

Interview

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Reinventing learning

With ‘Life Hamburg’, Benjamin Otto and his wife Janina Lin are planning the construction of a new type of building for cross-generational learning, working and wellbeing close to the Otto Group Campus in Hamburg. While both Benjamin and Janina were inspired by the international initiative ‘Learnlife’, their concept goes much further.

Dear Benjamin, dear Janina Lin, with your Holistic Foundation you have announced your strong commitment to society. Benjamin, is foundation-based work in fact part of the Otto family DNA or is there an intrinsic motivation driving your initiative?

Benjamin Otto: Both, I would say. On the one hand I live by the values I have inherited from my family and would like, just as my grandfather and father have done, to give something back to society that will have a sustainable impact. On the other, it is also important to me to act on my own convictions and make my own ideas for a better world a reality. Together with my wife I can best realise these through concepts that contribute to future-orientated learning and work, as well as to improving human health.

What is driving you both to choose such a global approach?

Janina Lin Otto: Our companies and the birth of our child have focused our world view. All of us are currently experiencing fundamental changes and imbalances regarding the climate, nutrition and across the world’s communities, to name just a few. All of these have been caused by humanity – and can also be remedied by humanity. We are the problem and at the same time we’re the solution. We believe that the desire to strengthen society should take precedence over looking after one’s own interests. If we learn to let go, raise social consciousness and show our gratitude for everything we have – including health, peace, loved ones around us, good nutrition and a wonderful natural environment – our approach to life changes. With the Holistic Foundation, Benjamin and I aim to provide practical examples to show how, together with many other individuals, we can change things for the better. The common good of society is at the heart of this.

Early this year you participated with a major sum in a project entitled 'Learnlife'. What does this project entail?

Benjamin: We had the idea that every human being should have the opportunity to get to know themselves better and be supported in developing their strengths. This starts as early as school age. Today, conventional forms of school education are simply no longer sufficient to prepare young people for the digital world of tomorrow, a world of permanent change. As parents this makes us feel uncomfortable. So, something needs to be done here to help people, both younger and older, come to terms better with the digital age and develop themselves further to be able to contribute to the common good.

We came across Learnlife in our search for ideas for a new approach to learning. This is an international learning initiative founded in Barcelona in 2017 that's already working on new methods to transfer knowledge in the future – beyond today's 'normal' educational paradigms. In this effort it concentrates on the sensibly designed personal acquisition of knowledge by learners themselves. Learnlife relies both on a digital platform as well as on local learning centres called 'Learning Hubs'. My wife and I are convinced that the Learnlife approach is the right way forward.

So, what is missing from today's educational concepts?

Benjamin: To a considerable extent they continue to follow rigid rules and predefined, largely obsolete academic plans that give students almost no room to develop their own talents and interests, a highly standardised 'one size fits all' approach, if you will. Given that every individual is unique, education should focus much more on self-knowledge and self-realisation. Learning should be seen not as a standalone, compartmentalised period of life but as a lifelong process.

In your opinion, how can this work?

Janina Lin: We have a clear vision of this. Collaborative learning communities will become problem-solvers in a world in which agility, creativity and innovation are required to successfully overcome the challenges the future has in store.

And to do this you are constructing a very large building in Hamburg?

Benjamin: Here in Hamburg we're building a prototype for a networked, collaborative learning community under the project name 'Life Hamburg'. However, we are taking the concept further and see this a lighthouse project that puts this vision into practice. We aim to make it a place that brings all generations together and where young and old can learn and work together, feel at home and network. At 'Life' we are building the world's first innovation community which integrates the core elements of life such as health, lifelong learning, vocational life, experiencing nature, craftsmanship and activities contributing to work-life balance. An own ecosystem that promotes harmony for the benefit of each individual, integrated with a balanced, sustainable approach to nature and technology, encourages everyone to learn, develop their full potential and therefore leads them to a happier, more fulfilled life.

This still sounds very abstract... could you please explain your 'Life' concept more precisely?

Janina Lin: From childhood onwards, people will grow up learning at 'Life'. It therefore unites the concepts of the child day-care centre, kindergarten, primary school and possibly further schooling under one roof, as well as university and practical activities such as cooking or carpentry, entrepreneurship and start-ups. The concept also places great value on opportunities to work with nature such as cultivating vegetables and herbs, a respectful approach to the environment, the efficient use of resources, sport and creative applications. People of all ages and in all life and learning situations will be able to network, to learn and to benefit from each other.

Benjamin: 'Life' will be situated on a campus spread over some 20,000 m², with two main sections harmoniously linked by a central forum called the 'Agora'. The construction is designed on sustainable architectural and social principles and its surroundings will be part of the overall learning experience. Here we will integrate Innovation Hubs, Gadget and Coding Labs, as well as Creative Studios where people can experience and get hands-on with multimedia, sound engineering, digital technologies, robotics and the widest possible range of crafts materials. In addition there will also be opportunities for people to come together in the context of digital innovations, start-ups and entrepreneurship.

Janina Lin: The topics of physical and psychological wellbeing as well as good nutrition will play central roles at 'Life' in the future. We're therefore integrating generously sized areas for sports,

mindfulness spaces, a food court and an auditorium for concerts, plays, events and exhibitions into the plans. 'Life' is designed to be able to accommodate around 2,000 people.

So this is much more than 'just' a new form of learning centre?

Benjamin: That's right! This is a cross-generational campus that enables the targeted transfer of knowledge at all levels. Younger learners will be brought into contact with real start-ups, scientific and tech communities to offer them immediate and continual access to internships, mentoring and the realities of a rapidly changing society and business world. Older learners will be able to take computing courses and benefit from further education offers in the field of digitalisation, for instance 3D printing, or create new physical designs in the various workshops. We aim to establish a constant and mutually supportive exchange between the generations.

And where will 'Life' be built?

Benjamin: Right next to the Otto Group Campus. Planning and construction still require some time, however. If we stay on schedule, 'Life' could become a reality in three to four years, but it's still too early to offer a precise forecast.

Does 'Life' as a construction project have anything to do with Bramfelder Spitze and Moosrosenweg?

Benjamin: No, these two construction projects are not interrelated. By the way, I no longer hold a stake in the EvoReal Group, which acquired the construction plots on the opposite side in 2017.

'Life' will also include a primary school: do you already have the necessary permits from the Ministry of Education and the required official recognition?

Benjamin: We are just about to open discussions with the Hamburg Ministry of Education and intend to propose that the primary school follows the International School model.

So this will be a type of fee-paying private school that only well-heeled citizens can afford?

Janina Lin: Yes and no. In the beginning we will only be able to make a certain part of the educational structure available to fee-paying students. However, there will also be scholarship grants that make cost-free learning possible. It is definitely our objective to reach a broad spectrum of the population with this educational concept. 'Life' is intended as a house for everyone.

What advantages will 'Life' offer Otto Group company employees?

Benjamin: On the one hand, the geographical closeness of the 'Life' campus will prove very convenient for them. The planned child day-care centre and kindergarten will definitely reserve places for Otto Group employees' children. In addition, many wellbeing offers such as yoga and meditation will be available to Group company employees. Furthermore, 'Life' will house practical innovation, as we plan to set up an Innovation Centre there – a kind of coding university that's similar to the Berlin Model of a private, state-recognised university of applied sciences for software development, or a bootcamp. Besides this, prototyping will take place here, there will be micro-offices for software and other digital companies such as Google, Microsoft and SAP for instance, and start-ups will be founded that can be developed with support from the Otto Group's venture capital firms or VC players beyond the Group, as well as from the Group's own internal Company Builder. The employees of the Otto Group will be able to benefit from knowledge exchanges thanks to the new opportunities for networking – I am absolutely sure of that.

Benjamin and Janina Lin, thank you very much for this interview.

Otto Group

Founded in Germany in 1949, today the Otto Group is a globally active retail and services group with around 52,560 employees in 30 major company groups and does business in over 30 countries in Europe, North and South America, and Asia. Its business activities are grouped into three segments: Multichannel Retail, Financial Services, and Service. In the 2018/19 financial year (to 28 February), the Otto Group generated revenues of 13.4 billion euros. With online revenues of approximately 7.7 billion euros, the Otto Group is one of the world's largest online retailers. The Group's particular strength is its broad market presence with differentiated product and service offers to diverse customer target groups in almost all of the world's relevant economic regions. Numerous strategic partnerships and joint ventures provide the Otto Group with excellent opportunities to transfer know-how and leverage areas of synergy potential. Group companies demonstrate a high degree of corporate responsibility and willingness to collaborate with one another; at the same time this guarantees flexibility, customer proximity and optimum target-group appeal in their respective national markets.

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