

UFAFABRIK (Berlin)

"The sustainable oasis of culture".

In the summer of 1979 over 100 students, artists and activists peacefully took over an abandoned site of the former and historically famous movie studios UFA (Universum Film AG), to save it from demolition, and set up a comprehensive work and living cultural project. Today the centre is a "green cultural oasis" in the middle of Berlin – a space of creation, innovative ideas, sustainable development and a productive meeting place for the citizens of Berlin and artists from around the world. The 18,566-square meter space is divided over seven buildings and many uses including the Freie Schule Berlin (Free School Berlin), children's farm, community centre, organic bakery and shop, hostel, children's circus school, artist residencies, café, accommodation block and more and three stages are open year-round for public performances. ufaFabrik employs between 160 to 200 people (depending on the season) and hosts approximately 200,000 visitors per year.

What distinguishes ufaFabrik from a lot of its contemporaries is the fact that it takes a holistic approach to its work and combines economic, social, environmental and cultural sustainability research and solutions in its stratagems. ufaFabrik has amassed a wealth of experience and knowledge in

low-fi, practical, approaches to sustainability that could be inspirational for other cultural centres and organisations, no matter their location, size or programme. Although it would seem like a natural fit for cultural organisations to embrace and lead on ecological sustainability, an issue that is so central to the continued development and even survival of culture and community, this is sadly not the case. This is not to say that such sustainability-aware organisations don't exist but examples are still rare.

ufaFabrik don't see a division between different disciplines and actions when it comes to sustainability. For example, their ecological sustainability is linked to their economy, in that conserving energy or rain water also reduces their bills. Or building a straw bale house themselves cuts the cost of contracting in a construction company and also creates a collective social activity. The same way as they have adopted a closed-loop system for their water, using rainwater for toilets, washing machines, watering the gardens and the like (drinking water is still taken from the mains supply), the whole functioning of ufaFabrik is working towards the principle of a sustainable 'closed-loop' system. Everything is interdependent, not least the people and their support for each other. This is evident also in ufaFabrik's approach to its finances. From the beginning, the basis of financial sustainability has been a shared economy (originally money was made from street performance and everything collected was used to pay the combined expenses of the collective. This is still the philosophy, even with a differential budget now reaching into the millions of Euros) – there is no individual ownership and important decisions are made collectively.

In this interview, representatives of ufaFabrik discuss these issues and their hopes for the future.



INTERVIEW

Sigrid Niemer - Communications (SN), **Frido Hinde** - Managing Director (FH), **Werner Wiartalla** - Technical Director (WW) by Sandy Fitzgerald (SF)

SF: When and how was ufaFabrik developed and how did you get involved?

SN: After the Second World War there was a huge effort to recover the country – education, establishing universities, the economy – and this was known as the period of *Wirtschaftswunder* (Economic Miracle, also known as the Miracle on the Rhine) and by the late 1970s my generation had a lot of everything. I was born only ten years after the war but had no real idea about the war growing up. When I attended college we were asking questions about this post-war society. We didn't use the word value back then but this was all about values. We started to rethink society and everything that was happening - the education system, health, with regard to all these new things we were exposed to like chemical products, the traditional family – we were questioning everything. We also had the American army stationed here and when some of the soldiers left the army they stayed in Germany and brought with them other questions, like the Vietnam War. All these questions influenced the student movements and combined with a hunger for life. The people I knew then and still know were from all backgrounds and we were meeting scientists who had information that was shocking to us. Especially what the research was showing with regard to the environment. And Berlin being an island at the time, (*surrounded by the GDR*) people knew each other and discussed all of this. We decided we had to work in a holistic way. This was coupled with the fact that Berlin was attracting a lot of people from outside of the city and there was a lot of experimentation going on. West Berlin had the status of occupation and, for instance, there was no German army in Berlin, which meant no conscription. So peace-loving young men came to Berlin. And there were less restrictions and rules than in other parts of Germany. For instance, bars and clubs had no regulations. They could stay open as long as they wanted. So people also came to Berlin to party. The idea behind all of this was to keep the city alive, as an island in the middle of the GDR. Due to the fragile political situation, there were no big investors, no industry, so there was lots of empty space and rents were cheap. So, many things were possible in West Berlin. What did happen was an investment in education and three new universities opened. Because of all of this, people came from all over Germany to study and, unlike other big city universities, students didn't go home at the weekends because it was too difficult to get in and out of Berlin. You couldn't just hop on a bus. All of this created a certain atmosphere in the city that opened up a lot of possibilities. But not without tension. We did have a very conservative government on one side and then the Red Brigades on the other. When I went to university the communist groups were very active there. In 1978 there was a big conference called Tunix (*a meeting of alternative and social movements to discuss a whole range of issues, including ecology, which took place from the 27 to 29 of January in the Technical University of Berlin*), which is a German wordplay meaning 'do nothing'. This conference was very influential on people like me who didn't want to follow any dogmatic ideology. This was the point where people got the courage to take life into their own hands and decided to forget about dogma. It is also vital to remember that the women's movement was very important. And, in fact, this is how I initially met my further companions Juppy, Gisela, Bärbel and others. I wanted to learn how to defend myself, joined a karate class and here we met, all of us doing

sports together, sharing techniques with each other and this progressed into sharing other skills, like learning to play the guitar, and this developed into discussing our individual interests like education, dance, the environment and so on. I moved into their collective "Wir sind überall auf der Erde" ("We are everywhere in the world"), a group of 16 – 20 people living and working together. We renovated flats, shared income and in 1976 we founded a communication centre for our friends and us, a factory for culture, sports, and crafts (Fabrik für Kultur, Sport und Handwerk"). These were the seeds of what ufaFabrik is today.

The concept of ecological sustainability became important very fast within the early ufaFabrik. For instance, by living together we realised we didn't need a TV each but just needed one for us all; we could buy veg directly from the farmers; we could share clothes; we could build a model of shared income. What this meant was, we didn't depend on one single individual. An early project was concerned with natural food, what is today called bio food. Another was home births. Then alternative medicines. We were fascinated by other cultures and art forms. And then within our group we had technical experts and so began technical experiments, for instance windmills. We built a co-generator out of an old van for our heating system and it worked!

WW: I first got involved with ufaFabrik in the mid-1980s through the Samba Band, Terra Brasilis, and then I just got more and more involved until I left Siemens, where I was working then, and joined ufaFabrik full time. I was an engineer and had been overseeing quality control at Siemens by the time I left. A very good job with very good money but the work environment was blinkered, I think you would say in English.

When I joined ufaFabrik I was helping the umbrella group with optimising the functioning of the organisation. A main aim was that ufaFabrik would be self-sufficient and sustainable energy was part of this. I began to look at recycling systems, for instance composting and how to reuse rainwater for the toilets. By building this rainwater system we saved about two million litres of tap water a year. ufaFabrik was already into ecology before I arrived, sourcing organic food and establishing the organic bakery, but their main concentration was on the arts side and I brought an expertise that was not within the team before I arrived. It was an opportunity that occurred at the right time.

At that time this was all new and we became a pioneer in this emerging field of ecological sustainability. We were learning by doing and then in partnership with a group called IPAT at the Technical University of Berlin. As we progressed, we went out looking for equipment, like solar panels, to be built and only found one company that could meet our needs and they also became collaborators. People thought we were crazy and this one place was the only factory who would produce solar panels for us.

Many of the solutions were low-fi, cheap, solutions. It took all of the 1990s to realise our ecological projects and then in 1992 up to 2001 we began to get some funding. ufaFabrik became a funded pilot project for the European Union, with co-financing from the city of Berlin. I was excited by our progress and wanted to open out our discoveries to the public and launched an initiative of open

days and tours but the first call only resulted in twenty five people turning up and it was then that I realised that something was missing. What had emerged globally was a description of sustainability having three pillars – economic, environmental and social but culture was missing and ufaFabrik is a cultural centre. So, I then got the idea of a festival that combined culture into ecology and organised a three-day festival that was a huge success. For the weekend we got 3,000 people a day. We needed the cultural part to bring ecology to people. In the context of the festival, people could see how ecology works through culture.

FH: I was born in ufaFabrik. My parents were part of the original group that squatted ufaFabrik back in 1979 and, in fact, my father is still involved as leader of the music ensemble in ufaFabrik. I attended the Freie Schule Berlin (free school) here until I was 11 and then had to move to a high school outside of ufaFabrik. That move was strange at first, with all the rules and regulations but I had no problem with regard to the academic content. At 12 years of age, it is easy to adapt. At ufaFabrik, schooling was and is an organic process, with the teachers facilitating the children's progress. Very much a collective approach to learning. Another important aspect of the Freie Schule Berlin was its size with only 40 to 50 pupils at any one time. In the mainstream school system, this is sometimes the size of a single class. In ufaFabrik that could be 8 per class, or, more accurately, in the yard.

From the beginning of ufaFabrik we have had maybe 15 children born and raised inside the collective's core group. But it is the case that children who attended school here over the years come back to ufaFabrik, in one way or another. For instance, when children left to attend high school, some would look for student jobs at ufaFabrik: working at concerts or in the café. There has always been a close connection between those schooled here and ufaFabrik. And some people, like me, have returned permanently.

SF: From when ufaFabrik was founded to now, there has been a major growth in awareness around ecological sustainability. Do you think this is the case with younger generations?

FH: Since ufaFabrik was founded, there has been a huge shift in awareness, yes. For ufaFabrik, this means we are no longer pioneers. It is not our USP anymore. But this is a good thing. And we, the younger generation at ufaFabrik, continue the work. In Germany there is a lot awareness and initiatives but we only have one planet.

An example of the growing awareness is the fact that we now have the Technical University of Berlin in permanent residence at ufaFabrik measuring all the effects of our sustainability projects. Everywhere you find people want to do their projects in an environmentally-friendly way. But this is just Germany, it is not necessarily the same all over Europe. For instance, I was recently at a meeting of an international network abroad and for every meal we used plastic disposable cutlery. This would hardly happen in Berlin now.

There are many supports for sustainability, like the Berlin Programme for Sustainable Development,

who distribute money from the EU Regional Development Fund. And the Green Music Initiative that advises music venues and festivals on how to reduce their carbon footprint. Another interesting initiative is the Berlin Senate Department grants that are linked to CO2 emissions. The amount of funding you receive depends on the amount of your CO2 savings.

SF: What are the biggest concerns for you, as you face the future?

WW: Most of the ufaFabrik people are over 60 now, so in ten years people will not be able to work. We need young people to create the future. We need a minimum of 10 new people who will come to live in ufaFabrik and we need to build new living spaces! But we are working on projects with some very clever and inspiring young people. For instance, to produce new eco-gas through photosynthesis that does not destroy food, like some people do in the biogas industry. This is part of the fight for a CO2-free future. What we are working towards is CO2 neutral.

FH: The shift of generations is certainly one. A very interesting but difficult process. We speak openly about it here in ufaFabrik. There is a recognition that if people have lived for ufaFabrik over 30 or 40 years, it is difficult to give up the decision-making. It is a question for everyone 'how can the older generation step back'? But the younger generation also has a responsibility to involve the older generation. But the positive thing is that there is a younger generation. Once a month we have plenary session of all the engaged participants of ufaFabrik. At this meeting this is the chance to have all discussions in an open way, including this intergenerational question.

Another challenge is the lack of accommodation. We need more space and are developing a plan to build a new accommodation block. The first step towards this was to extend the time on our lease from the city from 20 to 50 years. If we are to stick to the model of ufaFabrik as a place to live, work and support each other, we need to expand. For instance, I live outside of ufaFabrik at the moment, as do others. We want to move back in.

Another challenge is the development of Berlin as a capital of the performing arts, so there are a lot of offers in the city, which means we have to look at our public programme. But we are getting new audiences.

And we need to get more proactive again, with the new generation. As ufaFabrik got older, people got older and more inward looking. But this is changing as younger people get involved and we are looking and reaching out, for instance getting active in international networks again.

The basic and original values are also what the younger generations believe in. The artistic programme may change, as people's interests change. But we have to be open to change and the younger generation have to put their ideas into practice and to make their dreams a reality.

SF: The arts are not readily associated with ecological concerns. Why the arts and ecology for ufaFabrik?

SN: Maybe because of our personal interests. There existed a very formal education system in the arts and the only alternative was private teachers, all of which was very expensive. Back in the early days we felt we were all artists, in some sense. We wanted to bring art into life. We wanted everyone to participate. And we started with ourselves. We were all playing, performing, bringing in circus arts. And we used all of this to reach people and get our message across. We also found that people liked to meet up and do these things. And none of this depended on money. Not everyone liked or agreed with us. Even today there are artists who like this approach and artists who don't. This was another field of experimentation for us. Most of the time it started with ourselves and then people gravitated to us because of our values. This is why we have a guest house, where people can come to live and work in the best possible way.

SF: In what way do you think ufaFabrik has been influential on Berlin (or further afield) with its developments over the years?

SN: ufaFabrik has definitely been influential. There is a certain power in living and working together. People saw this as very inspiring. There was an African musician who came to visit us and when he went back home, he was inspired to open a bar. In the bar he put up a poster of ufaFabrik and said it reminded him that things are possible. One of the important things ufaFabrik did was start a dialogue in Berlin between people of different backgrounds and different political persuasions. Left and right wing people didn't talk to each other but we said we would talk to anyone once there was respect. This was surprising for people and it made an impact. Then when we started one of the first circus schools, others were inspired to start their own projects. Our motto was 'take your life into your own hands'. For instance we took natural childbirth into hospitals and out of this came a whole new approach, which is still going on. Then one of the first free schools opened on the grounds of the ufaFabrik. And we also established one of the first children's farms. In many ways we made a lot possible while others were dreaming about it.

SF: Do you think all cultural projects should have ecological sustainability at their core and, if so, why?

SN: Yes, they should. I know it is not easy. A lot of the time it is a matter of money. Even some of the artists who work at ufaFabrik are not so aware. It's a contradiction. Big corporations care more and are more aware than us in the cultural sector. Then, of course, you also have the influence of the market. For example, the avocado conditions of production are much worse than my health benefits by consuming it. We did a pilot project called Creative Strategies Of Sustainability (CSOS) aimed at cultural managers, where we discussed possible ways of developing a sustainable strategy for cultural projects. One of the best ways to make sustainability a reality in your centre or project is to devise a practical strategy for the implementation of sustainable actions at every level of your organisation. And a really good way to go about this is to make a Sustainability Charter. Such a charter will be

different for every organisation but there are common headings and approaches that can be adapted to most situations. CSOS developed a charter template, informed by a process that ufaFabrik and Mains d'Oeuvres (Saint Ouen) embarked upon in 2010 at a similar training program in Paris, which has been growing ever since and, in fact, led to CSOS, part of the TEH Engine Room Europe project (2012-2014). Out of this came a sustainability charter template ([link to download at the end of this interview](#)). It is so, so important for cultural managers because this is your life, it is your professional life, it is related to all parts of your life. I don't understand why it is not more central to the thinking.

WW: Even if there are examples all over the world where artists relate their work to sustainability issues, it is far from being a common approach. It is true that many cultural spaces still don't seem to have an interest in ecology and yet, on just a practical level, it saves money! For instance, you could save up to 60% of energy costs for heating. I have heard several times that ecology is expensive and this is correct with regard to the initial investment but you save money over time and it ends up being much cheaper. For instance, our co-generation of electricity puts €10,000 a year into our pocket. And it is so efficient we sell electricity back to the grid. Plus we are saving thousands of tons of CO2 from the atmosphere. Another example is the building of our straw bale house. Very efficient and a great social exercise, as well, because we built it together. Then there is the greening of our spaces – green walls and roofs to climatise our buildings and spaces. This is very important because the loss of green from our world is even more destructive than CO2. 350 square kilometres a day is lost and a lot of this is down to consuming. Stop consuming!

SF: Are you pleased at how ufaFabrik has not only survived but developed over the years and why do you think it has been successful?

SN: Pleased and optimistic. Several years of development have taken place here in ufaFabrik by the younger generation. Overall I think we were successful because we were not dogmatic. And, very importantly, we are always in process, always changing. But none of it would have been possible without such a strong commitment from the people who started the project. It's a very lively place. We celebrate together, we enjoy our cultural and artistic life. Children who have grown up here and children who have attended the free school come back. Of course there were many changes over the years, inside and outside of ufaFabrik. Berlin itself has exploded, especially after the Wall came down. But we are still here. We have invented ourselves already. We don't need to invent ourselves every day. We still have the sharing economy. Yes, we have gone through several financial crises but we have always managed. We support each other. Of course there are huge amounts of volunteer work and without this ufaFabrik would not exist, not to forget the huge investment by people at the beginning. But we are also very professional in our official structures: we know what we have to do and we learned our lessons well. Not to give too much time to bureaucracy but not to forget it. Another thing is, when we deal with people we don't have strict rules. In the long term everyone has the freedom to find the right place in our structure. This is hard but important. These are decisions for the project but for our lives also. 200 people work here and 30 people live here and they all get something from this philosophy. It makes the workplace precious. They are part of a community, which means something. People feel like they belong to something that is bigger than themselves. There are a lot of cross-sectoral relations.

SF: ufaFabrik has been in existence now for 40 years. What is your hope for future generations of ufaFabrik participants and, indeed, the younger generation, in general?

SN: It's up to them. There is a lot done already and they can use all that. But how the content will be is completely up to them. I see that the importance of places like ufaFabrik increases. All these issues like separation between people, rents going up, a lot of development, so much has changed in the last 20 years. I hope that the new generations keep the spirit of ufaFabrik. I hope we will have a good time for the next 40 years. My wish is a place for living and working, a centre for all ages, a real open-minded place where everyone is welcome, if they have a peaceful attitude.

WW: At ufaFabrik we engaged with the public school system and now have a programme. Students can choose ufaFabrik for their gap year. Since 1994, 16-18-year-olds come and do their ecological year here and many go on to study ecology or urban planning, or do sustainability work. Then we have tours of ufaFabrik about twenty times a year that include school groups but also technical and other sorts of groups. People come from all over the world. I hope that this will go on and that our ideas will be spread all over the planet and will inspire new creative projects for the future!

SF: What advice or recommendations can you give to people who are interested in improving their ecological sustainability?

WW: Examples like ufaFabrik I have never seen. This sort of diversity is hard to find because most places specialise in one theme. When people come here, say for the tour, they may be very tired but they leave inspired and enthusiastic. But when they go home and see all the work on their desk, trying to implement changes is daunting. I have this idea that what is needed is a small team or maybe even one person to visit cultural centres and projects and introduce and advise on sustainability. Maybe this could be the next round in Creative Lenses?

Another important aspect of this, is that I was not from an arts background. You need someone who will lead the initiative. And it has to be particular to the situation and that particular place and environment.

The other thing is the nature of ufaFabrik. It was always a free and open space. Open to everything: gardening, the urban farm, the bar, the school... I feel today other places are not so open. When a young person comes to a cultural centre it is very closed and structured. All nice and shiny but controlled. You need free space and free thinking to develop yourself.

People could:

Check out the Google type search engine ECOSIA where they use their money to plant trees.

Plant for the Planet is a really inspiring programme working with kids.

Have one working day a month devoted to ecological sustainability in your cultural centre. This would not destroy your centre but it would get people thinking. Bring in outside experts, have working groups. One day a month for the future is not too much to ask.

Have a look at the ufaFabrik publication CSOS (Creative Strategies of Sustainability) <http://teh.net/resource/creative-strategies-sustainability-cultural-centres/>

Related to CSOS, download the sustainability charter template to check the current state of your organization here:

<http://teh.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/CSOS-sustainability-charter-template.docx>

Research other examples of artistic projects working with sustainability e.g.

Julie's Bicycle (www.juliesbicycle.com)

Artists & Climate Change (www.artistsandclimatechange.com)

COAL, the Coalition for Art and Sustainable Development (www.projetcoal.org)

Learn more about ufaFabrik or make contact at: www.ufafabrik.de