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TEH Startup Support Programme 2021

Featuring:
DASTE, Bergamo, Italy
THE TRANS EUROPE HALLES (TEH) STARTUP SUPPORT PROGRAMME: WHY AND HOW?

CONTEXT

CASE STUDY: DASTE, BERGAMO, ITALY

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS
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 **DASTE**, which is based in Bergamo, Italy.
When the pandemic reached Europe in February 2020, Bergamo, with its impressive peak of deaths, became the Italian symbol of this global tragedy. Italy lost 131,000 people to Covid-19 while in the whole world the number of deaths is close to five million. The consequences that the health emergency has had on the city, both economically, socially and psychologically, remain palpable. In this context, DASTE, a brand new venue in a fully transformed power station, represents an opportunity for the rebirth and relaunch of the cultural life in the city of Bergamo.

The former power station, situated in Via Daste e Spalenga in Bergamo, was the heart of the Industrie Riunite Filati cotton mill, built at the end of the 19th century. At the end of the 1960s, following the transfer of the cotton industry, the entire industrial area – including this power station – was abandoned and left to disintegrate.

It was only in 2003, following an integrated intervention programme for the area surrounding the former mill, that the building was restored.

The power station is a fundamental piece of the area’s industrial heritage, located in the Celadina district on the city’s outskirts. In recent decades, the area has been transformed from a peripheral district into an important urban zone with health services and sports facilities. However, in the collective imagination, it remains characterised by poverty and degradation (even according to the residents themselves), due to the presence of a prison, a psychiatric and drug abuse support service, as well as many squats and the perception of a strong presence of foreign citizens and petty crime. The macro-area in which DASTE is located is well known for a strong lack of cultural and social facilities. In this extremely complex situation, there is a very active social network made up of associations, public and religious bodies and institutions, and voluntary citizens.

In 2017, the municipality of Bergamo, which has owned the structure since 2009, undertook a process of redevelopment of DASTE, both in structural terms and in terms of its use. It raised the funds for a basic renovation (respecting the industrial heritage) with a project financed by the Ministry of Public Works; the works were completed in February 2021.

In its renovated shape, DASTE is now composed of a large covered ‘piazza’ (the Spazio Eventi), a bistro, a cinema, offices and connective spaces. The building, surrounded by pedestrian and public green areas, is now part of a recently built residential context and is close to important social, health, sports and entertainment services. There are many free parking spaces around the structure, which is easily accessible by both public and private transport.

In June 2018, the management of the structure was entrusted to an ATI (Associazione Temporanea di Imprese – a temporary association of companies). This is a multidisciplinary group composed of Lab 80 film, a cooperative that deals with culture and film production; cooperative Ruah, which promotes the social and cultural integration of Italian and migrant citizens; Openarch association for architectural and urban culture; the Union of Professionals and Cultural Associations; Generazioni FA social cooperative, which deals with inclusive social policies; and Nutopia, a company that deals with catering and social aggregation.

This ATI is the body that legally deals with the municipality for matters regarding the rent and the socio-cultural programme to be delivered. In 2020, this association of companies was informally enlarged (for legal reasons) with the addition of another six organisations, operating in the cultural and social field. The management of the facility was awarded to this umbrella organisation for 15 years, renewable for another 15 years, from the date of delivery of the refurbished building.

The entire programme for the acquisition and reuse of the power station suffered a setback due to the Covid-19 pandemic, but now DASTE is ready for a new era.
The umbrella organisation created to apply for the use of this renewed space is led by Lab80, founded in 1976 and promoter of one of the most renowned Italian film festivals (Bergamo Film Meeting). However, our connection with La Centrale has been mostly with artistic director Martina Cesani, who works for Nutopia. She took the same course in cultural management, given by Fitzcarraldo in Turin, as Giada Pieri from E50035 (the other Italian centre selected by the TEH Startup Programme for 2021).

In order to pursue common objectives, the umbrella organisation has shared the spaces between all of the participating actors: a total of 4,628m2 (2,740 outdoors, 1,888 indoors), spread across four floors. The different organisations, in line with the principles guiding the project, have decided to share the rental costs, utilities, fittings, as well as the income derived from the use of the ‘piazza’. A system of royalties on the proceeds of the catering space linked to the initiatives organised in the public performance space was also envisaged to partially cover the fixed costs.

Each organisation will remain as it is, but the impresa sociale will be responsible for the central activities and spaces. There is also a parallel group that works on tenders and funding applications, from private and public institutions: cultural activities, programming and connections to the neighbourhood. The municipality will launch a specific tender for €50,000 focused on this neighbourhood.

In this respect, La Centrale works more like a hub than a culture and arts producing centre. For now, one of the main sources of income comes from rentals (for commercial, social and cultural purposes), especially of the beautiful Spazio Eventi. But since the umbrella organisation includes a few cooperatives engaged in social work, with different target groups, their aim is to offer to the citizens many different activities that can be described as ‘cultural welfare’.

In the meantime, regardless of the pandemic, the team has been able to organise some short-term programming, including a storytelling workshop about the power plant, a film marathon, a day initiative called Family Sunday, a film festival about immigration and integration, and more. There is also a co-working system in place and the building is available for courses, workshops, business and corporate events, university lessons etc.

In 2023, Bergamo and Brescia will become Italian capitals of culture. The team is preparing to participate in this event with the right cultural and social offer. DASTE aims to enrich the city’s cultural programme by becoming both a centre of attraction and an inspirational hub for projects that ignite social value; a cultural stronghold for the surrounding neighbourhood that creates social inclusion projects; a platform that also explores entrepreneurship, economic sustainability and innovation; a producer of culture and arts, not just a hub that hosts other people’s cultural proposals.
DASTE has a thorough plan when it comes to sustainability. This includes: the sharing of a governance charter; the presence of a project manager; a fruitful exchange between the public sector and the audience; a blend of cultural and social activities and commercial services; the monitoring of a programme co-designed with the surrounding communities in order to be flexible and modify the offer; and the implementation of cultural leadership through participation in Trans Europe Halles.

Since the space opened in June 2021, many things are still under development, but the managing team is well aware of what they need to do in order to offer a first-class service to the community. They need to improve the infrastructure; to finetune a common identity in order to create a programme that is satisfactory for all the actors involved; to intensify their relationship with the municipality; to get to know their audiences better; to build a financial and organisational model; to perfect the activity of the bistro/bar/catering service. In all this, they are coached by BAM! Strategie Culturali, an Italian consultancy firm working for cultural organisations that is helping them to coordinate their efforts and to focus on the above-mentioned issues.

For DASTE, networking is key: they will soon be part of the Italian network ‘Lo stato dei luoghi’ (The state of places), which connects abandoned or repurposed spaces and is working to raise awareness on a national level about their role in the Italian independent cultural scene. They also have a partnership with ARTLAB set up by Fondazione Fitzcarraldo. But they lack an international scope, and this is where TEH comes in: the DASTE team believes in exchanging experiences and skills. They believe that there is a strong need to expand the local cultural offer, especially after the outbreak of Covid-19 in the city, and to help heal the scars left by the pandemic using arts and culture as tools.
When we met Martina and the DASTE team, we had the feeling that they were incredibly well prepared to face the huge challenge of managing a stunning but very expensive space, coordinating the efforts of many different organisations. But of course, before the opening, all their energy went mainly on building the formal structure and the board and to deal with all the bureaucracy that a space like this entails. First, we tried to understand if connecting them with a similar space in TEH would be the right way to help them in the first phase of their activity: Kai Huotari, Managing Director of Kaapelitehdas cultural centre (Finland) was available and gave some very interesting insights about how to rent out such a huge space and get the most from it.

After that, Martina and the team expressed an interest in talking with someone who could help them build a cultural programme that was able to connect with the neighbourhood, but with an eye on the business plan and on sustainability, in both the short and long term. We asked Steve Rimmer (based in Sheffield and founder of Tickets for Good, The Ticket Bank and CADS Trust) to deliver an online workshop for them focused on these themes.

DASTE would also like to enrich their cultural offer by studying the programmes of other similar centres, so that they could maybe become partners on projects in the future, and also become an active organisation inside the network. DASTE is in the process of creating a collective identity and new forms of governance to be as innovative, flexible and ready as it can be for future developments. They believe that, if they learn to work together and towards a common goal, they can be a very successful model for Bergamo and Italian independent cultural centres. This process is quite complex and challenging but very inspiring and exciting. We think that TEH could represent the perfect environment for them to help them learn, share, inspire and get inspired.

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. Ada is also the author of this report.

**CHRIS KEULEMANS** a travelling writer and moderator – the founder and artistic director of Tolhuistuin cultural centre in Amsterdam.
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