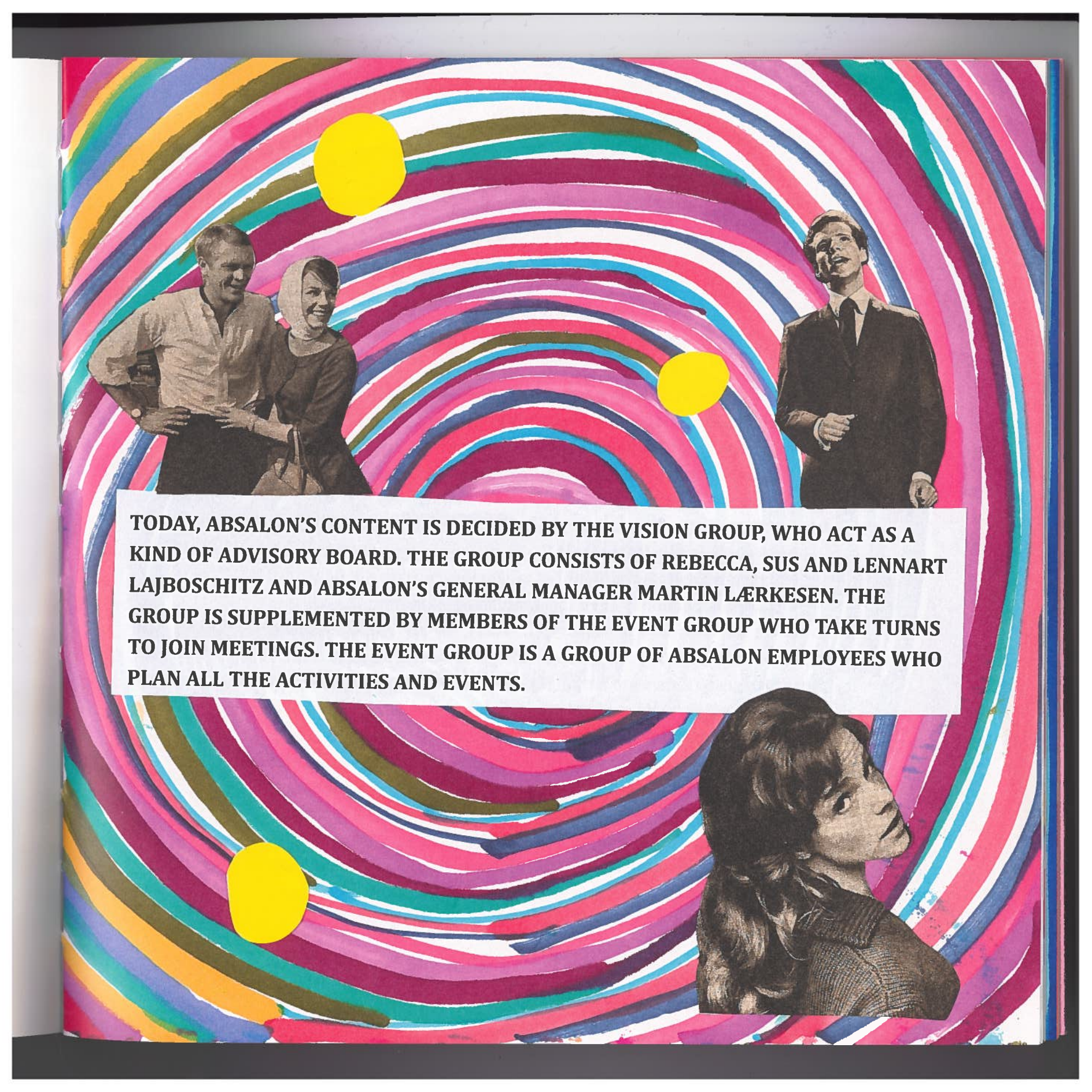


The organisation in practice

At Absalon, they never stray far from their mission and vision, and the organisation is structured in a way that makes this possible. At the top is the vision group, consisting of Sus, Lennart, Rebecca and Martin. In this sense, Absalon is quite a top-down organisation, where the vision is constantly part of the discussion. In the beginning, the vision group was also responsible for developing and executing events, but now its role is more to discuss the overall direction for the place—its function is more like that of an advisory board.

“Since we first opened Absalon’s doors, the organisation has changed a lot,” Lennart tells us. “At the start, Sus and I were rather dominating, but now we are in a process where we gradually give away responsibility to the other co-creators. Back then, we had to be very much involved, to ensure that our values were reflected and that Absalon communicated with one voice. But now, Absalon has developed its own culture and we can begin to let go. Perhaps at some point we will also step back a bit from the vision group.”

For now, however, Absalon is still very much a work in progress, and this requires the vision group to meet weekly. At these meetings,



TODAY, ABSALON'S CONTENT IS DECIDED BY THE VISION GROUP, WHO ACT AS A KIND OF ADVISORY BOARD. THE GROUP CONSISTS OF REBECCA, SUS AND LENNART LAJBOSCHITZ AND ABSALON'S GENERAL MANAGER MARTIN LÆRKESEN. THE GROUP IS SUPPLEMENTED BY MEMBERS OF THE EVENT GROUP WHO TAKE TURNS TO JOIN MEETINGS. THE EVENT GROUP IS A GROUP OF ABSALON EMPLOYEES WHO PLAN ALL THE ACTIVITIES AND EVENTS.

it is clear that everyone is passionate about the project and there are many long discussions. To make it easier for them to take final decisions, they have developed their own system:

“When we need to make a decision, we all have to choose from one of the following,” Lennart demonstrates.

- I believe in this 100 percent.
- I do not totally agree, but I can accept it.
- I cannot, under any circumstances, accept this.

The system allows the vision group to take on ideas and suggestions from others, even if they are not totally in agreement. It also allows them to veto a project if they fundamentally disagree with it.

But it is one thing to be visionary, and quite something else to turn visions into reality. Therefore, it is important that what the vision group discusses can be passed on to the rest of the team at Absalon. But how to ensure that the ideas behind Absalon are communicated to and fully understood by the staff?

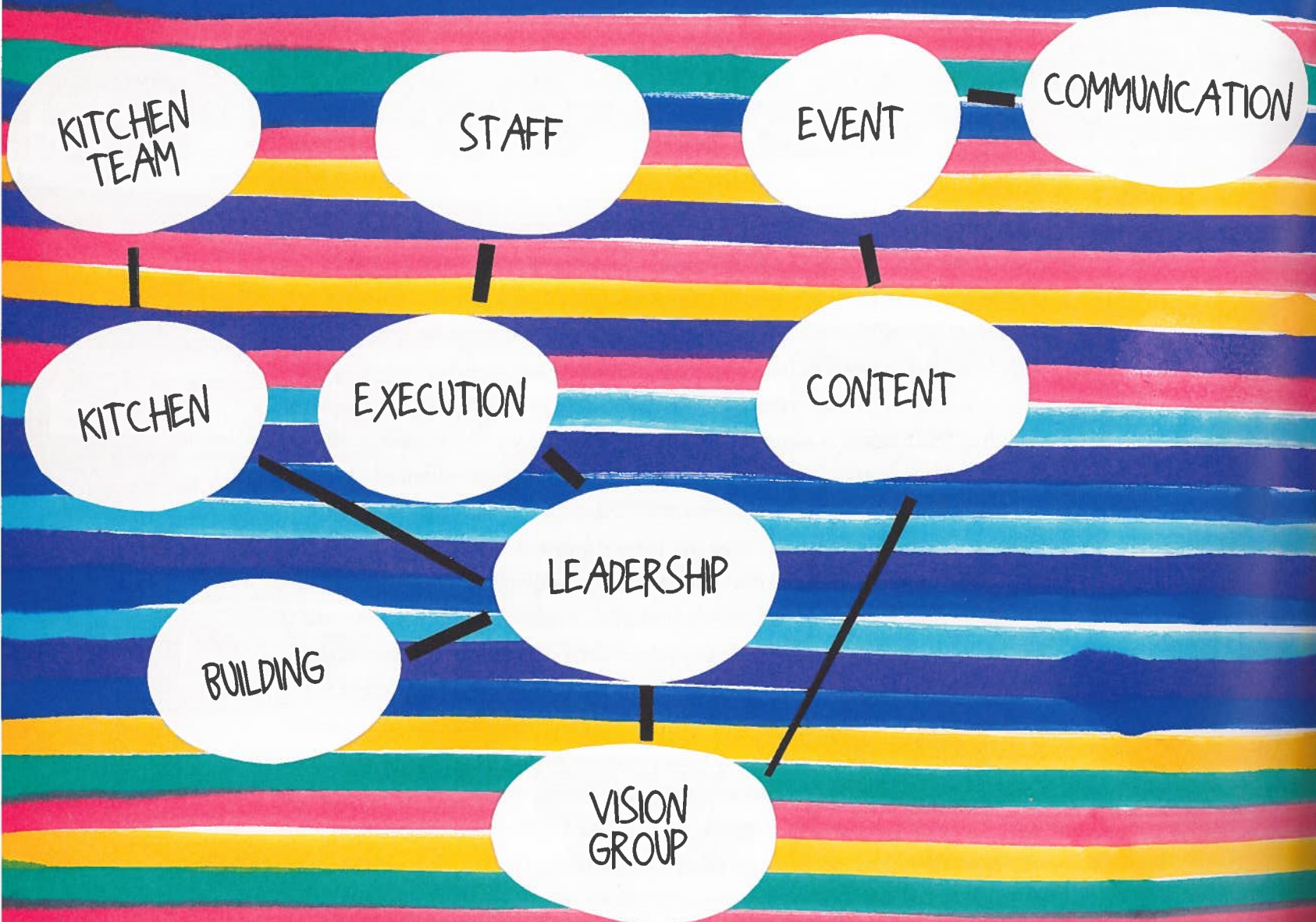
Sus explains that there have recently been many new faces in the Absalon team, so it has been necessary to have a lot of staff meetings


with the vision group present too, so that everyone can align. "It is tricky because, during the day, the staff have to deal with practical things. Perhaps they run out of plates or the coffee machine is not working—these things take up a lot of time and they can be frustrating. This is why it is even more important that we have the staff meetings where we focus on our vision and the staff can get a greater perspective on what their work is actually about," Sus says.

And it is Martin's job to play "translator" when it comes to ensuring that the vision is understood in the day-to-day running of Absalon. "When I try to reframe the mission into a 'what' and a 'how' for the staff, I draw from my own experience," he says. "On the one hand, Lennart talks about a social revolution and, on the other, a 20-year-old learns how to make coffee. It is my job to turn what Lennart says into something practical that the staff can easily relate to in their daily tasks. Often, it is about letting the staff know that they should be present and personal in their work, and feel that they too want to be part of the community that they are helping to create."

Generally speaking, Absalon has an innovative working culture where staff, or co-creators, can work with each other in many different combinations, but, as we have previously touched upon, a certain

THE ORGANIZATION





amount of structure is still necessary to ensure that both staff and guests are aware of the guidelines they have to work within. There is no official organisation model at Absalon, but, for the sake of this book, here is an illustration that shows how ideas become reality, with the content influencing the form, not the other way round. The lines show where there is most supervision and control.

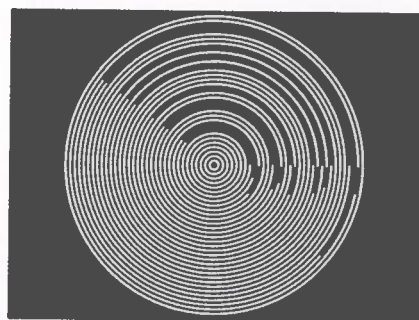
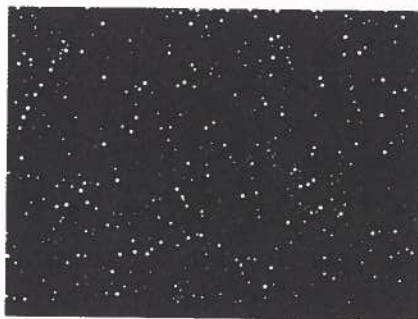
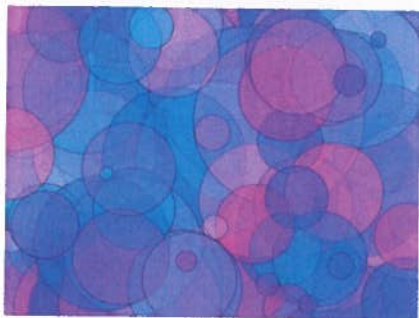
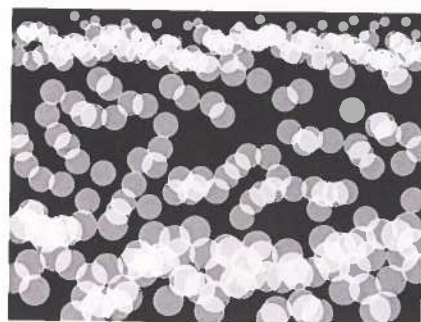
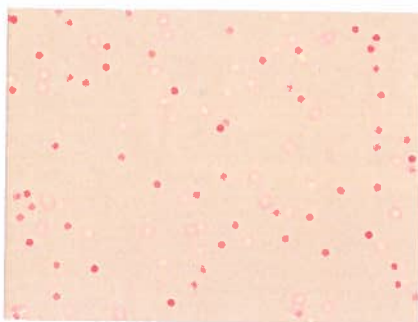
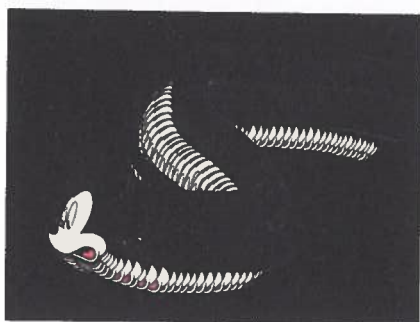
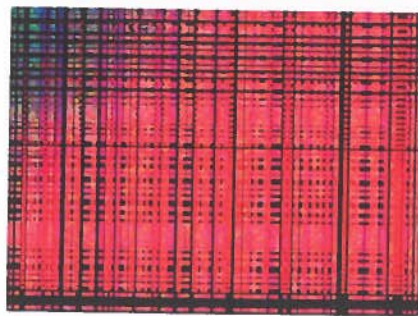
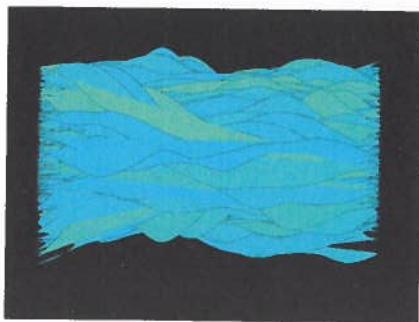
Absalon employs 50+ people. They serve food and drink, and are responsible for everything practical; they are on the stage and maybe even run some of their own events. In the kitchen, there are seven employees: chefs, dishwashers and a baker. Sus is responsible for Absalon's interior design.

◀ Martin is responsible for daily operations which involve, among other things, all of the employees, the building itself and the kitchen. Rebecca is in charge of developing Absalon's identity through communication strategies and activities. The events group is heavily involved in this work, and is responsible for organising the many weekly events. Absalon is still a work in progress, which means that these roles and their relationship to one another are constantly shifting, as they have done since the beginning.

But what about the guests? With such an organisational structure, do they feel that they too can contribute to how Absalon should be and evolve? Can they, for example, be part of deciding what kind of activities Absalon offers? Yes, they can. But, like much else at Absalon, there is no prescribed model for this.

“People often want to hear a simplified version of how to make things happen,” Lennart says. “But there is an anarchist in me that believes that, if it is meant to be, it will happen. I think things should occur spontaneously when I am, for example, eating dinner and I find myself sitting next to someone who is a world champion in memory. Then we’d naturally begin to talk about doing an event about memory at Absalon. It should happen like that. If you want to have influence, we are not going to create a procedure where you can fill out a form or send a postcard. I am not a fan of putting structure around how we create content. Let us be without borders for a moment and let us create some content,” he concludes.


► Images from Painting With Code



billeder fra Mal med
(SOM ER ET AF DE MEGET POPULÆRE
AHA-HOLD) ← Kodning



VI BYGGER EN
KIRKE, ARTHUR!



JA, VILHELM!
DEN SKAL HAVE
TÅRN OG VÆRE
AF MURSTEN.

Economically sustainable over time

As previously mentioned, it has always been the intention that Absalon should eventually become a sustainable business, because only then can the project inspire others to start similar projects of their own.

“I believe we have contributed an enormous amount of human value to the world—more than I ever believed possible,” Lennart says. “Then we have also done things like moving Absalon to Roskilde Festival for a week or so, where we did not make any money at all, but we profited in a human sense. We had a party, people came together and we created a community. At the same time, we managed to recruit some new staff.” When asked to describe Absalon’s financial position in more detail, Lennart puts it like this: “Right now, we have more than 50 events during the week. A year ago, we had around 25. More people are coming to Absalon now, which naturally puts us in a better financial position.”

◀ In 1919, the original Absalon Church was built. It was a wooden church, and it was often jokingly referred to as “the bike shed”. The current building was built in 1933–34 by *Det københavnske kirkefond* (The Copenhagen Church Fund). Arthur Wittmack and Vilhelm Hvalsøe were the architects behind it.

“We’re building a church, Arthur!”

“Yes, Vilhelm! It shall have a tower and be made of bricks.”

Martin also affirms that Absalon's revenue has increased by 50 percent a month, compared to last year. "If we talk about being economically sustainable, well, we are still in deficit every month. But we are getting there and we are always looking out for new things we can do to improve our financial situation," he says.

Absalon's bingo evenings have become so well known that they receive requests from companies and organisations that would like to hire Absalon for events. Although this could create an extra revenue stream, it is not something Absalon is interested in. "People should know that Absalon is not a place that works B2B," Martin points out. This would not fit the criterion that Absalon is for everyone.

Well paid, exclusive activities for private companies is not how Absalon will become economically sustainable, Martin stresses. To what extent Absalon should do these out-of-house activities has been discussed at length by the vision group. In the first instance, it was decided that Absalon should host these exclusive, external bingo events, but the matter is still being discussed and the final verdict remains unknown.

Another ongoing discussion in the group relates to Absalon's event-marketing efforts. Its intention is and always has been to create events for everyone, without discrimination. But on Facebook, for example, it is possible to be very specific and target a particular group of people. Rebecca is in two minds about it.



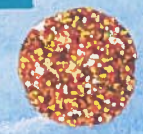
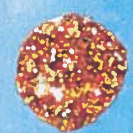
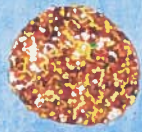
“We could create Facebook campaigns targeted towards a specific segment who we know are more likely to have an interest in a certain type of event, or we could target a broad audience where we make sure that we reach many different kinds of people, but where it is also likely that we will not reach as many people who would actually want to attend the event,” she says.

Rebecca explains that this is where they particularly run the risk of having double standards: “We state that we want to bring all kinds of people together and not separate people into groups. There could be a 60-year-old woman who would love to attend a yoga class, but she would be excluded if we created a sponsored post on Facebook that only targeted young people.” Rebecca herself is still not sure what the approach should be.

“Does it go against our identity and the story we want to tell people, if we do that?” she asks. “These are the kinds of questions we constantly ask ourselves; we still do not have an answer.”

It has become necessary to keep an eye on what Absalon’s growing popularity means for all the different events and what guests expect from them. At a bingo event recently, they had to turn away 300 people at the door. When they made a Harry Potter event public, all 250 tickets sold out within a minute, with 9,000 people expressing their interest in it on Facebook.

“It feels a bit as if we are cursed by our own success and, as a consequence, we have had to become very clear in our communication about each individual event,” Martin says. As well as this, the vision group continually discusses what should be on the programme, and which open and closed events make sense, so that Absalon can continue to be a place for everyone.



ABSALON
 TABLE TENNIS TOUR 2015
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