

MOVING — IN MOVING — ON

#9

**TEH Startup Support
Programme 2020**

Featuring:
Salaam Cinema,
Baku, Azerbaijan



teh.net

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JUST BEFORE THIS PUBLICATION APPEARED, IN OCTOBER 2020, WAR BETWEEN ARMENIA AND AZERBAIJAN BROKE OUT AGAIN. THIS HAS SERIOUS IMPACT ON THE EMERGING CENTERS PRESENTED HERE. THE CONSEQUENCES ARE UNPREDICTABLE.

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Publication #9
Salaam Cinema,
Baku, Azarbaijan

Trans Europe Halles is a network of cultural centres initiated by citizens and artists. Our mission is to strengthen the sustainable development of non-governmental cultural centres and encourage new initiatives by connecting, supporting and promoting them. We facilitate international cooperation, provide opportunities for learning and sharing, and promote the practice, impact and value of arts and culture.

Read more at www.teh.net



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1. THE TRANS EUROPE HALLES STARTUP SUPPORT PROGRAMME: WHY AND HOW?



Through an open call, launched in July 2019, Trans Europe Halles (TEH) invited upcoming initiatives from Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia to apply for our Startup Support Programme.

Trans Europe Halles is a network of more than 100 cultural centres – initiated by citizens and artists who have revitalised vacant buildings for arts, culture and activism across Europe. We started our work in 1983 in Western Europe and we're now supporting emerging creative and cultural spaces in the Balkans, Eastern Partnership and Southern Mediterranean countries too. In 2017, we launched the Startup Support Programme – offering access to all the knowledge, the experience and the skills we've gained in Europe over the past 37 years.

Why now?

From 2017-2021, we have been running and continue to run a wide range of activities under the strapline **Factories of Imagination: Investing in Cultural Changemakers**. This project is motivated by an urgent concern: In many European countries, non-governmental cultural centres are

under-resourced and don't have the funds or the conditions in place to fully achieve their potential. This is especially true in regions and countries where neither civil society initiative nor critical artistic production are encouraged by public authorities – and indeed are sometimes actively discouraged.

This is true in the Balkans, which was the focus of the first year of our Startup Support Programme, and also in Ukraine and Belarus, the focus for 2019. The same goes for Azerbaijan and Armenia, although these two countries are different in many ways:

- In Baku, the capital city of **Azerbaijan**, a combination of private wealth and state control has produced arts venues and institutes of a highly glitzy and globalised nature, mainly aimed at the local elite and international visitors. The independent scene, however, is barely visible and severely restricted.



ANALYSIS



MATCHMAKING



COACHING



NETWORK

SEPTEMBER 2019
APPLICATION OPEN

OCTOBER 2019
APPLICATION CLOSED

OCTOBER 2019
SELECTION

MARCH/APRIL 2020
SCOPING VISIT ONLINE

JUNE 2020
TEH CONFERENCE ONLINE

JUNE 2020
WORKSHOP ONLINE

OCTOBER 2020
PUBLICATION

DECEMBER
TEH CAMP MEETING ONLINE

- **Armenia**, on the other hand, is redefining itself after its 'Velvet Revolution' of 2018. So far this has not resulted in a clear and transparent cultural policy to support citizen-driven initiatives. And yet, in the larger cities of both countries there are upcoming communities of defiant artists and activists who are determined to reclaim the vacant buildings and neglected public spaces in their cities.

Their ambitions dovetail with TEH's core values: to revitalise spaces that have the potential to become exciting social and artistic hubs. They are drawing on the energy of civil society in places where hapless or hostile public authorities, irresponsible capitalism and social conservatism are standing in the way of open-minded progress. At the same time, they have a strong understanding of their responsibility to mobilise the power of arts and creativity for the public good and conscious

urban transformation.

The Startup Support Programme 2020 aimed to reach out to these kinds of initiatives across **Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia**. We launched a process that included an initial open call, a selection committee, scoping visits, conference participation, online coaching, organisational workshops and written reports, much of which was done online because of Covid-19 travel restrictions. We are very pleased to now welcome three of these initiatives into the TEH network:

- Kharatian Arts Center in Gyumri, Armenia
- Salaam Cinema in Baku, Azerbaijan
- Ta(r)dino 6 Art Platform in Baku, Azerbaijan

This case study will focus on Salaam Cinema in Baku, Azerbaijan.

2. CHALLENGES OF CREATING ART SPACES IN AZERBAIJAN: REGION & CONTEXT

"As the Covid-19 pandemic has continued to ravage the world," [writes Azerbaijani columnist, blogger and journalist Arzu Geybulla](#), "a host of authoritarian countries have used the virus as a cover to tighten control over civil society, attack journalists, and repress domestic opposition. Azerbaijan has followed in the footsteps first made by fellow autocrats in countries like Jordan, Thailand, and Hungary."

While the government in Azerbaijan fumbled its response to the pandemic, critics were immediately imprisoned. Journalists were arrested, (social) media was blocked and members of opposition parties taken from their homes.

During our work with the selected centres in Baku, in mid-July, military conflict broke out along the border between Azerbaijan and Armenia. The cease-fire, in place since the war over Nagorno-Karabach in the early nineties, was broken once again, as it has been numerous times before. On 14 July, thousands of protestors gathered in Baku, commemorating the victims and demanding war. It was a spontaneous, leaderless uprising. Neither government nor opposition spokesmen addressed the crowd.

"Azerbaijan lacks any sort of real representational politics," [according to activist Bahruz Samadov](#). "Most people believe that political ambition renders a person automatically untrustworthy. Nor do they think that elections can bring about any real change. They

have no love for the ruling authorities, but they do not like the opposition either."

Needless to say, both writers quoted here operate from outside the country.

As elsewhere, the pandemic has exacerbated existing divisions in society here. Labour migrants, internally displaced persons, people fleeing neighbouring Iran and other minorities are left to their own devices. Inside troubled households, domestic violence has soared. Trans women are being molested and killed. Where such gaps open up, we know that cultural spaces, however fragile, are vital to bridging them. But these spaces too have been locked down. The two centres in Baku we are working with, Ta(r)dino 6 and Salaam Cinema, show admirable resilience in regrouping and redefining themselves during this period of forced social distancing. But even in pre-pandemic times, they were facing an uncertain future.

The concept they are pursuing – to revitalise vacant buildings with creativity and social commitment – is virtually unknown in Azerbaijan. Most of the essential ingredients that make it possible for civil society initiatives in Western Europe, where TEH was founded, to realise these ideas are missing here. These include:

- clear options to rent or even own vacant property
- a cultural policy that makes funding accessible to new initiatives
- the education and mind-set among (younger) audiences and media to follow and understand upcoming artists and their work
- a minimum of financial security for artists and activists

- a minimum of social security for visible/invisible minorities

- a certain understanding among municipal authorities of the potential contribution of new arts initiatives to the well-being and economy of their cities

- a tradition going back several decades of reclaiming vacant buildings for the common good

- and a sense among younger citizens that they have the right, even the entitlement, to create new collective spaces where those do not yet exist.

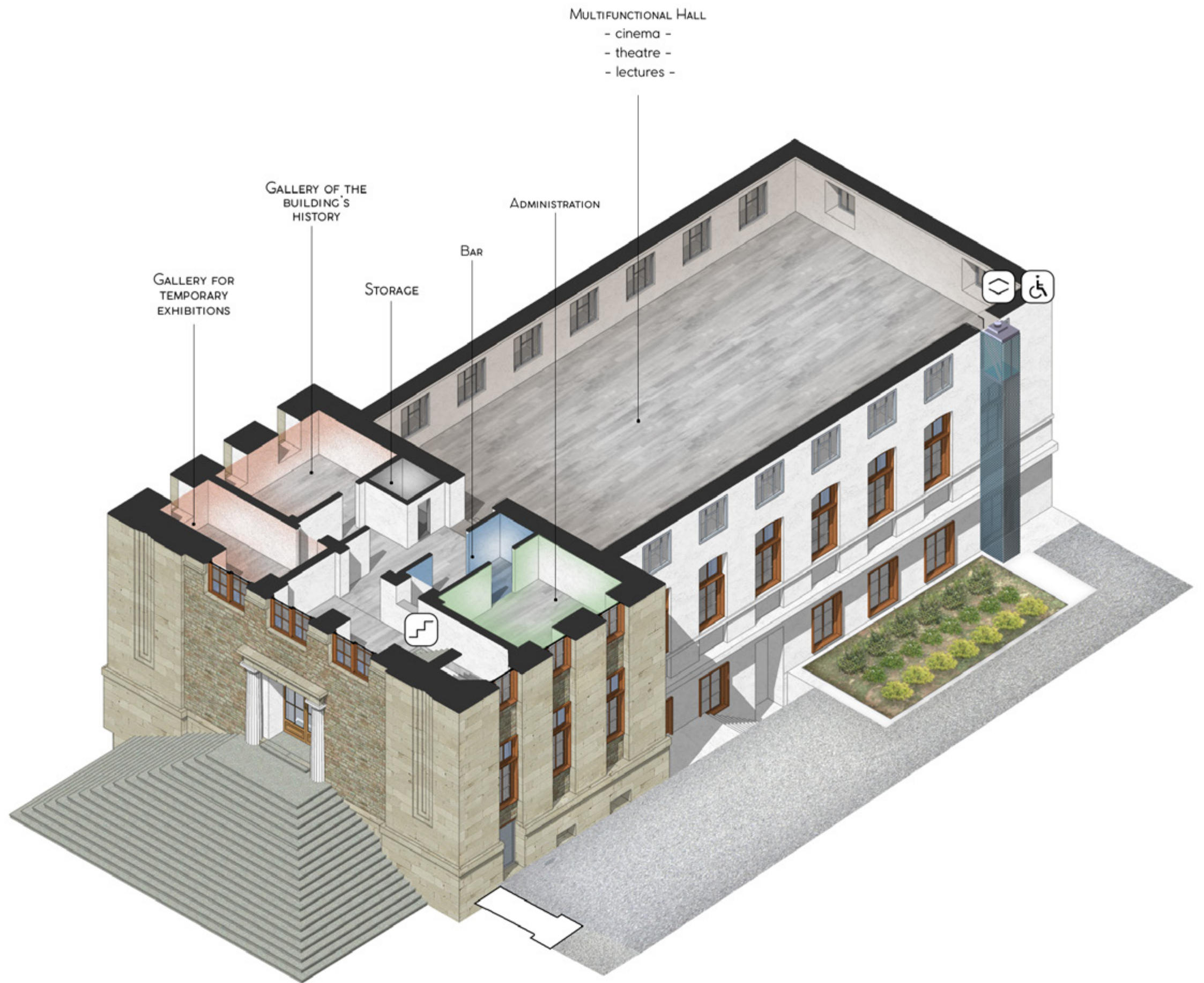
Even when all these elements are in place, it is never easy to create and maintain new spaces in old buildings. Across Western Europe, financial constraints, an overdose of regulation and a populist suspicion of the arts are conspiring to produce an environment of ongoing precarity, causing many new initiatives to falter and disappear – even before Covid-19. Similar threats, in still bleaker form, exist in neighbouring countries like Turkey, Georgia, Russia and Ukraine. But in Azerbaijan, even the most basic ingredients for creating fair and sustainable cultural spaces are absent.

The startups we work with in Baku certainly look promising and inspirational. Getting to know them better from a distance – through online conversations, practical assistance and workshops – we discovered how precarious their situation really is and how much support they will need to move from their current situation to realising their dreams.

The challenges are daunting. But the collectives behind these initiatives are working day and night, throughout these insecure and unpredictable times, to achieve their ambitions.

⚡ SALAAM CINEMA IS ABOUT GENDER EQUALITY AND SUPPORTING PEOPLE FROM THE LGBTQ COMMUNITY. WE PROMOTE THESE THEMES THROUGH OUR PROGRAMMING AND FESTIVALS, BUT ALSO IN OUR ORGANIZATION: IT HAS TO BE A SAFE PLACE THAT OFFERS SPACE AND WORK TO PEOPLE FROM THESE COMMUNITIES. PEOPLE FEEL SAFE, THEY ARE VISIBLE AND OUTSPOKEN. GENDER IS THE MAIN TOPIC FOR THE YOUNG COMMUNITY IN OUR CENTER. THIS CREATES A FORM OF TOLERANCE WITHIN OUR TEAM, IN THE SPACE ITSELF, THE PROGRAMMING AND THE ATMOSPHERE. ⚡

**LEYLI GAFAROVA.
CO-FOUNDER**



3. CASE STUDY: SALAAM CINEMA, BAKU, AZERBAIJAN

Salaam Cinema has founded a creative platform for movies, audiovisual and performing arts in an old Molokan prayer house building. The Salaam Cinema community has done impressive renovation and cleaning work in order to create spaces for film screenings, exhibitions, talks and workshops. It supports local filmmaking and gives the audience a chance to rediscover movies that have written Azerbaijani film history. Last year, when the owner threatened to demolish the building, a successful public campaign resulted in gaining official historical status for the building. Now, Salaam Cinema has prepared a professional design for the full reconstruction of the building. But the centre has been closed since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The building, in downtown Baku, is beautiful. Behind the elegant façade lies 1,300m² of history. The Molokans, 'spiritual Christians', who do not believe in temples or worship the cross, were expelled by the Czar across the Southern Caucasus in the late 19th century. Many of them ended up in Baku, where a small community still lives today. The prayer house was built for them in 1913, by the Molokan architect Skobelev. After 1926, it functioned as the first radio broadcasting house in Azerbaijan. The literary drama shows played an important role in the growth of the Azerbaijani language. But after independence, in 1991, following the break-up of the Soviet Union, radio left the building and various offices took over. It was privatised, like so much post-Soviet property. The current owner appears to be a former parliament member who lets himself be represented by a construction company specialised in demolishing property and building highrises in its place.

The Salaam Cinema team – young filmmakers, visual artists and musicians – basically squatted the place in January 2019 and immediately started cleaning it up. It was in very bad shape.

The ground floor is still destroyed, so it cannot be used, just like the spacious basement. There is no water or heating and the electricity is borrowed. Still, the team was able to host ongoing talks, workshops, exhibitions and no less than 75 movie screenings in 2019. During a festival, they were interrupted by some violent thugs sent by the owner, who threatened to kick them out or take them to court. In May 2019, a large campaign drew a lot of public attention and the owner withdrew.

The future is uncertain. The building, with its clean and comfortable spaces for screenings and exhibitions in the parts that are accessible, stands empty and quiet, just like the adjacent garden and courtyard. During the pandemic, most of the team has moved out of town, to stay with family, and there is a travel ban. As soon as it's possible, they will invite all the major parties involved – the Ministry of Culture, the mayor's office, the municipal tourism board, the owner – and present their plans. The aim: now that it has officially been declared a building with a historical status and cannot be demolished, the municipality should buy back the building and rent it for an affordable price to Salaam Cinema – the only people who have proved that they actually have a plan for its future. Salaam Cinema aims to fundraise for the reconstruction works and will not ask for government subsidy.

Until Covid-19, Salaam Cinema was run in the most open, inclusive and horizontal way possible. A dozen people, mostly between 18-25 years old, were involved in everything: production, preparations, bar, screenings, presentations, cleaning etc.

"Not everyone, of course, is capable or willing to do everything," says co-founder Ilkin Huseynov. "But we want everyone to get their hands dirty."

Through the ticket sales, bar income and the occasional grants, all very modest, team members were able to earn 20 Manat (= €10) a week, for two shifts of four hours each. (The minimum monthly wage in Azerbaijan is 240 Manat.) Someone is there every day: the place is open from 1pm to 9pm.

Decisions are taken collectively. Through Salaam Open Space, people are encouraged to come up with their own ideas about what to organise, even when those activities might not always live up to the artistic standards that Salaam Cinema aims for. Again, decisions about what activities to accept in the building are taken by the whole community.

"This society," says co-founder Leyli Gafarova, "is so used to build hierarchies based on age, gender and position. People tend to follow, instead of taking initiative. That's why this is a very unique situation."

Leyli and Ilkin, gifted artists themselves, are the driving forces behind the project, a bit older than the rest – and a couple. In the beginning, they took most of the decisions together, moving quickly. But they are determined that Salaam Cinema should really become the kind of place that doesn't yet exist in Baku and Azerbaijan: fully inclusive; non-hierarchical; a growing community of people who feel free and have the tools to build and develop; fuelled by the idea that – certainly in these pandemic times – there are no borders today, not between societies and not between artistic disciplines, now that everything

is virtual. When we asked them for their main concern, they replied:

"How can we stay cool but horizontal and inclusive at the same time?"

This is, of course, a familiar theme at Trans Europe Halles. Everyone's voice counts, but the artistic ambition comes first. The more activities, the more voices, the more dirty hands, the more some kind of sharing of responsibility and division of tasks becomes necessary. Hospitality is hard work. Salaam Cinema is eager to discover, once the lockdown is lifted, how to face these challenges while staying true to themselves, in a building where they are allowed to stay and grow. The mentoring and workshops that TEH offered were focused on these challenges.

Mykhailo Glubokyi shared the tools they use at Izolyatsia in Kyiv for project and team organisation, for budget planning and team management. And TEH members **Gabriella Riccio** (l'Asilo, Napoli) and **Natassa Dourida** (Communitism, Athens) zoomed in for a three-day workshop on strategy and structure: processes of commoning and the community; economies between sustainability and new models; ownership, care and common goods.

Seven of the team members took part. It was personal and serious, intensive and inspirational. Salaam Cinema is using this period to revitalise itself. Right now, the team is developing ideas for an online festival of art and solidarity.



4. A SAFE PLACE FOR MINORITIES

Each of these publications about the TEH Startups zooms in on a more general topic that is related to this specific case study but is also relevant to other emerging arts spaces.

"We want our space to be inclusive," Leyli says. "Salaam Cinema is about gender equality and supporting people from the LGBTQ community. We promote these themes through our programming and festivals, but also in our organization: it has to be a safe place that offers space and work to people from these communities. People feel safe, they are visible and outspoken. Gender is the main topic for the young community in our center. This creates a form of tolerance within our team, in the space itself, the programming and the atmosphere."

Salaam Cinema is not based in a society where these ideas are widely shared, to put it mildly, but Leyli sounds confident. And the team has proven that it works. One of their loyal friends is **Chris Belloni** of the NGO Art. 1, who runs the **International Queer and Migrant Film Festival** in Amsterdam. He helped them curate the **Invisible Festival**, dedicated to the same themes, just after the public campaign to save the building. The young LGBTQ+ community of Baku knows that this is a place where they can be who they want to be.

Like-minded centres in the TEH network will recognise the challenges, which are complex even in more tolerant societies. No matter which minority they belong to, people tend to stick to each other's company. They feel safe as long as the space is theirs, as long as they recognise themselves in

the organisation and the programming. Sharing this space with people with other lifestyles, with other ages, genders or artistic tastes, with other minorities, let alone with the dominant majority, is not a given. So even within centres that aim to be open to all, there are always codes signifying that some are more welcome than others. To be really inclusive is a balancing act. It's a vulnerable, potentially explosive situation, that requires daily care and honesty.

It's striking that the centres that are most willing and able to open up to minorities and people in need very often operate from a position of insecurity themselves. While their own existence is under threat, they offer the comfort of their platforms to others who are denied elsewhere.

"These are the questions we ask ourselves," Ilkin says. "When the government doesn't take care of people, to what extent do we share our space with those in need? When do we do art, and when do we do charity?"

Art and social justice, hospitality for all and a focus on certain minorities are not mutually exclusive. Learning to listen to the language of those who do not speak exactly like you, to understand the codes and to read the signals is vital. And it's also vital to allow your centre to have different spaces, each with their own level of exclusivity, but always connected to the others. While never forgetting that everyone has a voice – and that every voice counts.

- Go to teh.net/resources for workshop reports about Salaam Cinema during the TEH Startup Support Programme 2020

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

+ The Covid-19 pandemic makes us, our societies and nations look inwards. For the art world, it should be a wake-up call to do exactly the opposite: open up, cross boundaries, involve others. In a society where social and economic gaps are deepening, we know that cultural spaces, however fragile, are vital to bridging them. Salaam Cinema aims to do exactly that. At the moment, they have begun to reach out to international embassies and institutions, not just for support, but simply to raise awareness to begin with. The response has been very cautious so far. Even at a time when so many of our members are struggling to survive, Trans Europe Halles wants to use our reputation and influence to make public representatives pay attention. If we are not able to do so in countries that we consider far away, we won't be able to do it at home.

+ Salaam Cinema is operating in a mode – to be cool, inclusive and horizontal all at the same time – that is recognisable to many TEH members, but in Baku they might well be the first. Through the workshop with Gabriella Riccio and Natassa Dourida, they practised involving the whole community in decision-making and sharing responsibilities in an equal, respectful manner – all of this based on the extensively documented experience of the workshop leaders. They understood that it can be necessary to create rules, a process that involves all the members of the team, and

that these rules are never fixed: they can always be adapted if the circumstances change. The most important underlying message: never, even in the busiest times, forget to take care of yourself and each other.

+ Openly supporting and providing a platform for people from the LGBTQ communities is what has characterised Salaam Cinema from the beginning. To combine this with a passion for cinema heritage and contemporary art, while remaining open to all, is a constant balancing act. Certainly while the property issues concerning the building are not resolved. It's a rare combination of challenges. Not just in Baku, but anywhere. Salaam Cinema is a frontrunner in many aspects. There is a lot of knowledge about all these issues in the TEH network. They should not hesitate to ask and others should not hesitate to respond.

+ Circumstances in Azerbaijan are very different from many of the countries where TEH has its members. But creating and maintaining an arts space is still comparable in many ways. The exchange of knowledge and experience is invaluable. And it goes both ways. People who have set up spaces in Copenhagen would not be able to do it in Baku, and the other way around. There is always more to learn on both sides. That's what Trans Europe Halles is here for.

Two international experts worked closely with TEH staff to make it all happen: Mykhailo Glubokyi is the development director of IZOLYATSIA, a platform for cultural initiatives and IZONE creative community.

Chris Keulemans, a travelling writer and moderator, was the founder and artistic director of Tolhuistuin cultural centre in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. He is also the author of this report.

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