



## The Heart of Heidelberg almost lost!

*Committed citizens of the city, together with their mayor and the city council, managed to save the heart of Heidelberg from a heart attack.*

The former traffic hub at Bismarckplatz has been revitalized with smart, forward-looking measures to protect against the consequences of climate change.

The department store, which was abandoned in January 2024, was transformed into a so-called Climate House. The facade of the striking building was planted with trees and shrubs, following the example of the famous Bosco Verticale (Vertical Forest) in Milan. Since then, this has not only increased the center's attractiveness, but also improved the air quality on site immensely.

The building also cools the surrounding area by up to 2° Celsius in summer through photosynthesis by the plants. The entire basement of the former Horten building now serves as a cistern to collect rainwater and to water the plants both on and in the Climate House.

The green area in front of the building merges into a park that extends down to the Neckar River. Underneath the park, a large cistern was also constructed according to the sponge-city principle. These two catch basins can prevent flood damage during heavy rainfall and pleasantly cool the surrounding area in summer through evaporation. The first floor of the former department store has been transformed into a publicly accessible marketplace, with fountains and greenery, and the top floor into a restaurant with an adjoining café on the roof terrace. The view from up there is stunning! Around 400 climate change resistant trees were planted for the entire facility. Among them, almonds and cherries, which offer not only a splendor of flowers in spring, but also fruits and recreation for all visitors to this place. The reanimated heart of the city has attracted international attention and has become yet another tourist attraction in the university city of Heidelberg. The center has literally become the pulsating heart of the city. Here, the veins of the various parts of the city come together at a central point, and from here people can take electric buses and trains to the periphery of their community.



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*How did Heidelberg manage to pull off this miracle? We asked some passers-by:*

**Leah Albrecht; 41 years**

***Post-Doc for Economic and Social Geography***



At the beginning of the 2020s, there were also a lot of climate-minded people in Heidelberg. We all knew that something

had to be done urgently in order not to drown in the climate catastrophe.

Hoping that "the politicians" would do something was no longer enough; time was running out. As citizens of the city, we had to do something ourselves - but what? When the former department store building in the center of the city was sold, this was the opportunity to work with the City Councillor for Building and Construction, Jürgen Odszuck, and the city council to make the building and the square in front of it climate-positive.

It was urgent to follow up the words of the city administration with deeds. Together, the citizens put a lot of pressure on the city to implement a visible and tangible project on the way to the promised climate neutrality of the city. There was a lot of resistance at the beginning, but today there is no one who doesn't think this is great.

***Came to Heidelberg to study and stayed.***



Just seven years ago, cities like Copenhagen, Oslo and Vienna were pioneers in designing sustainable urban concepts. Vienna was even voted the city with the highest quality of life several times.

During that time, politicians in Heidelberg limited themselves to announcing grandiose projects:

"City on the river, more bike lanes, bike expressways, climate-neutral by 2030, photovoltaics on all public buildings, a cable car connection from the main train station to the university in Neuenheimer Feld" - none of this was implemented!

This one with the Climate House and the park in the center of the city is the first really visible project that was actually realized! CO<sub>2</sub> binding through reforestation and huge rainwater retention basins in the middle of the city.

A lively marketplace for young and old in a sustainably managed Climate House. That's something to be proud of! Now others are coming to Heidelberg to take example.



**Annegret Fuchs; 84 years**  
*A native of Heidelberg*

The summers have become warmer and warmer. At one point it was so hot that people died, especially the older ones among us! We had no cool places in town. Those who didn't have air conditioning or those who couldn't pay the increasingly expensive electric bills had to go to the basement to survive the midday heat.

At that time, I read in the newspaper that there was an initiative in Switzerland by senior citizens for climate protection.

They filed a complaint with the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. I thought that was great and courageous.

Here: I still have the text of the complaint with me:  
*Global warming is making people sick. We older people are among them: Because of more frequent and intense heat waves, the risks of getting sick or dying early are increasing excessively for us. Moreover, we must act today to protect our descendants from much worse effects. We are filing this complaint, because everything we hold dear is at stake.*

When these young people came to us in Heidelberg with the idea of redesigning Bismarckplatz and the former "Horten" department store with trees, shrubs and with many cisterns for rainwater, we old people were immediately enthusiastic. In the past, this had been a park, from the Neptune Fountain at Adenauerplatz down to the Neckar River. Under Mayor Zundel, it was all sacrificed to consumerism and cars. Terrible!

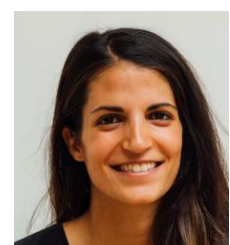
But now, look, now the heart of Heidelberg is alive again, we like to come here. And when it gets hot, we go in there, to the Climate House, it's pleasantly cool there, and when it rains, it's dry. There's also a nice café there.



**Elias Washington; 63 Jahre**  
*War als GI in Heidelberg stationiert*

I was in the 1990<sup>th</sup> in Heidelberg, Campbell Barracks at the Headquarters. We thought it was a great idea to do service in Heidelberg, the famous romantic town in Germany, you know. But honestly, the town wasn't really so romantic; lots of traffic, dust, building sites, no parks, no green spots to relax, only *Neckarwiese*, that was basically it. But now! Look at this, it's beautiful, it's fantastic! I have never seen anything like this before. A green castle in the center of the city - amazing! My wife and I love it here and we will come back again and bring our friends. Thank you, citizens of Heidelberg, for making this place so beautiful.

[#GreenCastleHeidelberg](#)



**Franziska; 42 years**  
*Urbanist and Project Manager*

I think Goethe once said: "It is not enough to want, you also have to do it. It is not enough to act, you also have to love it". I love this.



**Holger; 42 years**  
*Energy consultant and climate expert.*

Urgent steps had to be taken to mitigate the consequences of climate change, such as protection against the increasing heat and heavy rains. Significantly more Co2 had to be sequestered, and emissions in the community rapidly reduced. As it seemed, however, the hands of the city administration were tied at the time.

The end of the department store Kaufhof in January 2024 was the beginning of the citizens' initiative to save our city center. Trees and shrubs had to be planted on the facades of the building and on the square in front of it. A sustainable rainwater management system was needed. When the citizens of Heidelberg demanded the planting and accompanying revitalization of their city center, the time of empty promises was over and the phase of realization began. There was cross-party support, and the responsible departments also supported the project. What succeeded in Vienna should now succeed in Heidelberg. This place has become the healthy heart of the city thanks to the joint effort. It pulsates, it has a wonderful atmosphere full of cheerful people who find here their rest, their cooling, their encounters with others. There is a marketplace of opportunities and the former department store has become a symbol of the living, climate-neutral Heart of the City. And we have taken a big step forward on the way to becoming a climate-neutral municipality.



**Charlotte; 36 years**  
*Actress*

Nobody wanted to change their habits, nobody! Everyone knew that it was not good, the way we dealt with the center of our city. Always more, more, more consume, more cars, more parking, more concrete, more heating, more cooling....

All this would have inevitably led to the heart attack. The greed for more capital, turnover and energy had led to the clogging of the heart of the city. We had to do something urgently to save the heart of the city from collapse. Now there is a healthy climate here, the pulse beats calmly and cheerfully, it has become a cool place, a real attraction for the people of Heidelberg and guests from all over the world.

**If you would like to liven up the heart of Heidelberg,**  
please register here with the QR code:  
Share your ideas and your name with us:

