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Pathways to Cross-boundary Collaboration: case Helsinki City Library Oodi

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Introduction

Finnish public libraries are known for their diverse range of services, functional buildings, educated staff and free basic services equally accessible to everyone. Municipalities are responsible for arranging the public library services and they are financed by the municipalities and the state together (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2016). The flagship of the Finnish public libraries, the Helsinki City Library Oodi was inaugurated in 2018. The inauguration was preceded by a planning process lasting for nearly two decades and passing through several stages of projecting including e.g. the Helsinki urban planning and other big cultural building projects specifically (Audunson et al., 2024). During this time, the library concept evolved due to societal changes and technical development, from being an institution primarily promoting literature, to a multifunctional urban meeting place as reflected also in the renewed legislation (Public Libraries Act 1492/2016).

Planning of a culturally and architecturally significant building can be characterized as a complex public project which requires collaborative efforts of actors from multiple public and/or private organizations in planning (cf. Riche et al., 2021). While defining cross-boundary collaboration as groups, made up of individuals from different contexts, such as government, business, communities and citizens and where individuals work beyond their own departments or organizations, in order to tackle multifaceted challenges (e.g. Doherty, 2021), this high-profile and long-lasting cultural policy project offers an explanatory and in Finnish circumstances rare platform to study the collaboration of different actors and contribute to a better and more comprehensive understanding of collaboration between various actors involved.

The aim of this study is thus to examine the collaborative relations between the key actors in the context of the planning and the decision-making processes related to the Helsinki City Library Oodi. The study explores the dynamics of the interaction between library professionals, politicians, and city officials through their different roles and tasks as well as the enablers and challenges connected to these.

The research questions are:

- Who are the key actors? What are their roles and tasks in the project?
- With whom does the actors collaborate and communicate, and what is the intensity of the collaboration?
- What are the enablers and challenges of the project?

Method and analysis

The data was collected by thematic interviews in late 2021 and early 2022 via Zoom. The interviews were recorded with the consent of the informants and transcribed. Both the two authors were attending the interviews. The snowball method was used to find the most relevant informants. The study informants consisted of library professionals as well as politicians, and officials on the state and city levels.

Based on the previous knowledge of the project (Audunson et al., 2024), the interview themes and the review of the interview transcripts the authors decided on a following coding scheme of two stages:

- Stage one codes: Informant's roles, Tasks, Relations, Enablers, Challenges
- Stage two codes: Actors mentioned by an informant, Tasks, Roles, Enablers, Challenges

Preliminary reflections of the results

The preliminary findings of the study indicate that there are slight differences in the cross-boundary collaboration between the state and municipality actors when evaluated through the intensity of communication, which contributes in building trust in cross-boundary collaboration. The differences stem from the roles and tasks of the actors. The enablers in strengthening the pathways to cross-boundary collaboration were individual's professional tasks and their personal characteristics and competencies such as ability to listen, diplomacy, energy and experience as well as the library concept, the involving all the stakeholders, thorough planning, financing, and timing. Challenges consisted of general economic conditions and extensive building projects from other cultural sectors, as well as the questions related to urban planning which developed into issues delaying the project.

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