

Comparing goals and perspectives in Helsinki's Meri-Rastila suburb

The planners

Helsinki is an intensely growing city, which constantly needs to find solutions for housing new residents. Among many others, the city's "Masterplan 2002" development program introduced the idea of intensifying, expanding and upgrading a far-flung decade-old suburb called Meri-Rastila. The concept was introduced to residents at a meeting in the spring of 2003 as part of the normal plan-hearing procedures.

Despite critical feedback from different areas in the city, the local government approved the city-wide plan in late 2003. Leaving the neighborhood conflicts to be solved at the detailed planning level later on.

The city's plans kept evolving to a more detailed level. But the goals of intensifying Meri-Rastila were challenged by the fact that the owner of the shopping center next to the metro station didn't want to develop their lands. And voices from the developers were saying that the social-housing dominated center of the suburb was not an interesting place for investing into building new higher profile housing. A model to develop Meri-Rastila was chosen where a new, separate, housing estate would be built into the woods.

Following the results of plan impact evaluation studies and discussions with stakeholders (civil society, private sector, and other government bodies), a need to amend the area plan evolved in 2011. The ELY-keskus authorities signaled that building too close to coastline is not desirable. The planning board needed to put the plan back to the planners for a version where the shoreline was free, but the volume of new construction would remain. A version that matches these new goals came out and got approved by the planning board in May 2012 and later on by the city council.

The residents complaints have stalled the proposal to build more housing in Meri-Rastila. But a new opportunity emerges: the owner of the shopping center gets interested about developing the center of Meri-Rastila. A new project for retrofitting emerges. The basis is taken from a plan the residents have made to accommodate their wishes. Now there are plans to develop the forest and the rest of Meri-Rastila.

The residents

Shock and outrage were the dominant feeling among those Meri-Rastila residents who attended the city's meeting to unveil goals of their "Masterplan 2002" draft plan. The planners were proposing to slash the local wood-like recreation area between the suburb and the sea to introduce new construction.

The concerned residents immediately formed a group to collect neighborhood opinions and draft an official feedback to the city's plan proposal. The content was that the forest should be saved and all possible development should be directed near the center of the suburb, where a metro station sits.

Despite unsuccessful efforts to amend the contents of "Masterplan 2002" around Meri-Rastila through official participation channels, the concerned residents decided to keep the dialogue running. On the one hand they began staging events in the threatened recreational area to raise local awareness, and on the other, they started a petition and re-wrote their demand for changing the plan. The latter was given to the planning department and local councilors in fall 2005.

The residents continued their resistance through official and unofficial channels. In 2011 there suddenly was some hope in the air: the planning board put the Meri-Rastila area plan back on the planners' table for amendments. The forest could potentially be saved after all.

But the residents soon discovered this was not the case. Only a little bit of the shoreline forest got saved and much of the area would still be developed. An idea to an alternative proposal emerged.

In collaboration with a World Design Capital initiative, the residents launch a project in early 2012 to draft their own alternative plan (OurCity) to suggest how the growth could be accommodated with infill development.

Residents also file an official complaint of the city's plan.

The locals are faced with a new feeling of shock.