



C R E A
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STRONGER ARTS
AND CULTURAL
ORGANISATIONS
FOR A GREATER
SOCIAL IMPACT

CREATIVE
LENSES
CASE STUDY
L'ASILO

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Interviewee Gabriella Riccio

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Creative Lenses is a four-year project, running from 2015 to 2019, that seeks to make arts and cultural organisations more resilient and sustainable by improving their business models and developing their long-term strategic and innovation capacities.

To find out more about Creative Lenses and its publications, visit www.creativelenses.eu



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CREATIVE LENSES PARTNER ORGANISATIONS



L'ASILO

Location Naples, Italy

Website www.exasilofilangieri.it

Vision

The Community of L'Asilo believes that culture is a fundamental right for the personality development of the human being, it seeks to liberate art and culture from the control of the market and profit. Criticising the language and formats of business on the arts, L'Asilo values inclusion, freedom and creativity and is against every form of fascism, racism, homophobia, sexism, etc. It's self-governed and has adopted a process of consensual decision-making to ensure it is operating for the common good in an inclusive, non-authoritarian, manner.

Organisation type

Urban Common ruled under the Declaration of Urban Civic and Collective Use, a not-for-profit institution recognizing the self government and autonomy of activities of an open and informal community or artists, activists and researchers in a publicly owned historical building.

Main activities

An independent production centre provides rehearsal spaces, residencies, and a venue for performances, open to all.

The spaces are equipped for making art – including a theatre, a library, a cinema space with facilities for video artists, dark room, tailors / costume space, ceramic workshop, screen printing facilities, stage craft lab, studios for artists, sculptors, musicians, etc.

Renouncing artistic direction, the members of L'Asilo asked themselves how they might produce art in a different way. Events are planned through consensual meetings and public assemblies. This is resulting in a range of activities including performances, festivals, outreach, education, social activities, an urban garden, political activism, and direct democracy workshops.

Art forms they promote or produce

There is an interdisciplinary approach covering a broad spectrum including dance, theatre, music, visual arts, experimental arts, traditional dance and music, etc.

Introduction

2012 – A group of artistic activists and researchers occupied a 16th Century convent that had been virtually destroyed by an earthquake and renovated with EU funds remaining for years heavily under-utilised. After three months, this action was accepted by the City administration as an experimentation on commons and civic use.

2015 – Following two and a half years of continuous work with the community, with activists, with jurists, etc., L'Asilo was formally recognised by an Act of the Municipality as a new type of institution operating under the Declaration of Urban Civic and Collective Use. This gave formal recognition of:

- an informal community,
- its self-regulatory powers,
- and its self-managing and self-governing powers.

Key income streams

L'Asilo does not measure its value in terms of economic revenue, but refers to the idea of "civic revenue" supporting the need for the development of a new indicator capable of making visible the "invisible" revenue not calculated in economic terms (see 'vision' above). Costs are kept very low:

- The space has been secured for the common good of the City, with the administration not providing money, but a building.
- L'Asilo adopts an operating model of exchange where skills, resources, and competencies are all shared for the common good in the idea of solidarity and mutualism.
- Donations in the form of equipment (see 'main activities' above) have been given by empathic supporters. Other equipment (i.e., the Theatre) have been self built reusing recuperated materials.
- The administration covers heating, electric, water, major cleaning, guardians and is responsible for renovation (in conjunction with the community) to preserve the building for artistic and cultural production.
- Crowdfunding campaigns are activated to equip spaces (i.e., the cinema). All money is invested in equipment.
- Private financial support to equip spaces is sometimes accepted. The Community applied and was granted a €50,000 fund from Fondazione Unipolis for the equipment of the dance hall. In this case, a formal Committee was created to manage the fund.



The declaration has given L'Asilo the right to develop income streams to provide an income for artists, e.g., earned income from events, festivals, workshops, etc, often in a 'Pay What You Like' or 'Donate What You Can' format.

Income for specific projects and initiatives is also possible via crowdfunding. There has been offers of grants and corporate donations, but as there is no legal entity and they can't invoice for this income. They have resolved this by telling these organisations what they need and asking them to buy and they secure it for them and provide it as a donated resource.

Turnover 2017 ca. €40.000

Surplus/deficit 2017 €0

Number of employees and volunteers ca. 50 stable volunteers and over 500 artists for transitory projects

The drivers for change

Following the global economic crisis in 2009, privatisation and funding cuts in culture and wider public spending in Italy became widespread. This meant that many national and local cultural spaces were being eroded or were under threat of closure. From this sprang a movement of occupied cultural spaces.

The artists occupying the 16th Century convent as a cultural space in 2012, did not want to claim the space for themselves, but for the city. This left them in a grey area legally. The rules for what they were doing had not yet been written and they were in the space that had not yet been thought of or covered by law, and so they realised that they had to work with the administration (not against it) to develop recognition for the concept of a cultural Commons and started writing their own rules: The Declaration of Urban Civic and Collective Use. Four years later, this was formally recognised by the City thus giving birth to a new form of institution "Emerging Urban Commons ruled by Civic Use".

Authorities were supportive of the idea of developing a cultural forum for social use, and suggested they form as an official association. They said no. The goal was to get the space declared as a common good for the City.

The artists within L'Asilo believed that it was time for a paradigm change. They saw cultural organisations across all disciplines

suffering by using the language of business. How, for example, do you communicate to funders in advance of a project what the result will be when art is a process?

The solution

L'Asilo successfully demonstrated to authorities that underutilised spaces are a treasure that can generate value and revenue for the whole of society.

Looking at other industries, they found precedents had been set in Naples, e.g., water being treated as a common good and therefore not being privatised. They used examples such as this to demonstrate their vision of culture as a fundamental human right and to demonstrate what they meant about the space being held for the Common good of the City.

Each time they got a 'no' during the process of seeking recognition as a Commons, they worked with the administration to explore why, listening to them, and proposing a creative use of the law to remove its obstacles.

Over time mutual trust was formed with the administration. They adopted a mature, intellectual approach, keeping the dialogue at a very high level (some of the initiators were academics).

The space and the facilities are amazing and this has united people, inspiring them to continue to work together towards their goal, where art and culture are seen neither as public nor private, but common.

Securing formal recognition of their institution as a Commons and gaining full autonomy over their practice, enabled L'Asilo to become a civic space where decisions about access to resources are decided based upon the needs of the people through a radical, democratic approach.

The implementation

By focusing on art for the common there are no fixed roles and competencies are shared and passed on, so people can be involved in creative activities, as well as organisational ones, and all comit to the daily care of the building and of the common process. Anyone can contribute and create. Each project brings its own audience and participants, e.g., punk rock, 70s poetry, experimental and high contemporary art, theatre, dance etc. All are equal and L'Asilo grants equal access opportunities to the inexperienced as well as to well established artists and companies, allowing contact between artists young and experienced. Holding this breadth of activity alongside one another brings people into contact with different experiences and different perspectives.

This means that the artists within L'Asilo are no longer creating an artistic 'product' and then finding a market to sell it to, it is the other way around with artistic experiences created with and between people. The goal is not the market even if numerous creations at L'asilo, for their quality, enter into national programming in festivals and theatre.

L'Asilo adopts a solidarity network approach. Those who are empathetic to the values and approach, lighting designers for example, add competencies and resources. International networks such as Trans Europe Halles, provide wider opportunities to share ideas and competencies.

They ensure that there is a clear idea of what working as a Commons means. They experiment with different ways of working, it's never about one identity or ideology, but is open to all – all artistic disciplines and approaches, all ages, economic backgrounds etc. Facilitators are in place to dilute conflict by calling it out and by highlighting any potential move towards power.

When first starting out they feared that multiple people would want to use the same space at the same time, but this hasn't been an issue. Mutual support ensures that honest disagreements can be aired and resolved.

When first recognised and no longer seen to be operating in a grey area of the law, they had the very positive challenge of lots of people wanting to get involved all at once. They initially feared that this would put too much strain on the resources, but more people has meant more skill and expertise and so has led to more resources, enabling them to adjust to growth together overtime.

The results

A key area of debate with the administration was that of responsibility. The solution adopted ensures that responsibility is divided between the owner of the

building (the public administration) and the community (to each is recognised the right of use).

The Declaration of Urban Civic and Collective use provides a form of constitution with no legal representant, and the Assembly is recognised the power to change the rules if needed.

A cultural Commons enables interdisciplinary meeting and exchange. The approach recognises the value of creating. Those involved have reported this leading to innovation, artistic growth and an improved quality of life.

**'IT IS ALWAYS
POSSIBLE TO
CONSIDER
OTHER OPTIONS'**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Julie Aldridge is a consultant specialising in business planning, marketing strategy, and organisational development. She works with a diverse mix of clients from across the arts, heritage and cultural sector. Supporting leaders and teams to devise new strategies to achieve their ambitions during a time of rapid change. Prior to becoming a consultant, Julie was Executive Director of the Arts Marketing Association (AMA) for well over a decade.





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