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Ars Longa. Building a House for Senior Artists in Helsinki



Project design of the Ars Longa building. Image courtesy Hannunkari & Mäkipaja Architects

Overview

Dialogues shares an essay written by **Tuula Paalimäki**, Finnish Artists' Studio Foundation's Director (Helsinki, Finland) for Lea O'Loughlin's keynote speech on the topic **Cultural Permanence: The Impact of Legacy and Long-Term Planning** in occasion of the latest Res Artis Meeting, which took place in Rovaniemi (Finland), in July 2018. The essay reports the planning of **Ars Longa**, a studio building aimed to address the needs of senior artists right in the heart of the city of Helsinki.

How the Idea Came About

The Finnish Artists' Studio Foundation owns and rents artists' studios and atelier housing. Like everywhere else in the world, there is a lack of working spaces for artists, and this is especially true when considering affordable atelier housing. Over the years, one of the main problems that the Foundation recognized was that once artists get the atelier apartment, they get to keep it indefinitely, even if they are not active in the profession anymore. In fact, the law does not allow the Foundation to evict the tenant in such a case. It goes without saying that such terms are on one hand of inestimable value for aging artists. On the other hand, they create some problems with studio availability for younger artists as the average life expectancy has been steadily growing in Finland.

Thus, there came the idea to offer housing specifically dedicated to senior artists, who do not actively need a working space anymore, but could benefit from an environment which is shared with colleagues.

Getting the Project Started

When the Foundation presented the proposal to the City of Helsinki, the idea was considered interesting, but there were worries about the capacity of the Foundation, which is quite a small one. They then decided to connect two projects, since a design organization had applied recently for a building lot for senior designers too. The result was that in 2014 we founded a shareholding company together in order to build a multi-story rental house for senior visual artists and designers.

Right after the project started, it became clear that it needed more partners to be properly financed. So we decided to find more art organizations willing to take part to the project, which turned out to be the Union of Finnish Writers and the Copyright Society for Visual Artists. Many other refused, since they considered the venture too risky.

In Finland, the government guarantees a loan for social housing and – since our project was considered as such – it was approved for state support.

A Place for Intergenerational Exchange

As it happened that the two lots beside our building were given to some other organizations which were responsible for the building of housing dedicated to students and people under 30 years old of age, we soon established a connection and decided to collaborate, so that the natural result will be a building area which connects senior to young people and vice versa. There will be common living rooms, saunas, a gym and a roof terrace for all these inhabitants to use. The idea is that the young people will benefit from meeting older people with relevant life and working experience, and that elder ones will also gain advantage from their younger companions.

Making it Real

After almost four years of planning, networking and negotiating, we are currently at the point where the contractor has finally started to build – more precisely, at the beginning of June this year. According to our plans, the houses will be ready at the beginning of 2020, but the artists will be able to move in a little earlier in order to contribute to shape the style and services of the building and reflect their own values and needs. In fact, since until now our energy has gone to practical matters, we have not planned anything related to the mission, values and rules which will animate the soul of the

building yet.

The building will have 54 apartments, some small working spaces for writers and also some studios for painters and designers. The tenants will be selected by a jury of board members from all the organizations participating to the project. Practically speaking, the building will host visual artists, designers and writers who are over 50 years old of age. Most of the apartments will be one-bedroom studios, and will be inhabited by one person. Hopefully we will also get couples, since there are some bigger apartments too. The percentage of the different professional groups presented will depend on how much different organizations have invested in the project. At the moment, we have 30% writers, 50% visual artists and 20% designers. Of course, the final situation depends also on who will apply to the apartments. The estimated rent will be about 15 euros per sqm, which is about 2/3 of the rent in the free market at the moment. This is also one of the reasons why we expect a lot of artists to be interested in this possibility.

Tuula Paalimäki is Director of the Finnish Artists' Studio Foundation, which is headquartered in Helsinki, Finland.

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