

Case study: LoFoio - Florence

Theme: Economies responding to community needs

TELL US ABOUT THE LOFOIO EXPERIENCE. HOW WAS IT BORN?

Lofoio Makerspace started in May 2014. It was: Francesca Lupo (architect and advocate of freelance workers' rights), Lucio Ferella (Computer Scientist and Structural Biologist), Mattia Sullini (rendering designer and coworking enthusiast).

We met at FabLab Firenze, where we came up with the idea of a shared workspace for mutual help between creatives. It was meant to be a hobby, but we got carried away. In summer 2016, Mattia and Lucio splitted their professional collaboration and left Florence, deserting this side project with no forwarding. Francesca took charge. In 2018 Lofoio rented the garage next to this workshop. In 2021 we inherited FabLab's tools and fanbase.

CAN YOU DESCRIBE THE PLACE AND WHAT ACTIVITIES DO YOU CARRY OUT?

The makerspace consists of two rooms: one dedicated to woodworking and metalworking, the other to digital manufacturing (lasercut, 3d printing).

The place is open whenever the makers need to use it, without a fixed timetable.

We share an online calendar to notify all the resident makers the current and incoming activities.

Thus they are enabled to plain the individual activities - usually on a 4-hours slot base.

TELL US ABOUT THE ECONOMIC SUSTENAIBILITY

We never had public fundings or incubation support: we ask resources to our members/users and are responsible towards them. It means that if we don't solve real problems for our people, we won't survive. Some of our recent projects are partially supported by public money.

The main source of income has been workshops until 2020 (pandemic). After the pandemic we changed a lot of things, because of social distancing, but also because we wanted a really "maker" oriented space, and rely less on occasional workshop attendees, who in most cases did not come back to use the space.

We tried to build our economic sustainability on "resident makers", to have more stability and in order to create a community of makers who can bring the space to life and also take care of it.

So we now rely on three main pillars to make the maker space live and gain its economic independence: workshops, resident makers, and external projects that are funded by public or private entities.

TELL US ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE COMMUNITY

10 years after lofoio started, we are now known in the crafters' community, social services, travel designers, the neighbourhood and schools.

Public schools ask us to host stages and internships, social services ask us to make workshops for special targets (especially teenagers dropping out from schools);

the neighbours ask us to hammer a nail or cut a piece of wood or replicate a broken piece;

Crafters ask us to expand their business by giving classes to amateurs or to take care of the social/environmental impact of their processes or to prototype items, props and tools.

Travel designers ask us for « special experiences » of crafting.

The University of Florence and private schools of design send some of their students to us when they need facilities and expertise to make exams and prototypes.

WHAT KIND OF DIFFICULTIES AND THREATS YOU HAD/STILL HAVING?

We still struggle with the economic sustainability of the project, as we still need workshops in order to pay bills, but incomes are not enough to give us stability.

Also the community building did not meet our expectations, as getting people involved and motivated in our activities in the long term is not always easy.

THAT ARE YOUR PERSPECTIVES FOR THE FUTURE? NEXT STEP?

We are now trying to organize more structured ways of bringing people in using the space (wood club) and ways of using space that lead makers to a long-term commitment to the association.

We started to collaborate with more consolidated institutions, like public administrations and schools.