



Restaurant Day. Restaurant Kuchnya Pojska. Photo: Veikko Kähkönen

## IS HELSINKI THE NEW BERLIN?

TEELE PEHK, *urban enthusiast from Tallinn*

What is happening in Helsinki is nothing special in the context of citizen uprising, or - if you prefer – the end of individualism that increasingly characterizes the Western world. What is special is that these actions, aiming to improve the atmosphere and physical space of Helsinki as a living place, are documented in the form of a book called “Helsinki Beyond Dreams”. As editor and author Hella Hernberg (architect, designer and urban practitioner) notes, the book itself is “something of a collective grassroots activity”, being compiled and edited by various urban activists, artists and thinkers.

According to Yle News<sup>1</sup> Helsinki activists have brought the rights of the everyman out into the streets. The capital of Finland is facing massive transformations – Jätkäsaari, Kalasatama, Pasila and the oil harbour are being introduced as new residential, business and cultural areas in central Helsinki.

Does this vast transforming space in close proximity to the city centre give more ground to urban experiments and provide a playground for cultural manifests? It definitely seems so! The book describes actions of different scale and impact, including the Punajuuri Block Party, We Love Helsinki’s communal interventions (such as a water gun fight on a beach), massive tango dances in Vallila parks, and the open-air Solar Kitchen Restaurant. The book

1. [www.yle.fi/uutiset/helsinki\\_on\\_uusi\\_berliini/6212783](http://www.yle.fi/uutiset/helsinki_on_uusi_berliini/6212783)

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also contains stories of foreigners living and owning a small business in Helsinki, traces of suburban activism in Mellunkylä, small entrepreneurship conquering gentrified neighbourhoods like Kallio, Finnish-initiated international movements like the Restaurant Day, excursions to usually closed places by the Open House movement as well as future visions of the Helsinki-Tallinn twin city and Helsinki as the capital of the Nordic welfare society to foster non-economic values.

With regard to temporary uses of large-scale development areas and as a valuable example for Tallinn's transforming seaside, a **remarkable city government initiative** is the temporary cultural field of **Kalasadama**, which has a central role in the book. The former cargo port of 175 hectares is slowly being turned into homes for 25 000 people and work places for 8000 people. Since the construction may take up to 30 years, the city of Helsinki has hired coordinators to turn Kalasadama into a bureaucracy-free zone for public art, cultural activities and different open-air initiatives. Since 2010, when Kalasadama was opened to the public, the place has witnessed the creation of open-for-all graffiti fence, urban gardening, open-air pizza baking, a pop-up sauna, and life around the container-cafe Ihana. And all this in the middle of a construction site! These initiatives have been accompanied by night-time bicycle rides, bicycle brunches, open-air ride-in movie nights, Kalasadama festivals and other non-commercial events. All this is made accessible through a cycling route through Kalasadama construction site and along the shoreline. Adding to the charm of simplicity, this route is merely green lines painted on the existing concrete. We should do the same at Tallinn seaside!

Helsinki city government funds Kalasadama Temporary by collecting 10 euro per square metre from every developer in Kalasadama area. This 1%-for-public-art rule has earlier been used for example in one of Helsinki's new districts - Arabianranta.

Call it temporary uses, creative citizen deeds or agitative activism, but the message behind these actions are the same: reclaiming the right to the city,



◀ *Punajuuri Blockparty.*  
Photo: Carl Lindberg

◀ *We Love Helsinki Bicycle Day.*  
Photo: Johannes Romppanen

▼ *Vallilan Tango.*  
Photo: Heli Sorjonen





Kalasatama opening. Photo: Hella Hernberg

shaping one's living environment, and bringing more sense to planning space and life. **The book "Helsinki Beyond Dreams" is full of examples of invigorating public space through "what if"-thinking and doing things together.** This way the foundations for "a society based on active citizenship, the common good and caring of other people"<sup>2</sup> are being created. Does it sound too idealistic? Even if so, these people behind the stories and actions **dare to dream.** And dare to act on streets, in parks, in their courtyards, on seaside... By doing so they manifest their dreams in the public space of Helsinki and breed systemic, long-term changes.

As Hernberg states, it's the "new we-spirit and enthusiasm of its people"<sup>3</sup> that has turned Helsinki a surprising and inspiring place to live. Helsinki definitely has some secret charm - or is it the culture of trust that Hernberg refers to? - since the city has attracted many expats to work there, among other institutions, in Sitra, at Aalto University, in the city government and beyond. No wonder that in 2011 Monocle chose Helsinki as the world's most liveable city.

Apart from that, the book serves as a good city guide! While you might not witness lively Kalasatama or take part in the Punajuuri Block Party, you can sense the spirit of citizen-made Helsinki.

2. Santala, Timo  
*The City Belongs to Us*, in, Hernberg, H. (ed.) "Helsinki Beyond Dreams", Helsinki: Urban Dream Management, 2012, page 26.

3. Hernberg, Hella  
foreword in, "Helsinki Beyond Dreams", Helsinki: Urban Dream Management, 2012, page 17.



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