

World Design Capital 2012

HELSINKI,
FINLAND

Helsinki is the largest city, capital, and undisputed economic centre of Finland. The metropolitan area consists of 14 municipalities and accommodates 1.4 million people, almost one-fourth of the country's population. With the region representing one-third of the Finnish economy, the population increased by 17,200 people in 2012. Known as the knowledge and innovation champion of Finland, the city has a 40 percent share of investments in R&D.

Project overview

The city of Helsinki used an event – World Design Capital 2012 (WDC) – to promote the use of design in all aspects of urban development. Design implies the participation and involvement of not only designers but also end-users in the development of products and services that make cities better places to live, and thus add to sustainable competitiveness. WDC 2012 aimed to raise awareness of the role of design in urban development amongst all relevant stakeholders, aligning with the city's 'prosperous metropolis strategy' (2009), in which Helsinki expresses its ambition to develop user-driven innovation environments, create attractive urban areas (that meet the demands of citizens) and provide user-friendly services. The project is an inspiring example of how to use an event for a new type of legacy; a long-lasting transformation in urban management. This has been particularly significant in the context of the Finnish welfare state, where the government has traditionally played a dominant role in urban development, leaving few incentives for private initiatives and involvement. The Helsinki Region Infoshare: an open data initiative, is also clearly related to the openness and user-driven development ambitions of the city.

functioning of the public sector in general, both the city and ICSID were exposed to a host of opportunities. WDC 2012 resulted in 551 projects, half of which relate to initiatives that remain in place after the event; with 80 percent resulting from the open tender. Analysis suggests that 52 percent of the projects would not have been implemented without the umbrella programme, demonstrating the impact of the event. Another key impact of the WDC 2012 has been the development of new forms of cooperation within, and between, different sectors that will most likely continue to exist. However, an official evaluation also shows that many goals have not been met yet, indicating there is still a long way ahead in creating what some call a 'design democracy', notably in the delivery of public services.

Enablers

The strategy described above builds on important local assets such as Finland's reputation as a country of designers, strong organising capacity with relatively well-developed relations between government, businesses and knowledge institutions (multi-level governance and triple helix cooperation), and a policy environment that is increasingly susceptible to bottom-up, user-centered initiatives, despite a tradition of government control and top-down planning. Furthermore, the programme responded to a shared sense of urgency regarding the city's competitive position and attractiveness for international knowledge workers. The project builds on previous strategies such as the Innovation Strategy (2005), experiences with earlier events such as the European Capital of Culture (2002) and successful experiments with user-involvement and living labs, for example in the district of Arabianranta. These contextual conditions have facilitated the development of an inspirational vision and effective mobilisation of relevant actors. The concept of an open, design-driven city has been successfully translated in an open bid book which has provoked the initiatives of 'new kids on the block', with fresh ideas on how to apply design in everyday life. It has not been one person alone who has taken the lead in this process, but several individuals from different sectors who have played a crucial role in moving the initiative forward.

Results and impact

In a relatively short period of time, the city of Helsinki managed to prepare a winning bid for hosting WDC 2012. Interviews with 150 experts gave input to a strategic framework that evolved in a collaborative way. Moreover, the bid was presented as an 'open book' allowing citizens to suggest activities and events through an open tender. With the concept 'Open city, embedding design in life', Helsinki succeeded in convincing the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design (ICSID) that it was in their interest to choose Helsinki as a host city. By promoting design as a way to improve public services and the

