

Ukraine Crisis

Connecting the lines of humanitarian support in times of war

CREATIVESUNITE

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Lighthouse sessions are a series of talks dedicated to creative hubs who offered support to the refugee crisis across Europe.

Key Takeaways

Destroyed buildings, displaced people and abandoned lives. Last February Ukrainian people were forced to see the face of war. Among them thousands of artists found themselves scattered around Europe without a job. Creative hubs in different cities started gathering together to find solutions.

The European Creative Hubs Network organised a series of sessions dedicated to the welcoming of Ukrainian refugees in creative hubs and cultural structures. Artcor in Moldova and Boom!Studios in Ireland are among others, two creative hubs in Europe that decided to open their space to support the Ukrainian artists in need. The sessions were hosted by Rita Oliviera, Community Manager of European Creative Hubs Network and during the first session we got introduced to Viorica Cerbusca from Artcor and Gabriela Spulirova from Boom!Studios who shared an insight of their experience.

Artcor first started in 2019, only half a year before the Covid-19 outbreak. Viorica and her team had to develop a business model according to the new digitised era that arised.

“Covid-19 forced us from the beginning to think differently, make things differently and started to implement programs, not only as a space. One month after the Covid-19 outbreak we launched an online program that connects small entrepreneurs and small businesses. In Moldova everything was closed, we couldn’t go to physical stores. So we connected these small entrepreneurs and businesses with companies from the creative sector and found resources for them.”

When everything started going back to normal and the creative hubs could organise events again and have people around, war arrived in Europe. One crisis followed by another, made Viorica and Gabriela focus on a new project aiming to provide support to artists and creatives escaping from war. As a neighbouring country with a large Russian-speaking population, Moldova was

prepared to accommodate a lot of Ukrainian people.

Viorica offered the space in Artcor for free, mentioning that the great majority of the Ukrainian population that Moldova welcomed, are children. Masterclasses were specifically designed for children including painting, performances, storytelling and character design. Artcor provided a coworking space for their mothers so they could work and talk with their families back in Ukraine.

Viorica also organised an online school, arranged in the same way Ukrainian schools operate so the displaced children could continue with their education and keep on track with their country's educational system when they get back home.

"From the first days of the war we already had 50 children in Artcor, even though our space is not very big. Since Moldova couldn't accommodate all of the children, we found partners to start an online school and had more than 500 applications. We were in contact with Ukrainian teachers back in Ukraine and organised an online school for one month. For that period of time it seemed as an escape for both the children and the teachers. People abroad say that Moldova is a small country with a big heart."

Since everything started operating online, Artcor noticed the need for Moldavians to get more familiar with digital technologies. Soon after they organised trainings like express design, copywriting and filmmaking courses. After the courses people gained skills that could help them later in their careers.

Only when you become a refugee many things are taken away from you, which is incredibly difficult to deal with. It's a very big challenge.

- Gabriela Spulirova

Boom!Studios in Ireland started in 2014. Gabriela and her team managed the Ukrainian crisis with an immediate response from the local community that met the basic needs of the asylum seekers including a place to stay, healthcare and food.

"The whole town got together and figured out how to efficiently respond to this situation. We are still in the middle of researching our options and fundings, so we could provide in the future more space and welcome more people if needed."

Keeping in mind the need to provide any kind of support for the creative sector, Boom!Studios prepared art packs with different objects that anyone could grab, hosted online classes and offered workshop spaces for free. Gabriela brought up another unspoken issue for those who provide support, mental health.

“Something that people don’t talk about but is really important is that you put yourself in a position of power. You are delivering something to someone. You have the resources and you are giving them to someone else and that can create a lot of issues emotionally but also on a level of trust. Those people were perfectly capable, doing their jobs, having their lives and a status in the society. Only when you become a refugee many things are taken away from you, which is incredibly difficult to deal with. It’s a very big challenge.”

The second session was gathered around the past refugee crisis back in 2016, when Greece was called to deal with the welcoming of thousands of people. Maria Calafatis from The Cube in Athens and Mimi Hapig from Habibi.Works in Ioannina were two hub directors who took action in the early stages of a refugee crisis that years later would arise again.

The Cube is a coworking incubator hub space that focuses on the entrepreneurial community. Calafatis and her team volunteered in Startupboat, a mobile incubator that brings together locals, refugees, investors and experts in different fields who seek to perceive migration as an opportunity and not just as a problem. When the boat arrived at Mytilini, an island of Greece that has welcomed thousands of refugees over the past years, she realised immediately the lack of basic needs. The team helped the arriving refugees transport to the camp and get provided with the basic necessities. To help the kids of the camp, they set up a school named SOLAR (Self Organized Learning Environment).

“When you are dealing with young kids and teenagers, there's a very big age gap and language barriers. What we did is separate the kids into different age groups with one laptop per table among those with the same language background but different ages. So we asked questions and taught them how to research on Google, allowing them to look up things on the net on an educational side.”

The Cube’s next step was a mobile coding school called Rumi Labs. The team travelled around Greece in a bus for 6 months and trained more than 1.600 refugee and local teenagers on coding and programming.

Now the camps have started to resemble more and more prison

institutions.

- Mimi Hapig

Mimi Hapig travelled through Europe and witnessed herself the humiliating conditions and uncertainty refugees had to go through. That was the breaking point for her when she decided to move from Germany to Greece and create a structure that would allow other people to implement solutions themselves. Habibi.Works started in 2016 in the North of Greece as an intercultural space for education empowerment and social encounters for locals, international students and people living in camps or accommodations for asylum seekers and refugees. Her team set up a kitchen in the camps to offer free food for those in need, but soon after the kitchen was shut down by the greek military due to not complying with the hygiene standards.

“The military was accusing us of not complying with hygiene standards, while they provided 16 chemical toilets for 1.200 people. Don’t talk to us about hygiene standards, it's hypocrisy.”

Today Habibi.Works aims to provide access to means that allow people to improve their living conditions and access to education not only for those who live in refugee camps but also for the locals.

“In August 2016 UNHCR arrived and everybody thought that refugee people would move to houses, since there are many empty houses in Greece. The only thing UNHCR did was replace really bad tents with slightly better ones. Then in 2016 and 2017 we saw the arrival of containers. The living conditions have improved but both tents and containers are not a normal way of living. Empty buildings are available for refugees to be integrated into the local landscape instead of living in camps. At the end of 2021 the greek government went one step further with the approval and money of the EU and started building concrete walls around the camps. Now the camps have started to resemble more and more prison institutions.”

The third Lighthouse session took part in the Bautopia conference, the first conference of the European Creative Hubs Network. Mykhailo Glubokyi from IZONE and Gregory Zarkhin from LEM Station, two hub directors from Ukraine explained the situation in their country and how they managed to find ways to contribute to the local community.

IZONE was established in 2010 at the former insulation materials factory in Donetsk where it operated for four years and became the most influential cultural centre in the Donbas region. In 2014 the hub had to move to Kiev, due to paramilitary inversion in the original building and start over. The team decided to focus on decentralisation. Glubokyi described the numerous programmes and activities that IZONE organised for the creative community and how they tried to help the smaller communities, outside the capital.

Gregory Zarkhin, project manager at LEM Station, gave an impressive example of how a neglected and abandoned building can become a centre of culture and life just within weeks when people take initiatives and follow their vision. LEM Station, a creative hub in Lviv is housed in a 19th century building going through multiple stages of revitalization. Sustainability became their number one priority focusing on three main motives: rethink, repurpose, reuse. The total territory of the hub is almost 7.000 square meters, a quite massive area, planned to accommodate multiple stages for different purposes.

Zarkhin presented videos from parties and events that took place in LEM, looking back at times of peace. Even during war, cultural events never stopped happening. LEM was addressed by the ukrainian cultural front to make a couple of events in a gigantic bomb shelter in Kiev with multiple concerts and all the money being contributed to the ukrainian army, while more than 100 volunteers worked on administration, storing and distribution of humanitarian goods. LEM is a living proof that culture continues to arise even in the darkest times.