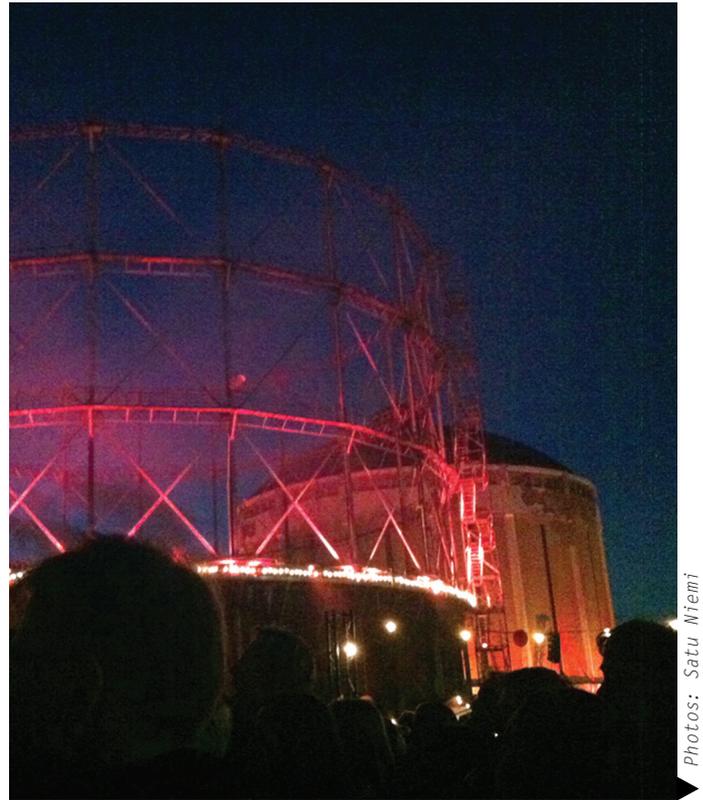
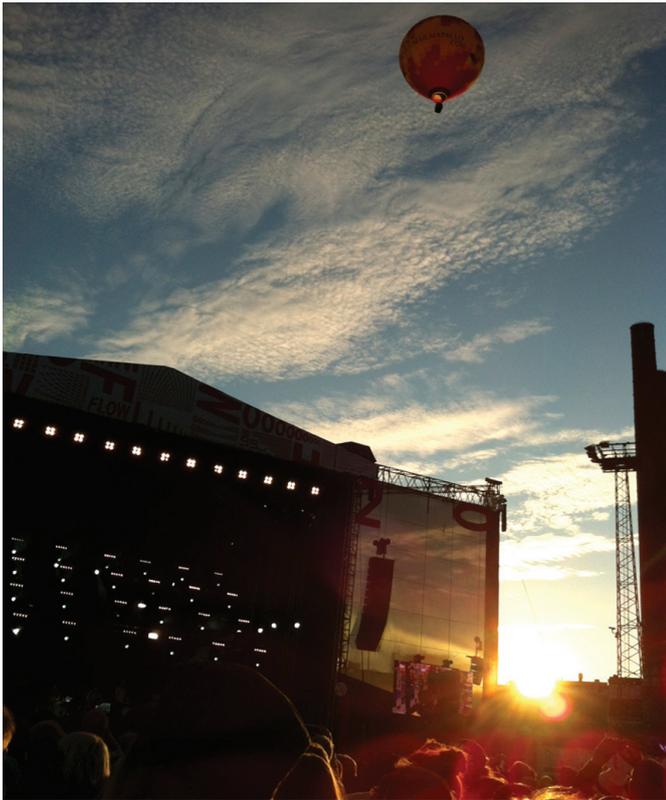


## OBSERVATION



Photos: Satu Niemi

# THE FESTIVAL CITY

## Berlin Festival and Helsinki's Flow Festival

NELE MOOR, *urban studies student in EKA*

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### INTRO

From small street festivals to gigantic music festivals, the city is a platform for all types of events. Backyards, parks, industrial complexes and airports are reused and we can sense that festival culture has become a lifestyle for many, especially amongst a younger generation. We, an architect Satu from Helsinki and an urbanist Nele from Tallinn, will discuss the importance and influence of this culture using the examples of Flow Festival Helsinki and Berlin Festival. We will observe their ability to relate to the surrounding urban context. Both cities are known for their vital cultural life and often used as examples, but what can we learn from them?

### THE CHAT

**Nele Moor** (later **NM**): The percentage of single households in our society is rising and contributing to the **individualistic world-view**. In that light we can boldly suggest that the emergence of festival culture could be a result or a cure for this problem in bigger cities where people are hungry for warmer communication and something that goes beyond mundane everyday life. Music unites and offers experience not only for one but also a **feeling of collective enjoyment**.

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**Satu Niemi (later SN):** This feeling of collective enjoyment seems to be one of the most notable factors about urban music festivals. Flow Festival attendees have described the event as a “**city within a city**” and “**a village that doesn’t exist**”. The festival creates a fleeting sense of a village gathering, where people are connected through similar interests: taste in music, style and fashion, and above all of course the choice of festival itself.

NM: To a degree it is even comparable to the religious tradition of Sunday morning church service. Besides satisfying emotional needs and gathering to listen to “the holy word” the experience is also about checking out other people and establishing new contacts - it’s a **social game**. You hear people not talking about only whether the music is better in one or another event, but also about the general atmosphere of the festival - a type of **synergy**, mostly defined by people, location and music. This is not directly and immediately perceptible but can determine the success of the event.

**SN:** This is very true, if the festival manages to create a sense of communality in the festival-goers. Rather than a series of big gigs or a big party, the festival becomes a temporary community where people relate to each other. This feeling of coming together can spread to the city on a wider scale as well. A well-received and a popular festival can create a **feeling of pride** amongst the residents of the surrounding areas and connect neighbourhoods.

**NM:** On one hand, there is a tendency that **festivals move out of the city** to more natural surroundings like forests and fields with the purpose of narrowing the amount of participants and also creating more specific and intimate atmosphere. On the other hand, the number of festivals in cities is growing and the content is becoming increasingly diverse. Therefore festivals have to become **platforms for contemporary urban activities**. Berlin Festival, for example, aspires to offer venues for **urban subcultures**. To mention a few more examples, there was an Art Village introducing street art, and a brand market introducing Berlin based smaller entrepreneurs.

While these festivals can be venues for contemporary urban movements there is also a tendency towards becoming **commercial and profit oriented**. Festivals can be used for city branding and lose their initial credibility for the subcultures. This could be prevented by allowing **participatory** projects and a space for the festival visitor to take action and influence the course of the event.

How should we look at integrating design and art into Flow Festival?

**SN:** Flow festival offers film screenings and art installations, and it is branded as a “creative” festival. This connects to the current venue of Flow: **Suvilahti**, a former gas plant next to one of Helsinki’s hippest neighbourhoods. The area has been developed by the city to become a **versatile event venue**, housing creative production companies, galleries, a circus and different kinds of non-profit organizations, just to name a few. Even though the development of the once derelict industrial area to an important cultural hub had started a few years before Flow Festival first organized their event on the site, the festival has played an important role in improving the profile of the area. The festival is also a breeding ground for **new collaborations**, for example in 2012 Flow Festival collaborated with the European Architecture Student Assembly held in Helsinki in Suvilahti just a few weeks prior to the festival. A design competition was organised which resulted in a new kind of stage typology that was then built for the festival.

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**NM:** So what to think of the much-discussed notion of **festivalization**?

Contemporary cities are competing, and big events can be used as one tool to attract cash flow and investments. This is often done without considering the context. It is commendable to **see Berlin and Flow Festival using the urban fabric wisely**. They have managed to celebrate the re-ignition of former industrial and infrastructural landscapes. In addition to that (and also in connection), **Tempelhof**, the location of Berlin Festival, as a former airport is actively used now as the biggest open-air park in Europe. The historical layers of the sites are incorporated into the festival. When you enter the festival in Berlin you have to pass through a quite a formal looking check-in with pilots and stewardesses. The decoration and design of the event makes constant references to the subject of airports and flying.

The organizers don't see themselves only in the role of introducing Tempelhof; rather, they aim to compete with festivals worldwide and introduce the whole city. The scale and dimension of the festival shows that it is a **grandiose spectacle** aimed more towards the outside visitor instead of trying to entice the experienced local clubber.

There are many actors behind creating a profile of a festival, but most important are the organizers and the experience. Festivals tend to embrace more local context when they are growing organically step by step in collaboration with the music scene and people. That has been the case with Flow Festival - initial character of the event remains, even though the prices on the site grow significantly every year. In Berlin there is so much going on simultaneously all over city that a big scale festival feels more like a **packaged version of the cities endless possibilities**. A central question today for Berlin's subcultures is what next. The physical space is becoming neater, sterile and gentrified and the underground scene has to either transform or disappear. Former club areas become quiet residential districts or touristic shopping havens and the international hipster takes over the night life.

## OUTRO

**Looking for possible futures, urban festivals could grow bigger and bigger and become increasingly commercial. If we consider the fact that most big scale European music festivals have the same line-ups every year, it would be interesting to see them develop in an opposing and more local direction.**

**A good example is Tallinn Music Week, which uses many locations. In general it could be about understanding possibilities beyond big intentional performers, becoming a venue for local movements and newcomers, and involving non-professionals and the visitor.**