

MOVING ——— IN MOVING ——— ON

#12

**TEH Startup Support
Programme 2021**

Featuring:
Útero, Lisbon, Portugal



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THE TRANS EUROPE HALLES (TEH) STARTUP SUPPORT PROGRAMME: WHY AND HOW?

Through an open call, launched in July 2020, Trans Europe Halles (TEH) invited initiatives from Mediterranean countries – Cyprus, Italy, Malta, Portugal, and Spain – to apply for our Startup Support Programme.

Trans Europe Halles is a network of more than 100 cultural centres – initiated by citizens and artists who have revitalised vacant buildings for arts, culture and activism across Europe. We started our work in 1983 in Western Europe and we're now supporting emerging creative and cultural spaces in the Balkans, Eastern Partnership and Southern Mediterranean countries too.

In 2017, we launched the Startup Support Programme – offering access to all the knowledge, experience and skills we've gained in Europe over the past 37 years.

WHY NOW?

From 2017-2021, we have been running and continue to run a wide range of activities under the strapline **Factories of Imagination: Investing in Cultural Changemakers.**

This project is motivated by an urgent concern: in many European countries, non-governmental cultural centres are under-resourced and don't have the funds or the conditions in place to fully achieve their potential. This is particularly true in regions and countries where neither civil society initiatives nor critical artistic production are encouraged by public authorities – and indeed are sometimes actively discouraged.

This is the case in the Balkans, which was the focus of the first year of our Startup Support Programme, and also in Ukraine and Belarus, the focus for 2019. The situation is the same for Azerbaijan and Armenia, where we operated in 2020.

Within the EU, in the Southern part of Europe, some emerging centres also struggle to create a sustainable existence in their environment. At TEH, we noticed a lack of new member applications from these countries over the past few years. That is why we encouraged initiatives from this region to apply for this year's Startup Support Programme.



The Startup Support Programme 2021 aimed to reach out to these kinds of initiatives across **Cyprus, Italy, Malta, Portugal** and **Spain**. However, since the Covid-19 pandemic was in full swing, the process we launched was carried out completely online due to Covid-19 safety protocols and travel restrictions.

We launched an initial open call in July 2020; we chose a selection committee; we carried out online visits; we organised conference participation, online coaching, organisational workshops and written reports. As a result of this activity, we are very pleased to be able to welcome four of these initiatives into the TEH network:

- **DASTE in Bergamo, Italy**
- **E50035 Expect the Unexpected in Palazzuolo sul Senio, Italy**
- **Eixo Residências in Mosteiró / Vila do Conde, Portugal**
- **Útero in Lisbon, Portugal**

This case study will focus on **Útero** in Lisbon, Portugal.

ÚTERO, A BRAND NEW CULTURAL SPACE IN LISBON

The neighbourhood is unspectacular and residential – not far from Baixa, in the heart of Lisbon. On our first online visit, Pedro Colaço walks us through his new environment: cars lined along the narrow sidewalks, small parks and squares, modest shops, groups of Nepalese and African migrants who have settled here, a couple of funky bars and galleries – and he stands still in front of the large shop window where soon the magic will happen: Útero, womb, the source of creation.

During our eight months of weekly conversations, we will follow Pedro, the coordinator of this new cultural hotspot, on his journey from fixing the electricity in the basement all the way through to the lively, newly discovered place that it is today.

THE SPACE

Unlike many of the TEH centres, this is not a converted industrial building. For many years, it was a storage space for the former owner. When we first visit, it is empty: 80m² on the ground floor, high and light, and a 200m² basement, lower and darker. And everything a functional arts space needs is still absent. No electricity, no lights, no furniture, no stage, no equipment, no bar, no books, no art

work. But it takes no effort to see that it is all possible here. There is just work to do. A lot of work.

Six months later, the transformation has happened. The sunshine streaming through the shop window illuminates a vivid, broadly oriented new cultural space, focused on bringing emerging visual artists, writers, filmmakers and musicians to a wide and varied audience. It consists of a specialised bookstore (including shelves for free book exchange), a bar and a small stage, a large and flexible exhibition, performance and screening space in the basement, with an agenda of art shows, poetry readings, creative workshops, cinema and music nights.

Open from noon until 10pm, Útero has quickly found its first customers, having a drink, browsing through the books and opening their laptops. Dozens of people visit the exhibitions and stage events. The place is coming alive.

THE FOUNDERS AND FUNDERS

Unlike most new spaces in the TEH network, Útero started life with two arts-loving founders willing to finance the work from the beginning. This included a modest fee for Pedro,



allowing him to spend months on building the place from the ground up and to invest in the infrastructure, interior and equipment. As a result, Útero is soon to be legally registered as a cultural association that can accept donations or sponsorships and invest them into non-profit social and cultural activities.

This situation is better than for most startups. Still, it poses some challenges. To begin with, the founders' budget is not infinite: they aim for Útero to be self-sustaining within a year from the opening. With monthly expenses adding up to some €5,000, this goal is not within reach. In the meantime, the founders are entitled to have certain views on the quality, ambience and content of the place and its programming (its choice of books, artists etc.). However, their views don't always chime with those expressed by Pedro and his small circle of voluntary co-workers and co-curators.

As yet, the founders don't see the need to formalise the working relations, the organisational structure and the business model. The work so far has been done based on trust and sympathy. In the foreseeable future, some written formal agreements might be useful

to avoid possible misunderstandings and disagreements.

THE PROGRAMME

Even before the official opening, Útero presented its first exhibition: a complex multi-disciplinary show, which turned out well, thanks to careful production work, and received a good number of visitors, even under tight Covid-19 restrictions. The adventurous image that Útero seeks to present was clear from the outset.

Since the centre really opened its doors in May 2021, hosting more visitors every day once the Covid restrictions eased, the bar started working and there was a wider range of art and books on offer. Pedro and his friends have started programming on a modest scale and frequency. The programme includes exhibitions, both in the basement and on the ground floor, small concerts, a couple of movie screenings, some poetry nights on the small stage facing the books. All of these serve to enlighten the atmosphere, but also to find out what works best in this space, what additional equipment is needed, how to best reach an audience etc.

Pedro, who just published his first book of poetry, has been reaching out

to friends across Lisbon from different artistic circles, inviting them to bring their ideas and like-minded artists to Útero. Currently, he cannot offer these 'curators' a fee, but the platform itself, the facilities, the good company and, most of all, the sense of the new attract them nonetheless. As a result, Útero is exploring its artistic identity, somewhere between the cutting-edge dreams of the city's upcoming artists and the confinements of the space, its budget and its facilities.

THE ORGANISATION

Pedro and the two founders-funders, a lawyer couple, have agreed to work as a three-headed management team. In practice, Pedro spends his days (and nights) at Útero, while the couple between them provide the funding and intermittent advice on organisation and content (with their main focus on visual arts and special books). In the meantime, the two bar workers on every shift receive a modest fee. The curators and co-organisers of events and exhibitions do their work on a voluntary basis (Pedro's two steady co-workers, Joana and Rui, double up as barkeepers and curators). This unequal working situation will need to be solved sooner or later. As will the top-down structures that will exist as long as all the decisions have to go through Pedro, before they are shared with his co-workers.

THE CHALLENGES

Transforming an empty space with no facilities into the welcoming arts centre that Útero is today meant that Pedro, the young poet, had to learn about everything from fire safety systems to bar equipment, from

electric circuits for LED-lights to social media (which he refused to use in the beginning, out of principle).

With many of these practical obstacles out of the way, the main question remains the working relationship with the funders. While they prefer Pedro to 'have fun and experiment', this leaves him with no real criteria to work with. They are not inclined to develop an annual budget which would help them to highlight some of the choices they will have to make (paid staff vs. volunteers / bar restaurant vs. restrictions / public activities vs. expenses for stage, exhibitions etc.), a business model or a working agreement. The situation is so unpredictable, they argue, that it would make no sense to put such things on paper. In the meantime, they have always been clear that their funding will, understandably, not be unlimited. As already mentioned, they would like Útero to be self-sustaining within a year. As it is, the turn-over over the first few months has not covered the monthly expenses by some distance. This explains why they expect Pedro to assemble his team of co-workers on a voluntary basis.

A challenge of a different nature will be to reach out to and involve the different social and cultural communities in the surrounding neighbourhoods. For the Nepalese, the Sri Lankans and the migrants with roots in different African countries, Útero could become a meeting place with the space to develop their own artistic and social ambitions. Now that Pedro has established connections with other art spaces, bars and entrepreneurs in the neighbourhood, this could be the next step.



RECOMMENDATIONS

After six months of weekly Zoom calls with Ada Arduini and Chris Keulemans, mentors of this year's Startup Support Programme, TEH provided a three-day workshop on a topic of Pedro's choice, with an expert we selected. Matthijs Ponte – poet, philosopher, activist and former coordinator of bookshop-platform Perdu in Amsterdam – worked with Pedro and his small team over three days, on strengthening the organisation and its financial possibilities. Together, we came up with some recommendations:

- **Develop a written working agreement with the founders-funders, to be clear about the respective responsibilities and how to divide/share them.**
- **Develop an annual budget and a business model, to better manage the fluctuations of the next phase and work towards a financially sustainable future.**
- **The most promising option seems to be to, somewhat experimentally, engage with a selection of private investors/patrons to fund specific lines of programming, basically letting them take a share in its activities, be it without any financial return. In doing so, it is as obvious as necessary that Útero protects its full artistic independence in this process.**

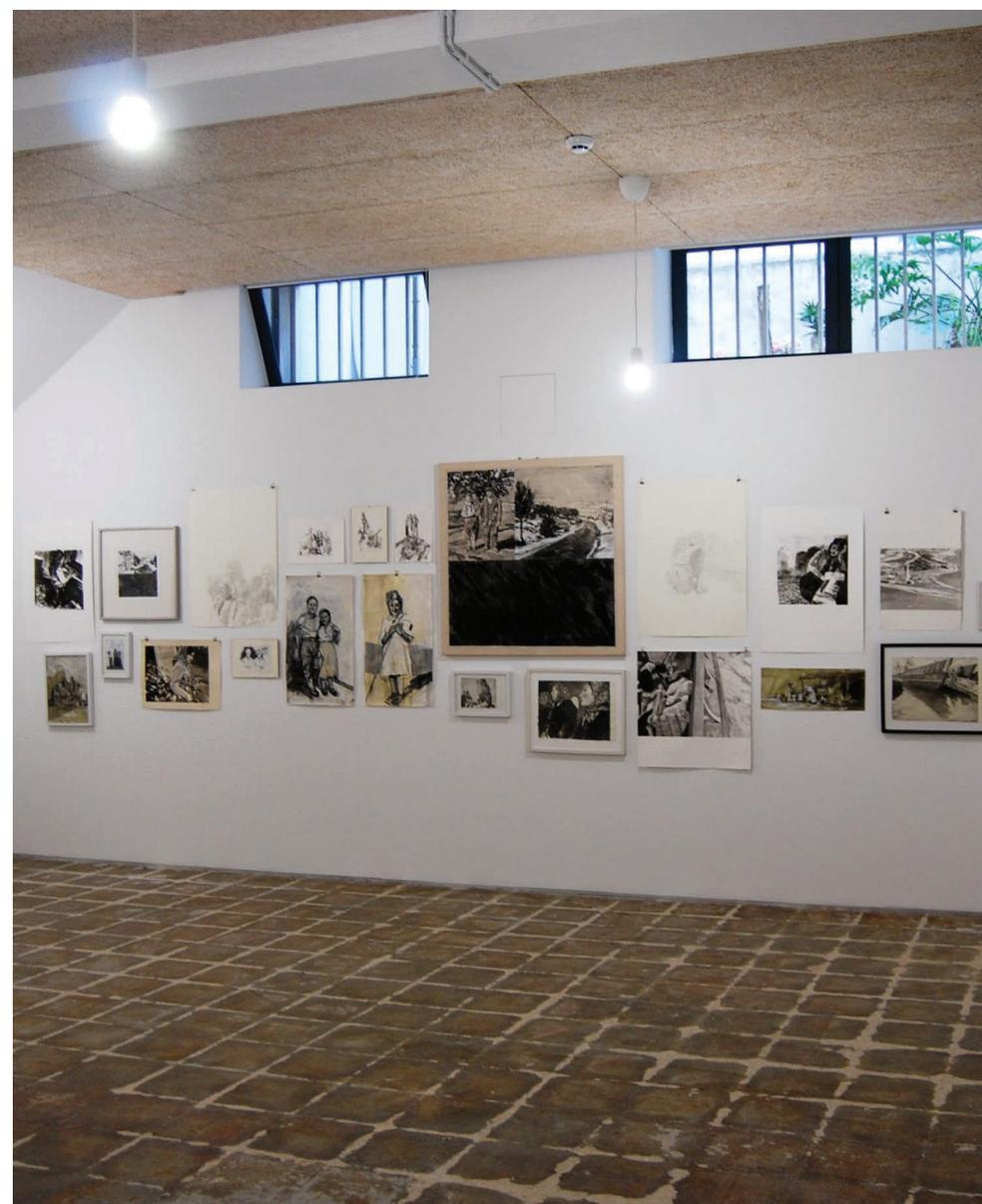
- **Alternatively, or preferably additionally, Útero could create a subscription, in exchange for a small but set monthly donation, and in return provide the subscribers once or twice a year with a reproducible yet special piece of art specifically and uniquely created with this goal, by a selection of its exhibiting visual artists. The latter strategy has the advantage that many small donations tend to be more certain than a few larger ones, since the impact of a single lost subscription has little financial effect, while the sum makes it worthwhile.**

- **Have dinner-brainstorms with both the practical/logistical/technical team and the content/curatorial team, in order for them to meet, exchange ideas and create new collaborations.**

- **Reach out to and involve the migrant communities in the neighbourhood.**

- **Increase the visibility, both physically, on the outside of the building, and online, to the wider cultural and social audience in Lisbon and beyond.**

Read the full workshop report by Matthijs Ponte [HERE](#).



Two international experts worked closely with the TEH staff on the Startup Support Programme 2020:

ADA ARDUINI volunteer and former director of INTERZONA in Verona, Italy – a cultural initiative that, for the past 30+ years, has been focusing on contemporary music and arts that were ground-breaking for this area.

CHRIS KEULEMANS a travelling writer and moderator – the founder and artistic director of Tolhuistuin cultural centre in Amsterdam. Chris is also the author of this report.

The recent TEH publication 'Smart and Fearless. Guidelines for emerging arts centres in Eastern, Southeastern and Southern Europe', which describes discoveries made and lessons learned during the Startup Support Programme 2018-2021, can be found [HERE](#).

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