

Waste to value

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“Waste to value” –is a collaborative project between Westenergy and University of Lapland, and part of my project studies, included in the Master’s programme of Arctic Art and Design. The aim of the project was to develop the visitor experience for Westenergy, through creating a ‘conversation piece’ exhibited in the energy plants facilities.

Westenergy is a modern Waste-to-energy plant located in the municipality of Mustasaari in Western Finland and it is an important part of the areas waste management system, utilising source separated, non-recyclable and combustible waste into energy. Electricity and district heating is produced in cooperation with Vaasan Sähkö Oy, through using the steam produced in the plant. Compared to a landfill, the combustion of waste releases significantly less CO₂. Westenergy’s WtE -plant has been operating since 2012 and it is owned by 5 municipal waste management companies. The stakeholders cover together 50 municipalities with over 400 000 inhabitants.

The ‘conversation piece’ was created collaboratively in the form of a workshop together with an invited elementary school class. In the workshop, we were collaboratively making miniature models of the energy plants different elements, by using waste material. While creating we were discussing what is happening in the energy plant and what is waste. The workshop was organized in Westenergy’s facilities and included a tour in the energy plant. A documentation in the form of a photo series is exhibited as a story in Westenergy’s window. It highlights collaborations, existing and future ones and discusses the role of creative industry in communicating and creating transparency, while pointing out that there is great value in the educational work, which is already happening in the energy plant.

The project was created on Westenergy’s initiative to collaborate with students from the field of culture and arts. Having had several collaborations done in the past together with engineering students, the field of culture offered new opportunities and aspects to the company’s communication and educational work.

According to the company’s Health, Safety & Communications Officer, there is a lack of understanding about what a WtE-plant is and about the different responsibilities in the waste management system. Therefore, the aim was to try to open a discussion about attitudes to waste, while investigating our relationship



Figure 1. School group first visiting the factory and then working on energy plants models in the workshop. Images: Anu Corin, 2017.

to material and try to understand the material flow of our society and role of a WtE-plant in the whole waste management system. Though the initial aim was to research attitudes, the project ultimately led to developing the context for future collaborations and discussions – What could and should be discussed? How, why and where? The process-based approach is combined with object-based traditions, researching the role of participation and creativity when it comes to understanding the material world.

Through exploring the meaning of seeing, making and sensing for the purpose of learning and understanding, the project was opening new ways of communicating and understanding their visitors and customers. The project also contributed to the energy plants transparency efforts, which is apparent in seeking new opportunities to create a dialogue with their customers through unconventional methods.

The process has given me experience in how to manage a project from beginning to end. Besides improving management skills, it has deepened my own understanding of my surrounding. It led to an insight that the relationship to material, objects and environment is deeply individual and personal. Our environment consists of natural and processed materials, complicated systems and an increasing amount of waste. However, because most people don't see the entire material flow, people tend to fail to follow the environmental impact, which leads to a lack of understanding and sense of responsibility. To create a better relationship to the environment, I think it is important to highlight that we are not outside of our manmade structures.