The key is that publicly produced processes should serve their purpose. With regard to the facilitation of projects developed by citizens, the main issues revolve around permits and, in many cases, the regulations regarding use of space. An event organiser must deal with at least six different authorities to obtain the necessary permits and sort out safety issues. In 2011, opening a restaurant required ten different permits that all need to be applied from different municipal offices.<sup>7</sup>

Why not, then, consider permits a service intended to promote the implementation of projects in an effective and

responsible manner? In Helsinki, the aim is to ease the operations of event organisers by providing an online "one stop service" where all the necessary permits can be obtained.<sup>8</sup>

But with more and more events and activities being organised in Helsinki, is navigating this jungle of bureaucracy really as difficult as the public debate suggests?

"Putting together new events is one way of finding out how the bureaucracy works and how it can be developed. It also leads to new interpretations of existing regulations and creates new practices," Jaakko Blomberg says.

Community events are a way to develop a new culture for living and operating in a shared urban space as well as the culture of administration of shared matters. The best concepts find life in new contexts and their impacts are reflected in the day-to-day life of residents. This is design of the operating culture at its best.

**Hella Hernberg is an architect and designer whose work ranges from small scale projects to research and strategic design. Hernberg runs Urban Dream Management, a design practice focusing on creative and systemic solutions to sustainable living.**

1 <http://www.helsingintaivaanalla.fi/>

2 City of Helsinki population forecast 2011–2050. Helsinki Urban Facts, City Statistics 31/2010. "Population register centre, register information as of 31 august 2013" (in Finnish and Swedish). Population Register Center of Finland. <http://goo.gl/WtZzsW>

3 John Thackara, *In the Bubble: Designing in a Complex World*, MIT Press, 2005, p.7

4 <http://demokratia.hel.fi/>

5 [otakantaa.fi](http://otakantaa.fi), [kansalaisaloite.fi](http://kansalaisaloite.fi), [suomijoukkoistaa.fi](http://suomijoukkoistaa.fi)

6 Bryan Boyer, Justin W. Cook & Marco Steinberg: *Legible Practices – Six Stories about the craft of stewardship*. Sitra, 2013, p. 15

7 <http://goo.gl/PpKSrg>

8 Online service for event organisers: <http://goo.gl/0672PA>