

Fate of Kultflux

Interview with Ula Tornau / by Anna Pozniak

- 1. Moving from the idea to the space.** How was the idea of making Kultflux born? Can you tell us about the different aspects involved in the realization of the project: i.e. institutional, social capital, infrastructure and financial.

Ula: I was working on my MA degree in urban history in the Netherlands with some architect-friends. There we saw lots of interesting initiatives. I participated in an exchange program and travelled to four different cities in Europe. We returned to Vilnius in 2007 and it was scheduled that in 2009 Vilnius would be European capital of culture. When we came back, there were already several competitions being held from which it was possible to get money to realize certain ideas. It was a few of us, two architects and me, who started to develop this idea to create something on the river. For a very long time, I had been aware that the river Neris is the center of the city. Also I noticed that most of the capital cities of former communist states, such as Warsaw and Kiev, stand on rivers, but that those rivers are just left to themselves. We thought that maybe it could be possible to do something in Vilnius. Many people had noticed a very beautiful space on the opposite side of the river, where Kultflux is standing now. There is a place where the Vilnele flows into the Neris, where there used to be a small café and downstairs there was boat storage. We were thinking about that boat storage. For me it was a romantic place: I used to pass it while going to music school as a teenager. We found some people who could be interested in making a café there and decided to write a project to get money. We were also encouraged by the office organising the competitions, because they were trying to get initiatives. We realized that nobody really wanted to invest in that place because it was in very bad shape. One woman from the municipality urban development department proposed to me to realise the project in the place where Kultflux is now. It was possible to build something temporary there. Through other architect-friends we got some support together. There was a financial crisis in 2008, and at the time we started building (spring and summer) it hadn't yet started. In autumn, I remember, you could feel it harshly already. We got our sponsoring in products and building

materials quite easily. Our idea was to build a space of some sort and see if the model works. For us, it was also a kind of research experiment. A laboratory to see if this was possible. I think the main problem was and is that the European capital of culture office encouraged us to apply for an infrastructural fund. Finally, somehow the people we were in touch with said that our project could only fit the part where they were financing solely cultural programs. If we had got at least some money for infrastructure and could afford one person working only on administrative things, everything would have been much easier. What happened is that we got money for a cultural program only for one year.

Kultflux for us meant “cultural flux” and a flux is a coming together of two rivers. Since from the beginning we wanted to do it on the flux of two rivers we decided on this name for our space.

2. The team of Kultflux and its structure. The organization of the working process.

Ula: Three of us were the main founders, but then more people joined. It was maybe three architects who were responsible more for the hard infrastructure. Me and my two art-historian friends, and one also who was a cultural manager, were responsible for the program. Also, we invited one guy to make the cinema program because we wanted to keep the place always engaged with urban matters: in terms of the exhibitions, lectures, and screenings that we held. We wanted to connect to the themes of the city and architecture. We did everything ourselves, from calculating the budget and writing projects, to technically equipping the place and preparing chairs, to making payments and bank transfers. Everything.

In the beginning, we were very enthusiastic about the idea of an architectural center: a small place where you have little exhibitions, a library and lectures. I see now that it's very difficult to work on a voluntary basis. I believe that it's possible to do it only for some time, maybe two years. And then I think that either other people have to take over it or you have to start working as a normal institution. I see our trajectory in this way: we started to lose energy. It was too much of a job, because the cultural sector here is very low paid, so many art-historians or even architects were doing many side-projects to earn

money. After some time, you get tired and I think that's what happened to us. Maybe we were also doing things very chaotically and if we had had a clearer vision, things could have gone in another direction. You know, the architects always want to build and realize projects and we wanted to make a program. Nobody actually wanted to take care of the place.

So our structure was that of a sort of group that was there all the time and we gathered to discuss things, but it was not really a fixed structure. We founded the organization, but the positions were all unpaid. All of us were working on voluntary basis. I was a director and did financial things. Alexandras, one architect, was assistant director, but only officially. In reality, we didn't have this structure. Usually, we just had meetings when there was something to discuss. Everything was quite organic.

We were cooperating with organizations like the Skalvija cinema, the Free University held discussions and later we also worked with the beginnings of Beepart, which was not then Beepart, and we also held some conferences. The Architectural Union was doing some workshops.

People, invited for certain tasks, were paid. But also we were exchanging with different organizations, usually non-profit, in such a way that we provided a space for them to do things and they would pay us rent in order to support us. It was not that we necessarily asked them to do this, only if they had money.

3. Contact with the municipality and other power institutions.

Ula: It was ambivalent. On the one hand, we started during "Vilnius – European cultural capital" and promotion through the municipality was a good tool for us. They wanted to say, "it's our initiative" and even travelled with our project in 2009 to some kind of urban city expo. But, on the other hand, when it came to very concrete things, like getting permissions for our events, or when we were had troubles in terms of getting people or technology, or when it came to getting money, they were not really interested. Also, you know, it depends, because we were in contact with different departments. For example, the department of development was really eager to support us. On the other hand, the department of household administration was far from these ideological things, so they saw us as an obstacle. Maybe because they

perceived us just as some strange object near the river, which left trash after events. So contact with them was more negative.

4. The development of Kultflux in a time perspective. How long did the project “last”? What was the most intense period of work for Kultflux? What were the main struggles and worries for the Kultflux team? How were such problems solved?

Ula: The first year was really active and maybe still also the second. During the second year we invited a wine bar, so it became a wine place as well. The first year was very much engaged in a DIY ideology and very spontaneous activities, both because it was the year of “Vilnius – European cultural capital” and since, because of crisis, the financing simply stopped at a certain point. Many small organizations got cuts in their budget and started cooperating, and then because we had to go through the painful process of getting permissions for music events, we were also doing things illegally. In the summer, nobody would come to a music event at 7 or 8p.m., and you can only play music until 10p.m. So we were just doing it anyway, and the same was the case with alcohol as well. We had to wait weeks and weeks, and then the commission couldn't come because one of the members was sick or on holiday. And then again and again... Once we even had to wait for a month. So, sometimes we ourselves were standing at the bar and putting out glasses. People would give us money, but we couldn't really sell things. It was like a donation system. For the second year, we decided not to go for this. We felt that we had to do this at times, but we were already tired. Because you are always sort of afraid if someone would come. During the second year, we started cooperating with the wine bar “Tappo D'Oro”. We thought that they would have a fixed system of work; and that they would look after security, trash and guard the place. And then we could focus on just doing the events. We didn't want to bother so much about all the practical issues. Some of us have families, and other kinds of jobs, and were really working a lot, so it all became somehow too much. We functioned on a permanent basis for three years. During the last year, it was only a few events. This year we wrote to the municipality asking for permission to move the structure to another place. I think it's still being discussed. Basically, in the end the group of people, who were the nucleus of

Kultflux, split. It doesn't exist anymore. Part of them wants to keep Kultflux, maybe in another place. Others just want to quit and see it as a short-term project.

Vyta: This is also very typical for self-organized grassroots initiatives who are willing to make a change. They put so much energy in and it's really hard to keep it up unless new people come in and take over. It was a long time to do it, for three years: writing projects, being at the bar for the whole night, organizing events... I think it was an amazing initiative, but this splitting up of the group is quite usual if you look at similar initiatives. People get tired and move on to new things. Either you have to become an institution, have permanent funding and people who work full-time or you have new people coming in.

Ula: We were actually searching for new people, but couldn't find them fast enough. I didn't mention that the problem was not only the administration and the impossibility to generate a positive cooperation with them, but that from the very beginning we failed to think about the maintenance of the building itself. Usually, if you squat a place there is already some infrastructure: you have toilets, running water, electricity. Here, we don't have anything. It is a place that is a bit to the side and, although central, somehow remote. First, you have to rent toilets. Another question is where to put the toilets, and how to deal with trash. The building itself became a problem as well. It was so nice to have something different; the building has a clear statement, it's green and bright. But we didn't think about its maintenance. A lot of small problems became very big problems. You had to put in extra work and think how to use project money for mending broken windows, for example, or we had to put our own money into this.

The splitting of the group was natural. People saw that it's enough, that there's no energy anymore and they did not believe that it's possible to make it work in the long term. Some people in the group thought that it is possible to reform the whole thing; this was mostly architects. It was their building: for them it was very precious. They are now trying to find ways to use the building further. There were some thoughts to make it warmer and make it possible to use during the winter. We had the idea that if we find a café, like a wine place or a coffee place, we could continue to realise projects. It was not so easy. On

the one hand, even the most tolerant coffee place or wine place wants to have a certain atmosphere. Maybe they don't want to have cinema screenings. People who come to the cinema are not necessarily buying so much wine. On the other hand, it became increasingly expensive to rent toilets and bring water. Even in terms of the projects, it was a specific place. Because of the humidity, paper starts to wrinkle: so if you have photographs or drawings you always have to keep this in mind.

5. The legal status of Kultflux. Its “pros” and “cons”.

Ula: We had to found ourselves as an NGO. Otherwise we couldn't get money and do the legal stuff. As I said, Kultflux did not really function as a normal organization in terms of wages. We got money not only from the “Vilnius – European culture capital” office, but also from other foundations. Concerning the building: we registered it as a temporary building and got permission for three years.

Vyta: This was one of the most difficult parts to keep Kultflux going. You could get money for projects and pay people to do the program or events. But we couldn't get money for the upkeep of the place or to pay wages. I think that was the hardest thing after three years. People got tired and didn't have energy anymore. The city wasn't really supporting the initiative. You know, for big non-profit organizations it's ok to survive. They will write big projects, look for big funding. But for smaller ones, it's different. You only get small money for initiatives and there is no way that you could use that money for supporting other aspects of the work or paying yourself. I think that's why many non-profits stop functioning after some time and three years was a long time for keeping the programme going and doing a lot of work.

Ula: Imagine, everybody had their own regular jobs, and then afterwards they were going to Kultflux where they also had a lot of functions. You have to be a director and financial person. You do things that you don't even know about! You learn by doing and maybe you don't even like this financial and legal stuff. Our legal status allowed us to work in a way that we all wanted. It's nice to work with people you like, your friends, without much legal obligations. Then you can get some support and also exchange with other non-profit organizations, because they have similar problems. But on the other

hand, you are loaded with work and obligations. And as a small institution you don't have so much influence on the municipality. We always had to fight for this and it consumes a lot of energy.

6. Cooperation. Was there some cooperating network of organizations around Kultflux? What were the conditions for cooperation?

Ula: Some activities were part of the Kultflux program. Some were collaboration with other small initiatives. A very important thing for us was design workshops. We were inviting artists, architects or creative professionals who already have experience in working with urban space. In the first year, this involved four or five groups of about ten students each and people from Lithuania, Netherlands and Finland. These groups had to work for 10 days and produce something. We asked them to concentrate on Kultflux and try to transform it, to propose other uses that were not there yet. We asked artists to work on something really applicable: to rather make a piece of visual art you can sit on or play with. There were also fish days – and electronic music evenings. Sometimes we had live concerts, music events on weekends. There was a flea market on Sundays during the first year. Some institutions or people wanted to do something out there. The Skalvija cinema center was making a few workshops and screenings. Also there were lectures from the Free University. Basically, this was connected to the “European cultural capital” crisis. The government took away part of the money during the crisis and this happened right in the middle of program. They automatically cut budgets for many initiatives. It was very painful. Sometimes you had contracts with people and then you couldn't pay them anymore. It was a crazy situation. At this moment, small initiatives started to collaborate with each other. Some of them didn't have money to rent spaces and we invited them to run part of our programme. I think it was a positive outcome of this situation.

7. Closing down Kultflux. Why is the space not used anymore? What could be the possible uses of the space?

Ula: Many people wanted to take over the place and even there were quite a lot of café places thinking that they could make it profitable. They were stopped by all the minuses we were talking about. For the projects, people

were coming and they still come. You see, I think it needs some huge energy to start it running. It's not enough to make some projects there. It needs to be a strong group of people who are really dedicated. People come but speak about one project, one evening, or want to rent it for a birthday.

8. Kultflux and Vilnius. Can we think in terms of mapping dispositions in the local culture industry and cultural initiatives in the city space? What do you think the Kultflux experience has changed? What did you learn?

Ula: Some initiatives appeared during “Vilnius – European capital of culture”. This was already significant, because there were already some functioning institutions and people who tried to realize their ideas through the financing of “Vilnius – European cultural capital”.

Vyta: There was this time just before the crisis when everyone thought, “now it's ok, we can really get the money, but next year it's going to be empty”. I remember people saying that the “cultural capital” project is finishing and the crisis started to hit. I remember a lot of open-air cinemas in the backyards of the old-town, concerts and different things. It was quite common, and then it just disappeared. Big initiatives remained, I didn't hear about smaller ones that much. I think big institutions keep on doing their things; for the small ones, maybe it's more local.

Ula: I still think small organizations continue to do things, maybe just at a smaller scale. In 2008, it was sort of an introduction to the “cultural capital” project. You could already get money and do things. Sometimes people got more money in 2008, because later the crisis really hit, in October or so. The Government changed and they started to cut the budget in December. Next year, the whole “cultural capital” office was frozen until March, waiting for decisions. For me, there is still a lot happening now: Beepart and what Ekaterina Lavrinets is doing. I think it all started around that time. Now there are more and more people who do things.

I don't think that the fate of Kultflux is connected to the temporality of the “cultural capital” project. Although we got not a small part of our money from the “European cultural capital” office, we also got money from other foundations. Even then somehow we were not acknowledging that we were a “European cultural capital” project only. We thought that this is a

collaboration of financiers and sponsors, but we are not really a project of “European cultural capital”. Next year, we fundraised and got money from the Nordic foundation and culture support fund in Lithuania. We already knew how to fundraise. It’s true that “Vilnius – European cultural capital” tried to help us to mediate in those permit requirements, permissions and so on.

Vyta: The primary aim of the initiative was to attract people to the river and to make the river a center of the city. It’s difficult to say what was the result.

Ula: We noticed that architects really paid a lot of attention to the building: we got some prizes for the architecture and it’s still sometimes being discussed as an interesting object in public space. Many people feel bad that it’s going to be removed or disappear. On the other hand, there were also many negative opinions. If you speak about the crowd for whom we were oriented, I have to mention the tension between us, “Vilnius – European cultural capital” and the municipality. For them, the main goal was visibility and the public-ness of all our events. Kultflux seemed to be an alternative thing, but it was financed by “cultural capital” and permitted and monitored by officials from municipality. We had to advertise it for the broader public. This produced a kind of identity crisis. I think really alternative people would say: “Ok, so what are you claiming to do? To sell this space as alternative, but in fact you are paid by the municipality and attracting everybody”. Indeed, the situation was not so clear.

Vyta: I think Kultflux catered for a quite specific group of people. It was the art-scene, architects, young professionals, musicians, etc.. It is hard to say how Kultflux influenced wider developments in the city. It was part of the culture for a while and now people go to different places.