



OPEK, public depot for the arts



From ashes to cultural hub



Participatory governance of cultural heritage



Adaptive re-use of heritage buildings



LEUVEN



101,700



Challenges

- Five cultural organisations were looking for a temporary relocation that could accommodate their infrastructural needs and low budget.
- A former industrial neighbourhood (the canal area) was at risk of a monofunctional urban redevelopment and absence of community feeling.
- There was a need for a physical space of encounter and recreation between side-by-side residential areas and their inhabitants.



Solution

Converting a listed industrial heritage building solved several challenges at once.

In Leuven, European Capital of Innovation 2020, cultural heritage has become an accelerator and resource of urban development, thanks, among others, to the OPEK independent art centre: one of the first grass-roots infrastructural initiatives in a listed building.



How ?

- While the five cultural organisations (united in TPAKT Infra, a non-profit association created to maintain and manage shared infrastructure) were looking for relocation, the city of Leuven was aiming to reactivate a former industrial district and find use for listed industrial heritage.
- Using an innovative finance and governance model, the city facilitated the reuse of a former customs office and entrepot, listed since 2003.
- After energy renovation by architects T'Jonck-Nilis, OPEK, a 6,000 m2 art centre, managed by TPAKT Infra, opened in 2010. Initiated as a temporary solution, it is now a vibrant cultural centre housing more than 10 organisations.
- Entering OPEK you can run into youth dance & theatre companies and art educational organisations, united in TPAKT Infra. These frontrunners were joined by other socio-cultural organisations in need of affordable space.
- OPEK has built its reputation as a creative and community hub for the whole city, attracting new talents and visitors. It is now a linchpin between the North and South side of the canal area, while the square in front stimulates encounters.

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Budget/Financing

€ 1.7 million

- TPAKT Infra holds the lease for the space. For non-profit organisations being the owner of a listed building of this scale is a huge responsibility and financial risk.
- TPAKT couldn't get a loan with a private bank, so secured a €1,060,000 interest-free loan from the city, an innovative financial model. The renovation budget was €1,725,000. A yearly subsidy by the cultural department more or less covers the repayment.



Management

- The local government facilitated the process.
- In 2009, TPAKT Infra signed a lease with the city, later turned into a ground lease for 36 years. A ground lease is one way of reinforcing the role of civil society in heritage governance.
- The ownership and responsibility of conversion and conservation lies with TPAKT Infra.
- To manage their daily practices in the building, every partner organisation contributes an annual fee to TPAKT Infra.
- OPEK is a completely independent project that runs without any staff support from the city administration.



Transferability

- Accept that grass-root plans take time. The result can be a community-based programme with huge urban, social and economic impacts.
- Let local community participate from the beginning. Avoid being an alien that lands in residents' backyard out of the blue.
- Cohousing with other cultural organisations forces you to sharpen the identity of your organisation and brings many benefits, including financially.
- Heritage buildings can seem a source of many constraints, but they enrich your project and relationship with the community.



Links

www.opek.be

<https://bit.ly/2YhsPga>



Impact

- OPEK has become a pioneer in the area, a creative hub attracting new players to work together, share infrastructure and reactivate heritage, enlivening community and public space.
- The municipality found its role as a facilitator, leaving grass-roots initiatives to lead projects, in the spirit of the commons. Cultural heritage is now more integrated into local policies as an accelerator for urban regeneration and community building.
- Leuven has now introduced the Vaartopia project, an urban renewal project for more affordable space for creatives in the area.



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