



KAUNAS' SOLUTION STORY: INVOLVING STAKEHOLDERS IN THE CREATION OF A NEW CREATIVE DISTRICT

June 2019

Subject	The story of how Kaunas overcame the challenge of involving stakeholders whilst creating a new cultural district
Network	Creative Spirits, Implementation Network
Author	Hen Gerritse, Lead Expert



For over two years Kaunas has been working to improve its implementation capacities. This activity found its nexus in the repositioning of a dilapidated industrial district as a new cultural and creative area. In the process, the city overcame two key implementation challenges. First, how do you move from strategy to action plan? Second, how do you involve stakeholders in the process of implementation? As a result, Kaunas has a district which is in the early stages of undergoing a renaissance. This is the story of how it happened.

Let's start with the context. Today, Kaunas is Lithuania's second city, with a population of nearly 400,000, but it was the historical centre of Lithuania's economic, academic, and cultural life. It has impressive cultural infrastructure — for example, it hosts more museums, 30, than any other Lithuanian city — but this is very much underutilised. It also has a higher density of heritage structures than anywhere else in Lithuania, a fact that has been recognised by receiving the European Heritage Label and by being included in the UNESCO Design City Network. However, many of these buildings are neglected and in poor shape. Regarding the cultural and creative industries, although the technology driven sectors are thriving, other areas are struggling and lack variety and innovation.

As most of the creative activities are focused in the city centre, the Municipality wants to spread creativity to the outer districts of the city, for example to the Aleksotas district, the target area of Kaunas in the Creative Spirits project. In the Aleksotas area, the current centres of creativity are the Music Academy, the old meat factory's exhibition space, and the Botanical Gardens. The empty buildings of the Botanical Garden, as well as the aviation factory have the possibility of being creative places by inviting creative-cultural enterprises to settle there.

The Creative Spirits Baseline Study identified four priorities for the cultural and creative industries in Kaunas:

1. Ensure favourable conditions for business and encourage cultural and creative entrepreneurship

2. Strengthen cooperation between the municipality and the relevant stakeholders
3. Increase the quantity and quality of services, including business incubation
4. Increase the effective use of pre-existing cultural infrastructure

Regarding the target area, the Aleksotas district, the Baseline Study identified three challenges:

1. No venue for community events
2. Emigration
3. Abandoned buildings

It was in this context that the municipality developed an implementation/action plan as part of its work in Creative Spirits. This consisted of four actions:

1. Mapping the target area (Aleksotas district)
2. Identifying a location for a creative hub
3. Developing a programme of capacity-building events for the cultural and creative industries
4. Hosting a series of events to raise the profile of culture in the district

With the implementation/action plan in place, Kaunas could proceed with implementation. But this required overcoming the five implementation challenges that Kaunas and the other Creative Spirits cities have been working on:

1. Ensuring the integrated approach
2. Involving stakeholders
3. Measuring performance
4. Moving from strategy to action plan (already addressed, as explained above)
5. Financial innovation

For Kaunas, the most important was the second, involving stakeholders. The involvement of stakeholders is a crucial aspect of the participatory approach to urban development. In URBACT, this is ensured through the use of URBACT Local Groups. Composed of representatives from the social, economic, and environmental sectors (e.g., city staff, NGOs, SMEs, universities, citizens, etc), these groups have the objective of finding solutions to their city's needs. By bringing together partners to collaborate on a specific issue, and by exchanging their experiences at the transnational level, URBACT Local Groups guarantee a more rigorous and innovative result.

So, how did Kaunas respond? How did it overcome the challenge of involving stakeholders? It made it a priority by including it in its implementation/action, namely, the series of events aimed at raising the profile of culture in the district. The most important of these was the Aleksotas Autumn Festival. As part of Creative Spirits, this pre-existing festival was reinvented with an idea contest at its core, where citizens could submit proposals for festival activities.

This festival changed the approach of local people, particularly young artists in the area. Previously, they lacked confidence, believing their ideas were not of interest to others and that things could not change. This improved relationship with, and between, stakeholders is probably the most important legacy of Creative Spirits.

