

— WE CAN BE **HEROES** —

Exploring Europe for a better world

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HERO #8

PUBLIC GARDENS

with **TOBIAS**



THE PROJECT

CAN YOU INTRODUCE YOURSELF ?

My name is Tobias. I'm a product and interior designer. I am a member of [Hildegarden](#) since 2014 and now co-chairman of the association.

CAN YOU SUM UP HILDEGARDEN ?

[Hildegarden](#) is an open project for a public rooftop-garden up on a huge WWII-bunker in [St.Pauli](#), a district of [Hamburg](#), Germany. It could be the first stone of a natural landscape above the city.

HOW DID HILDEGARDEN COME TO MIND ?

In fact, the idea was born in a pre-dinner drink. One of the co-founders of Hildegarden lived next to the bunker with a stunning view on it from his flat. One night, after years of watching the bunker, with friends seating on the terrasse, they imagined a public garden on the top of it. In the following days, he contacted some friends working in creative companies - architects, designers, engineers. They developed a first concept, went to the City Council to discuss with authorities - administration, Fire Department, Heritage Officer. It's an important historical monument, so you can't do what you want to.

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CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THE HISTORY OF THIS PLACE ?

This bunker was built in 1942 during WWII by forced labourers to defeat allies attacks. After the end of the war, it became a residential space because all the area around was destroyed, except this building. It was also used for a small theatre, one of the first German television studios and lots of cultural activities in the 1950s.

Until the end of the Cold War, the building was the propriety of the Republic of Germany. After the reunification, it has been given to the city of Hamburg, but it was in a bad shape : all painting fall down, the roof was leaky and the municipality didn't have money to maintain the building. And with an expected cost of 27 million Deutsche Marks even the demolition would have been too expensive.

In 1993 finally one of the renters, the Hamburgian entrepreneur Dr. Thomas Matzen became sole tenant of the whole building by dealing with the municipality. He proposed to rent the bunker for 60 years and take care of the renovation and maintenance. And he did it ! Today, the building is totally rented by different companies, institutions and artists.

THE COMMUNITY

WAS IT EASY TO MOBILIZE PEOPLE AND PARTNERS AT THE BEGINNING ?

Lighting a spark and inspiring people were very easy ! The hardest job was to motivate them to contribute and bring in concrete ideas. That's why we organized workshops to introduce the project and discuss with people about different topics. We wrote down ideas and opinions on a mind map and from the results, we created working groups.

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HOW DO YOU INTEGRATE NEIGHBOURHOOD TO THE CONCEPTION OF HILDEGARDEN ?

Our community is composed of 50 members including 20 active people. After the consultation, we created five working groups in accordance with their expectations :

- Governance : they define our organizational goals and how to reach it with a legal form ;
- Outdoor space : they collect ideas about planting school gardens, knowledge sharing and interactions between old and new generations ;
- Indoor spaces : they imagine activities that we can create in the 500m² of the bunker. It could be a kitchen, a cooking studio, an art gallery or social activities like evening lessons ;
- Memorial Exhibition : we develop an exhibition dedicated to the history of the bunker ;
- Circular economy : we want to use and reuse solar energy and from the bunker to be independent. One of our project is to collect the water from the shower, recycle it and bring it to the toilets and sinks. We also want to do aquapony and compost.

IS IT ONLY A PROJECT FOR ST.PAULI'S RESIDENTS ?

Of course not ! That's why we created an advisory board. It's composed of local actors from Hamburg like local church, social associations, urbanism and gardening experts, the chairman of the Hamburg's Historical Museum Foundation, and also politicians.

Right now, public institutions don't finance us. But last July [2017], the Parliament of Hamburg gave us the permission to continue our project. It means that they have confidence in us. This is good news for the future because it could convince other partners to support us.

THE CHALLENGES

WHAT WERE THE FIRST PROBLEMS YOU ENCOUNTERED WHEN DEVELOPING THIS PROJECT ?

When founders designed the first concept, financing issues had come quickly. They contacted the owner and presented the idea. He liked it and even decided to bear the full costs of the project if they can prove the project will be realistic and profitable. So they also proposed to build a rooftop. This challenge led to the economic model : renting indoor spaces to finance activities and maintain the public garden. In the long term Hildegarden will pay for itself. You know, [High Line in New York](#) [hanging gardens in an old railway in Manhattan] was only financed by private donations ! We have to find partners, but this example makes me confident.

FOR YOU, WHAT COULD WEAKEN OR STOP HILDEGARDEN ?

I think the main challenge is to mobilize people for a project which will be concrete only in 2 or 3 years. We have to implement the great ideation of so many people and it will be a long way. People like the idea of Nature in the city, but now there is no public garden yet - not even the possibility to get out on the roof. We have to be aware of that and don't stop the dialogue with citizens. That's why the working groups are so important. We also begin our project of aquaponic system now, this is something concrete !

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Then, some neighbours feared that the project could cause more gentrification. Historically St.Pauli has been a working class district, sailors came here in the red light district and now it became the main place in Hamburg to party. The municipality support many events to attract tourists. That's why some people fear Hildegarden will become just another hot spot... But Hildegarden could be so much more. It's a participatory project designed by citizens to connect people living here.

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APPROACH OF LIFE

WHY DID YOU ENGAGE IN THIS PROJECT ?

I'm fascinated by Nature since always. Growing up in a rural village, I came to Hamburg 15 years ago and I love this big city. But there are only a few green spaces. I think one of the most beautiful experience in life is contemplating a landscape. In the city, you just see the next house, it's quite limited... That's why I find this project interesting : a rooftop garden above the city with a distant view and open to the public, what an amazing idea ! I want to be part of the process that makes a new kind of Nature in the City and I think this project is trying to do it. It's about creating, building and developing the City by your own. That's absolutely motivating me !

CAN YOU GIVE ME ONE WORD/ADJECTIVE/FEELING TO RESUME YOUR ENGAGEMENT ?

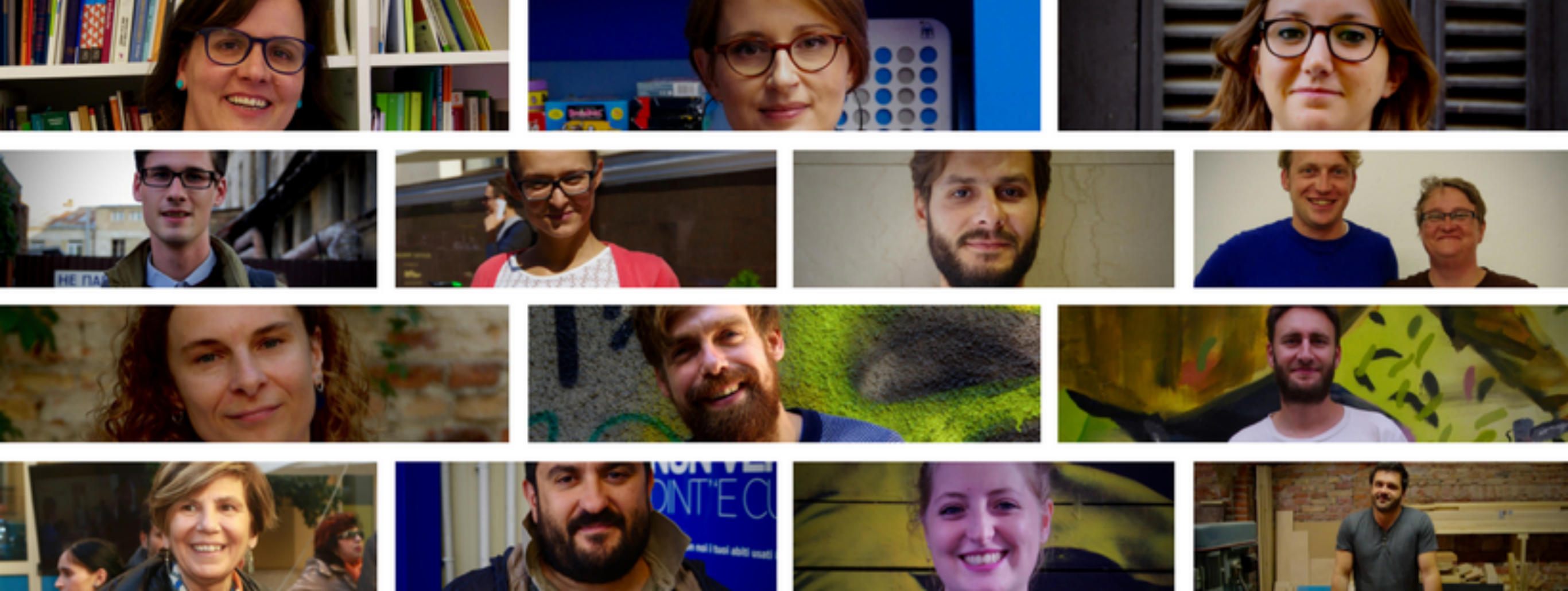
I would say "discovering", "curiosity" or "passion". It's very difficult for me to choose one word, I find so many things interesting ! I like to understand how things work.

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