


Helsinki

X

The background features a light blue area with a wavy top edge, and a large yellow area below it. A black 'X' is positioned in the upper right quadrant of the image. A thin vertical line runs down the right side, and a thin horizontal line runs across the middle, intersecting at the 'X'.



Sharing Spaces for Social Learning

By Côme Bastin and Fleur Weinberg

What if we could use existing resources instead of constructing new buildings? This is the philosophy that led to the creation of the first “School as a Service”, in the city of Espoo in the Helsinki region. By sharing

space with Aalto University, this award-winning school solution doesn’t only reduce educational costs, but also offers a new pedagogical approach which allows learning to take place everywhere.



A:space is an open, collaborative and creative home for Aalto students, the community-at-large, businesses and partners. © Anne Kinnunen

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Top: T-Talo – the Department of Computer Science of Otaniemi's campus. © Anne Kinnunen
Bottom: Startup Sauna hosts the largest start-up community in Europe. © Marc Goodwin.

“To go from one lesson to another, pupils at Haukilahti High School walk freely around the Aalto campus. They can meet students of the university and follow some of their courses.”

Walking into Haukilahti High School, you could easily believe that you have entered the wrong place. There are some adolescents in the main hall, sitting on Fatboy pouffes or at the table of a Korean restaurant. But there’s no reception desk, no loud playground, no timetable, no uniform or anything that would remind you of a traditional school. “*Are you waiting for me?*” asks Professor Jarmo Suominen when he arrives. Obviously, we are in the right place. A teacher of architecture and design, Jarmo Suominen is one of the main initiators of this school, which is unlike any other. He calls it “school as a service”, versus “school as a product”. What does it mean?

In the same way that city dwellers tend to use mobility rather than own a car, the school building is not owned by the city of Espoo but rented. It is situated in the heart of Aalto University’s Otaniemi campus, one of the largest in Finland. Our meeting with Jarmo Suominen took place in the main building of Haukilahti High School, but all the teaching is spread around the campus’s facilities: physics in the university’s chemistry department, sports on the football pitches, drawing in the visual arts building... Even the school’s career services aren’t in the main building, but are located elsewhere on campus. For lunch and coffee, students go to places like the Korean restaurant. Run by a Finnish lady who used to live in Seoul, it offers meals like Korean bibimbap – much healthier and tastier than what you would find in a classical school canteen.

Social learning

School as a Service aims to create a new kind of education, in which learning takes place everywhere, at all times and in interaction with others: social learning. “*Today students need to develop creativity, critical thinking, communication and collaboration,*” says Jarmo Suominen. “*Those skills can be taught inside a society, not outside.*” To go from one lesson to another, pupils at Haukilahti High School walk freely around the Aalto campus. They can meet students of the university and follow some of their courses, like Chinese or communication, preparing themselves for future studies. There are also multiple spaces where they are free to do what they want: networking, teamwork, giant chess games, open source electronics, or music bands. Since adopting this new educational model two years ago, Haukilahti has become one of the leading high schools in Finland. The number of applicants increased by 176.6% between 2016 and 2017, clearly showing that adults and children were interested in the concept. “*A survey shows that students are also much happier than in an average school,*” adds Jarmo Suominen. How can this success be explained? And what is the logic behind such a distributed school?

To get an idea, we met Group X (a focus group concentrating on cross-disciplinary design at Aalto University’s Department of Architecture), which started the project. “*Here in Finland, we are quite good at pedagogy,*” says Antti Ahlava, director of Group X.

“But the school buildings and the underlying principles are still from the 19th century, like everywhere in Europe.” Together with Jarmo Suominen and the members of Group X, Antti Ahlava tried to figure out how to adapt architecture to new ways of learning, and what would be the school of the future. *“Instead of being concentrated in a single place, we concluded that a school should be a kind of network in multiple locations. That way, schoolchildren and teachers can meet other people and collaborate with them.”* In summer 2015, they organised a workshop called “Lab for Learners”, in collaboration with London’s Royal College of Art. At the time, a nearby high school in Espoo, called Tapiola, was being renovated. With the support of the city of Espoo and Aalto University, Group X started to imagine how it could transform its theoretical ideas about service design into a real experiment with a school. Tapiola users participated in the workshop and the concept of School as a Service was born. It was first tested with Haukilahti high school, another school in Espoo.

Platform economy

The goal of the approach is to provide better education at a lower cost. It is inspired in this respect by the “platform economy” (Uber, Airbnb), aiming to optimise the use of existing resources rather than create new ones. *“Any city in the world has facilities and spaces that have a low occupancy rate and could be suitable for a school,”* explains Antti Ahlava from Group X. In the case of Espoo, *“the process started by bringing together all the potential participants in the project—residents, workers, construction companies, government officials, investors. Instead of doing traditional top-down urban planning, we mapped their resources in order to create a vision together.”* By sharing and renting spaces in collaboration with Aalto University, rather than building a whole new school, School as a Service has proved the efficiency of its approach. Even the furniture of a typical classroom is 80% recycled or taken from underused facilities. As a result, the new Haukilahti High School is less than half the size of its previous premises. *“The total investment per student by Espoo has been divided by three,”* Jarmo Suominen points out. *“The municipality saves about 10 million euros per year!”* This number relates to the operating costs and does not include the research costs of the project. But it is still very promising.

In 2016 and 2017 the School as a Service concept won five Finnish and international awards, for quality of education, innovation and municipal governance. Two other schools in Espoo are now also adopting the approach, both of them using the resources of Otaniemi’s campus. In addition, Professor Suominen is working with the Design Department of Shanghai’s Tongji University, in China, who also want to apply his method. Furthermore, *“the service architecture philosophy could be applied to health, public administration, event management”*, Jarmo Suominen believes. As an example, the small city of Kotka is now working with Group X on a “Space as a Service” approach. *“They did not have the money to build a concert and conference venue,”* Jarmo Suominen explains. *“So we helped them cooperate with local universities so that they can use the campus as an event facility instead of building one”.* Finally, the whole City of Espoo has decided to become the first ever “City as a Service” in the coming years.

Top-down and bottom-up combination

School as a Service may look like a success story now, but it wasn’t clear at the outset that the experiment would achieve its objectives. *“I would love to say that we knew where we were going, but the truth is that the whole innovation process was very messy,”* Jarmo Suominen acknowledges. The nature of service architecture means that it has to involve both top-down and bottom-up innovation. Top-down, because to share spaces, resources and knowledge you need the support and funding from those who own or control it. *“At first, Espoo’s real estate department felt that their task was to build a school and that our platform approach couldn’t work,”* Jarmo Suominen recounts. *“But the mayor gave us critical support and decided to try our solution for two years.”* Bottom-up, because a new spatial and social model like this requires the participation and engagement of all users.

“During the first few meetings, some parents were suspicious of this new pedagogy,” Antti Ahlava remembers. *“Today the number of applications shows that they appreciate that their kids get inspired by the university environment.”* Consideration had to be given to less sociable students, who sometimes felt even lonelier than in a traditional school. Applications like WhatsApp were therefore used to develop communication between pupils, for example if any of them got lost. As part of the Human Cities programme, several workshops with students were organised by Natalia Vladykina, PhD student in architecture and a member of Group X. The objective was to further enhance the concept of School as a Service for students, for example by figuring out how they could make spaces their own and what games and activities they could take part in after school hours. However, some of the teachers were not convinced. *“At this high school, we needed experts in pedagogy rather than teachers in specific fields,”* explains Jarmo Suominen. *“Even so, we told them not to worry too much and to keep going the way they had done before.”* Three years later, we meet one of them in the main building. *“It has been a lot of work,”* she admits, *“but I don’t miss the old system.”*



Startup Sauna is a business accelerator open to everyone, including the students from Haukilahti High School. © Juho Heikkinen

Aalto University and the greater Helsinki area

Aalto University was established in 2010 as a fusion of three major Finnish universities: the Helsinki University of Technology, the Helsinki School of Economics and the Helsinki University of Art and Design. Today it is one of the largest universities in Finland. It is named after the famous Finnish architect Alvar Aalto, who designed

some of its iconic buildings. The main campus of Aalto University is located in the city of Espoo, which is part of Helsinki's capital region (1,050,819 inhabitants). Modern and functional, the campus includes the first "Design Factory", a coworking space for students that has been duplicated around the world, and a startup

incubator (Startup Sauna), developed by the Aaltoes student community. It's located in the same area where Haukilahti High School used to be. Today, the high school uses the resources and facilities of Aalto University's campus as the first "School as a Service".

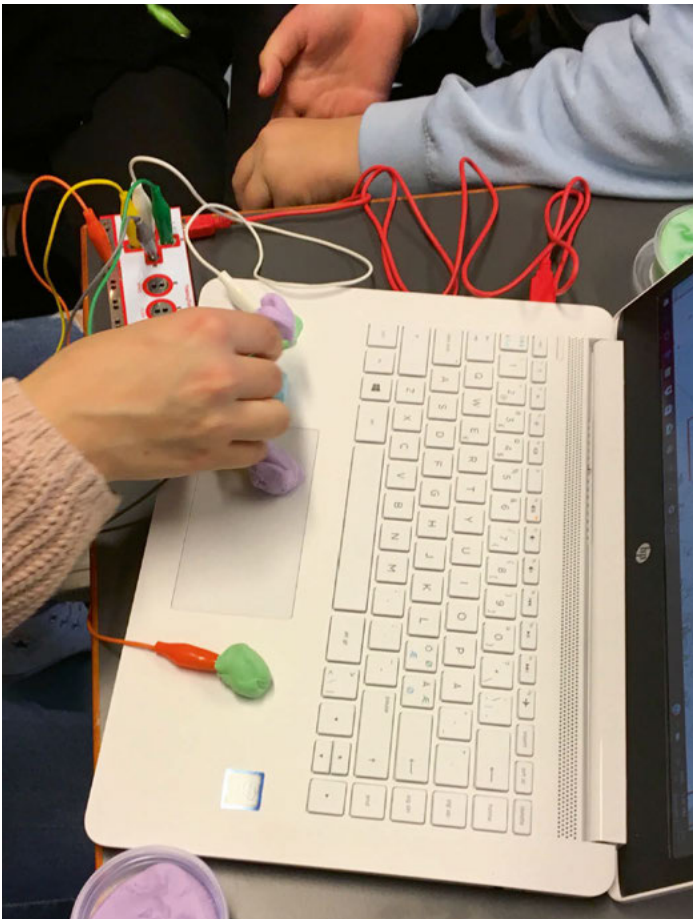
“In this high school, we needed experts in pedagogy rather than professors in specific fields.”

Jarmo Suominen, Group X.



Paja – the wood workshop of the Department of Architecture. © Marc Goodwin





The "Map that Matters" workshop with pupils of the high school. The Makey-Makey tool was used to create a playful atmosphere and facilitate students' creativity. © Natalia Vladykina



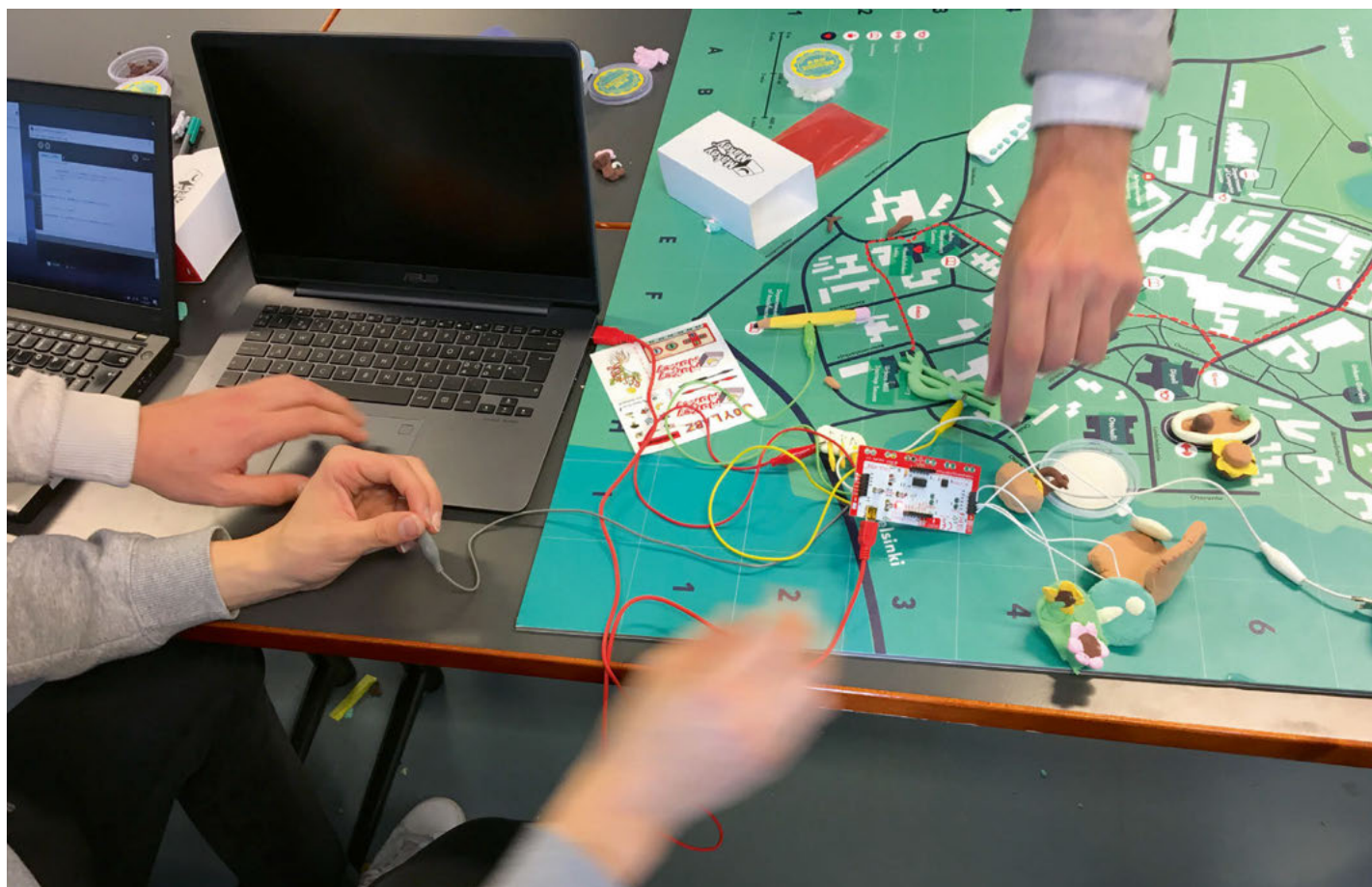
Service architecture

Group X is part of the Department of Architecture of Aalto University. It consists of professors, researchers, lecturers and tutors who focus on user-centred design and spatial development from the point of view of active users and sustainability. The key philosophy of Group X is the culture of sharing: how architecture can lead to the sharing

of spaces, knowledge and technologies. To reach this objective, the group has developed specific co-design and co-creation methodologies in communicative planning and design. Opposing the normative assumption that architecture is about teaching clients and users how to live, Group X supports the idea that it should be a collective

construction of knowledge for creators and users alike. During the 2017 Human Cities workshop in Helsinki, the members of this pan-European creative project developed ideas for leisure activities at School as a Service.

“As part of the Human Cities programme, several workshops were organised with students to understand how they would like to make the space their own.”





The new Aalto Bioproduct Centre aims to stimulate collaboration between students and research groups. © Marc Goodwin