

Hanna Harris on How Design Can Help Develop a Functional City

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SPEAKERS

Hannah Harris, Olga Stella

Olga Stella 00:00

Hi. I'm Olga Stella, the Executive Director of Design Core Detroit and the Vice President for strategy and Communications at the College for Creative Studies. Thank you for joining us for season three of the Detroit City of Design podcast. As stewards of Detroit's UNESCO city of design designation, we aim to raise your awareness of how design can create conditions for better quality of life, and economic opportunity for all. In Season Three, we will hear from thought leaders who view our world through a lens of empathy and applied design thinking to address some of our world's most pressing issues.

Olga Stella 00:43

Please welcome Hannah Harris, the second chief design officer leading Helsinki's pioneering work of using design to transform the city's future. Prior to this, Hannah was director of Arc Info Finland, the Finnish national promotion and collaboration platform for architecture. Hannah has also worked in Helsinki Design Week and the Finnish Institute in London. In 2018, Hannah was commissioner of the critically acclaimed mind building exhibition at the Finnish pavilion at the Venice Biennale. In this episode, we will discuss the role of design in the public sector and how to develop a functional city that works for all people.

Olga Stella 01:23

Hannah, I'm so happy to be able to talk with you today. Thanks for joining us on the Detroit City of Design podcast.

Hannah Harris 01:29

Thank you very much, very good to be with you here today.

Olga Stella 01:34

Well, I think we should start out first was just setting a little context for our listeners. Your role is chief design officer for the city of Helsinki. And for many people that may be a unique role they're unfamiliar

with. Can you tell us a little bit about what the role is of Chief design officer and you know, what kind of role you play in city government?

Hannah Harris 01:55

Absolutely. So if you look at kind of Helsinki being the finished capital, obviously we are both in a city and country where there's a strong history and legacy of design and architecture, perhaps you could even say that it's a strong element of our DNA as such, in building the nation and and that's something that obviously is a base there that we still build on. But as a city organization, really as an administrative body, the city of Helsinki started looking at design and what to do with design on a more strategic level, soon to be 10 years ago. So at that moment in time Helsinki applied to be and was given the title to be world design capital, which is a global title every two years that's given to a city that really uses design to to make the city a better place for services to work better for the city as the fabric to evolve better and and how design is sort of working across the city in different sectors and what that means to build a better future. And so hence in 2012, so coming up to 10 years, Helsinki had this one year celebration if you wish of using design. And of course there was lots of there were many events, things that were highly visible to the people of Helsinki as well, at that point, there was like a number of all the all the key design universities. So we have a number here in the capital region, really globally respected of their work, design companies, obviously, or the design organizations and a number of other businesses and so forth that came together to produce this year with Helsinki, but really importantly, the city itself. So what the different sectors and departments started looking at, hey, what what could we perhaps do with design and organize around it? I as kind of side note was myself working in London at the time. And this was visible there as well. So there were lots of international satellites that we were doing as well there to kind of build networks and look at what the situation in Helsinki is. So that year, that 2012, was a success on many levels, it really sort of broadened the idea of what design is how it helps a thing like a city organization. And then also started putting in place certain structures and other things in the city that that are connected to using design. So first of all, there was a for instance, a legacy project called Design Driven City that ran for a couple of years after that year, where for the first time we started hiring designers in the city itself to work on different pilot projects that could go from things that challenges that that were happening in the social and health sector to infrastructure and so forth. So they were these pilot designers working on pilot projects for a couple of years inside the city and perhaps a sort of emphasis on especially things like service design was very strong at that point. and then started evolving into a in house design-led development team that then a few years after that took the form of what's now called Helsinki Lab. And we are now looking at kind of the next stages of what that will evolve to and how it what things we will strengthen across the city. And then also the role of the chief design office, then a pilot edition was launched in 2016, for a couple of years, which, again, coincided with a large kind of organizational reshuffle in Helsinki, we introduced a new model at the time, and, and the city's functions were divided into the Central Executive Office and four different divisions. So you'd have urban environment, you'd have culture, recreation, social, health, and education. So all these four sectors, and today, we are working with all of these four sectors, they all use design to various capacities. And then, of course, along the way of other kind of partners have been really strong element of this community. So I already mentioned the different sort of education establishments in the region, but also things within the city such as emphasis on developing how Helsinki becomes really leading city in using digitalization. digitalizing, our services, or things, how we develop dialogue, issues of dialogue within our city. So participation, how we work

with our citizens, and so forth. So that's kind of the idea of three Ds if you wish. So design, digitalization and dialogue. And my role was then re introduced. So in 2020, so I've been in the role for a year now, that okay, that we really need to look in a city wide, that the design community is a citywide community that there are different things happening that have to deal with, for instance, international forums, networks, how that sort of profile of Helsinki as a design city where that's going what's happening in that in the future sectors. How we will internally strengthen the the kind of learning capacity and capacity of what we have the tools we use inside the city to help our different sectors use design. And then thirdly, the kind of new element that I'm working with as well, is that the issues to do with urban space, urban environment will also be drawn slightly closer to the kind of whole equation of how we work with design. So I'm in a role where I'm weaving contacts between different sectors in the city, and identifying those spots where we use design to respond to the city strategy, and really take us forward to the future.

Olga Stella 07:42

Can you give a few examples of the types of projects that you're working on right now?

Hannah Harris 07:46

Sure. So we have if you look at the kind of range of what what happens across the city per year, so you might actually say that Helsinki is actually, the city of Helsinki is one of the biggest design agents in, if you wish, in the country. So we work with in house designers and then also, we have a multi year agreement of how we work with external design agencies. So it's the kind of procurement contract where we have eight top agencies involved at the moment on a four year basis. And within that context, there is close to let's say, 75 projects a year that takee place where all the different sectors are doing stuff with design. And things that are happening there at the moment, for instance, are things like how can we look up phenomena that crosses different sectors? So how, for instance, how can we work with serviced apartments, for instance, with people with disabilities? What is the kind of quality there? What kind of ideas of living at home emerge working together with the users of the service, and to make sure at the same time that we have really good quality, good impact procurement processes in place, for instance, and something like this. Or how, for instance, we might look at outdoor children's playgrounds, how who...how are the services working? These are in Finland, they are kind of, you know, you'll have your playground on the road, but also they offer lots of there will be staff, there will be activities, services used by the local communities and are looking at are they reaching all the different diverse communities? What should they be doing? How should they work in the future in those things? Or we might have things like let's say how do our roadworks processes work? What's the communications that happened around them? How are different communities and places that are affected by roadworks? How are they involved in the processes and how can they be made better? And I think in all of these, I mean that the kind of ... the core of it has been that all of the stuff that Helsinki has done with design has really been about a making stuff work better, of course, whether it's the the product that's at the end or the way things are done internally, and really importantly, of helping the city. And by the city, I mean, we are close to 40,000 people working at the city of Helsinki is the largest employer in the country. So how can we work better with the different user groups with our citizens, with the people and communities of Helsinki, and that has been really the the key in there.

Olga Stella 10:36

And we, as the fellow UNESCO city of design, like Helsinki, we, here in Detroit have often admired the just the different projects and strategies that had been deployed in Helsinki. And, you know, you mentioned that it's really been just about 10 years of strategic investment and design, when you think about the most important impacts that have been made as a result of this investment. You know, what, are they there specifically? Or, you know, categorically?

Hannah Harris 11:08

Well, I think it's really, I mean, that has been, when I started in this job, I've done a big round of learning about where we are at the moment, and what's kind of working for the different sectors of the city and the different developers in different parts of the city. And, and, and really, the big, the big thing has been to bring us closer to the people and citizens of Helsinki, and users of all different services on how the city kind of works. So that in itself has been a major shift perhaps in in the mindset and mentality. And this kind of ranges, of course, from understanding what's out there, and what's what's needed, and how to how to kind of, in an effective way, run a city, but, but also the area where we do have stuff to develop still, but then it will run to involving those communities. So the idea of co-creation and how we co-power our communities and do things together in the future, and what that might mean. So it's kind of the focus on people has been a major thing. And design has played a major role in, in helping in that. And then perhaps the other thing, which would be typical, I mean, we like any large organization, and my work in a way involves all of this as well as weaving sort of bridges and connections between different linear structures and organizations within a city so so I don't identify spots, for example, okay, how how might the cultural sector The, the urban environment sector, and let's say the education sector work together to, for instance, develop how children for instance, play and do stuff out there in the in the city. Because we have a strong idea on you reusing the city as a learning environment. And that's perhaps been another thing that kind of, in general, on a national level, as well, I mean, the Finnish school system and education system is obviously something that has, there's lots of kind of international benchmarking going on there in terms of, you know, equal access to education and, and free education and, and things like that. And actually, the idea of kind of a design lens on that and using design processes within the curriculum is something that's that there's a lot of good work done as well and which will we'll be looking at in the future even more so. So we have in Helsinki already several schools that are piloting really great work and and teachers who are really tuned into this, how they use design thinking in looking through, for instance, the our current curriculums and sort of phenomenon based learning how kids learn about creative problem solving, working together, the idea of empathy through looking at looking at kind of the users and, and the people and, and also ultimately, as well as reading their immediate environments and how they have been built and designed and, and the kind of, I suppose, an idea of sort of civic pride as well range stemming from that. So that has been another very strong thing on which we will be looking at strengthening that in the future even more.

Olga Stella 14:17

That's really important, I think, in all those aspects. And I, you know, that currently, the city of Helsinki's vision is to be the most functional city in the world. And this, you know, to maybe, maybe, before we kind of dive into that a little bit more, you know, what is that when, when, as a charge to, you know, all the city departments, what does that mean, you know, practically to both the government of Helsinki and to the residents of Helsinki?

Hannah Harris 14:48

Yeah, that's a good question. So our current city strategy, that the overall aim is to develop Helsinki as the most functional city in the world and that sort of breaks down to two things. I suppose it breaks down into the services that the city produces and the kind of processes and products. So is stuff working? Is our infrastructure working? This connects very strongly, of course, also to, to the really kind of massive work we're doing in digitalizing services at the moment as well. How can we, for how how do things work out would be so what the city of Helsinki is working as a joint entity, a community, a place that delivers its stuff, rather than, you know, having people going from one part of the city to another and being a bit confused at what, what, who is going to help me? Or What am I going to do with this thing? So that the city, as a unified body is in the best possible way serving its residents, visitors, the communities are based here working here doing business here, and so forth. So that sort of one thing, and obviously, depending on what, what the service or sector in question is, there will be different ways of measuring and looking at his stuff working. Or is it not working? And how pleased people are with it? But then the other thing, of course, which is of equal importance, and in a way harder, perhaps is, is then how do we internally organize around certain issues? So how do we look at how things that run through the city and don't neatly fit into let's say, for instance, one sector or one department, how are they managed and coordinated through the city? And design has a big role to play in this as well to look at, look at those processes on helping in making kind of the backstage, the backstage, run smoothly, as well. So that is a way. And I think that kind of third point about that which stem from any design work is of course, understanding the challenger in the first place, and what is it that we are searching a solution for? And how design can help in that in the first place of knowing what kind of issues we are trying to tackle as a city?

Olga Stella 17:09

Well, I know Helsinki has been consistently ranked as one of the, you know, or I guess Finland has been consistently ranked as one of the happiest countries in the world. And does this strategy around functionality tie into kind of the ingredients of what makes for a good life, you know, for Helsinki citizens? Or are these things interrelated? The overall happiness of of residents in your city and and how functional the city is?

Hannah Harris 17:37

Yeah, well, I think, of course, there's the fact that it's stuff that you need in your everyday life, and really basic things that the smoother they are and the better they respond to the needs that are out there, of course, the the, the easier they become as well for all the different communities of Helsinki. And that takes, you know, burden and stress off those gives capacity elsewhere. But I think one really interesting thing there that is, perhaps plays in as well is, is the role of trust... the kind of role that trust plays. So trust in institutions and institutions like the city, or trust in the process is that the city puts forward and how it works. And I think often that kind of idea of, of trust, I think during Covid as well, this has been a really big thing that has played in you, you'll see differences in different countries that that what sort of trust do we hold in institutions and authorities? And does that trust also allow for, you know, dialogue and looking at things that might not work? And how is that dealt with as well. So the other side of that is, of course, transparency, and openness, and, and so forth. And I mean, we've been working really hard on on issues to do with our, let's say, use of open data, for future years will involve a lot about

using data and using data to help decision making, but also, then, of course, the kind of data that we can put out there as well, transparently. So that idea of trust, I think is central in there as well.

Olga Stella 19:12

So much of what you've talked about has really been about service design. And I think for many people, you know, and they when they think about design, they tend to think about the objects of design, you have, you know, the piece of furniture or something, you know, visual communication. And I think this idea that design is ultimately about how not just about those objects and those things, but also about how people relate to those things and use those things, and how services are organized is really important. I wonder you know if there's a couple of tools that you might want to describe in terms of your approach. So as you're, as you're thinking about how to, you know, help the other city departments organize their services or develop their services in a different way, what are some of the design tools that have been deployed?

Hannah Harris 20:05

Well, first of all, I mean, we have a kind of small internal unit that helps the different sectors So, so they will, and they will as well the different sectors, depending on what what it is that they do might have slightly different how they've organized around issues of design, but but we help them in identify, first of all, what kind of challenges they might have. What kind of thing is they searching for solution for? And how that how, what capacities might they have or tools internally already? And f there's scope and need for involving also external design agencies to help them in the work? How will they do that? What will be the most effective way to do that? And so we've developed a tool called the design radar, model totka, which will, which will help how we internally help, in a way get the design work started, and ranging from sort of light inquiries to more in depth involvement impacts, really strategic projects. And this, this goes, of course, to to looking at the stakeholders and the issue at hand all the way to how procurement what might work in in those processes. We've got around digital things, many, many kind of playbooks and tools like this as well, that are used. And you mentioned there, the idea is also about things that are kind of visual, let related to brand, this is another area where we are doing lots of work in Helsinki in terms of brand strategies, tools that are available in that sector. So we have a housing design system that we are developing as well at the moment to help all the different digital developers or the visual work that is done different platform development, so of using a design system that can help them and and then that communicates out to different users in a coherent way. So things like that, perhaps in the more kind of you mentioned, the sort of service design approach, which certainly has been very strong, I think areas that we will be looking at more into the future as well have also to do strongly with how we indeed look more into the future. So kind of foresight, thinking or capacities of strategic design and how that works. Then you touched upon the kind of, of course people think often of designers, you know, the things that are out there, if it's the visual elements, or the different digital interfaces and places and platforms, but then also, of course, how the city feels like that urban experience and the city experience, which is of course one key part of it. And we use things like a kind of a urban design guidelines and different tools and city wide kind of approaches how we how we look at what's done in there. And we are currently working on and that's something that I'm leading on finalizing that also have an architecture program, a kind of a policy program, in how we work with architecture in the future and what that means in terms of public buildings, what that means in terms of developing open spaces, how we use competitions, and so forth. So these kind of tools as well, that are

obviously sort of strategic, city wide tools that touch upon all the sectors and that they can then adapt to the more specific tasks that they have at hand.

Olga Stella 23:25

And citizen engagement has been a really important part of the work and we had one of your colleagues help bring the city of Helsinki's participation game that we played here at the Detroit month a design festival a few years ago. So I think maybe if you could help our audience understand a little bit about, you know, maybe the participation game itself and just some of the other tools for citizen engagement and participation in government and in the work that you're doing

Hannah Harris 23:58

in day. This is a very, very strong area. And we're really committed in working on that citizen engagement aspect of how Helsinki is developed. And we have gaming tools around that but also where the design is playing a big role at the moment is our participatory budgeting system. So these are core systems that they're different variations and additions around the world and how cities use those but we are into the second round of kind of newly developed system here called Oma study own city where design thinking has been heavily used in developing that system and it's a way where around about 8 million euros are distributed so that the people of Helsinki decide how they use them that that works in a way that there will be ideas that one could submit on a city wide ideas and then there will be different areas, large areas of the city and How different ideas that are particularly related to those areas. And there's an initial kind of idea submission stage, which then goes into a co creation stage, where different experts of the city work together with people have put the ideas forward to develop them a bit further look at budgeting issues, visibility, and, and so forth. And, and after that they go into a voting system where anybody above the age 12 can vote for what gets realized across the city. So our engagement team work really closely with designers to look at, you know, take onboard learnings from stage one, how will we deliver develop that further how we work with our communities. And then on the other hand, how we improve processes internally about the kinds of ideas that are coming out how we help them realize them, and also the ideas that might not go through in the voting processes that what we can learn from them about what's kind of out there and what the people of Helsinki would like to see happen. A big strand in there relates certain straight directly back to urban design, and things out there in the urban space. So that's really one of the biggest area that people are putting forward suggestions.

Olga Stella 26:18

And what happens when the suggestions and ideas that people put forward don't match maybe what the you know, quote unquote, government experts think,

Hannah Harris 26:27

Yeah,

Olga Stella 26:27

How do those discrepancy know how those disputes get resolved?

Hannah Harris 26:32

Well, this is something that we're working on making that better and better at what happens there. But I think that's why the kind of early stages are very late stage about sort of initial ideas without asking people to work too heavily on them yet, so that then we can look at, there might be legal issues around something that it's simply not possible, or there might be something in the making already in the city that, that the people who put ideas forward how that worked. But but for instance, now, we're working on certain other things. So there's another he was asked about the tools. So there's another tool that we are looking at, at the moment of developing kind of the model and internal capacity of delivering thing, and that's placemaking, which is, of course, not a new tool as such, but it's something that again, goes through the city and that we we are looking at developing that the future models around what how we do placemaking. And for instance, at the moment, we didn't work around certain rail stations and these kind of you might think really key public spots in different neighborhoods, that you might look at squares, but for instance, also main transport hubs such as local railway stations and, and when we've been looking at various things that will be developed in them in the future, one key element will also be working with certain pilots with communities around those areas. And, and here again, we have been looking at the type of ideas that are coming through, for instance, the participatory budgeting system, and they are reoccurring things that are really of importance to the city, or again, using data such as all the different feedback channels that the city of Helsinki has on what kind of reoccurring really important strong themes are emerging from those and how we can in the future, be sure to use them in an even more kind of coherent and holistic way. And and then if we're doing, let's say, development work elsewhere that what do we know already? And how can we take all that information on board?

Olga Stella 28:34

And then maybe it's the final question along this line around just accessibility and inclusion, you know, thinking about a wide range of people, maybe even from different cultural backgrounds that may have come to Helsinki, from other places with different physical needs, you know, age ranges, all this, all these different types of characteristics. You know, how do your processes really, you know, account for accessibility and inclusion?

Hannah Harris 29:02

Well, we have several citywide programs, we're actually currently updating one of them, which takes a really sort of human rights approach actually, and how these different things fall under that and and so it's something that we take very, very seriously. We're currently working on also a different projects around issues of inclusion in urban design processes and how that works in Helsinki. And the sort of tools we might develop in the future around that. If you look at certain examples that have in the past year, really brought together those themes and design thinking in Helsinki. One has been for instance work that we do with libraries here. So in Finland in general, I mean, the library system is is something that is really perhaps a prime spot for inclusion, something that is really for everyone, which has been a sort of free space for learning, sharing, developing an idea of active citizenship. And then again, the library buildings and then how libraries have been running, what sort of services they do have, how the staffing structure works, what their functions are, has really mirrored or matched that and in a very progressive way being developed all the time. And a couple of years ago opened our new Central Librar Oodi , which is a flagship building in the in the city centre in a very sort of symbolically important spot, prime real estate spot, facing the parliament building and in the capital city. So something that we've really sort of put the people in the, in the center then. And of course, this was a major

architectural project that was an open architecture competition, anybody could take part in it - over 500 entries. And all architects from Finland, the office wanted to have the time and, and the building itself has been really, you know, winning lots of design prizes, it's got lots of attention, but equally importantly, the whole process that went into there, that idea of inclusion, and accessibility, and how the both library users and workers have been involved all along in the process of co-creating that what the building is, and how it's used, has been a really sort of strong case of how we've used design, and that continues to how it works today. So how, for instance, the staff teams are organized in their how they rotate from this flagship facility to other libraries in Helsinki, we have close to 40 libraries. How those learn from each other and exchange ideas and and really are attuned to what the different very diverse user groups of these spaces need. And in fact, this kind of success of this flagship facility has actually translated to raising and opening up all of the libraries so our visitor figures have gone up throughout the network, not just in the landmark facility, we have had a huge rise in registered new users. So that idea of inclusion in our processes, and also in the kind of facilities that we have offer, how we can offer to our people has been very much incorporated into the idea of places like libraries.

Olga Stella 32:08

Maybe as we as we close out our conversation today, I you know, I've just been struck, thinking a little bit about what you've been saying and, and thinking about how maybe other governmental leaders like city leaders and other and other cities around the world might, you know, hear our conversation. And if you were to speak directly to them, a lot of what you've talked about are the really the benefits of not just design tools and design thinking and in thinking about city service. But really this idea of co-creation with residents. What would be your your kind of words of counsel words of advice to to maybe fellow city leaders who just believe it's too much work, it takes too much time? It's just easier to do it the way we've always done it, what might be your words to them?

Hannah Harris 32:58

Yes, it takes time, but that time pays back. So if we really take seriously who we are doing stuff for. Who are the users? Who are the people in our cities, who are the communities? And we really deeply understand what it is that they need, we are able to more effectively also manage our own processes, governance processes, and how we make investments. So we will first of all really target the problems at hand. And we will do it in a way that is resourceful, appreciated, and makes the city flourish into the future.

Olga Stella 33:38

Well, thank you so much, Hannah. I'm so glad that we were able to speak and thank you so much for coming on the podcast.

Hannah Harris 33:44

Thank you very much, Olga and everybody in Detroit.

Olga Stella 34:03

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