

Schmitzundkuntz e.V.

"This is how communities work."



Community is at the heart of the Schmitzundkuntz e.V. initiative. The project is run by a group of likeminded people, fostering the sharing of things, knowledge, time and other resources, providing communal support and encouraging a more sustainable and creative lifestyle in urban areas.

People in urban communities face a variety of different challenges: limited spaces for cultural and creative activities, high rents that limit their resources and lower their living standards or tiny living spaces that do not allow the accumulation of many things. But some are also victims to more serious threats like poverty, anonymity and above all loneliness, that make them feel small, invisible and insignificant although they are surrounded by a huge number of people. While anyone can face these challenges, these struggles disproportionately affect marginalized groups like the elderly, migrants, refugees, students, and single parents.

Against this backdrop, the Schmitzundkuntz e.V. located in the "Komponistenviertel" (composers' quarter) in Cologne, Germany, emerges as a beacon of hope by putting community and mental health in the spotlight. Its concept is based four key-pillars: art and culture, community, sustainability and community service.



The organization's heart is a vibrant community space that pulses with life. Here, theatre performances and music practice blend with craft workshops, clothing-, book- and plant swaps intersect with seniors' cafés, and a public bike repair station. Yet the vision extends beyond these walls through urban gardening projects, bird and nature preservation efforts, street art initiatives or neighbourhood walking tours. Central to their philosophy is a powerful belief: everyone's voice matters and everyone can and should have an impact on their local community. By creating a space where ideas can take root and flourish, Schmitzundkuntz doesn't just talk about community, they live it.

While some working groups are transient, others become long-standing institutions. All share a common goal: to reimagine urban living as a collaborative, sustainable and meaningful experience through shared resources, like an equipment and tools rental, urban gardening, clothing swaps, a repair station or rentals for bikes and cargo bikes.

The Schmitzundkuntz website features a dynamic calendar of upcoming activities, embodying their "act fast and try out" philosophy. The organization welcomes ideas from both members and non-members, supported by a team of nearly 110 volunteers. This innovative approach earned them the prestigious Elisabeth Prize from the German Caritas Foundation, recognizing exceptional social engagement. Additionally, they've been nominated for the German volunteering award.



The Spark

The legend has it, that founder Günter Schmitt, sought creative inspiration in a dedicated art-space. An IT professional and part-time artist, Schmitt rented an art studio that quickly evolved into a shared creative hub. As ideas and fellow creatives multiplied, the initiative soon expanded to occupy more spaces in the neighbourhood.

The project rapidly grew beyond art, encompassing educational and community support activities. A cornerstone of their offerings is the "FAIRLeih" (fair rental) system, a library of over 2000 items including high-tech equipment, e-bikes, and even an excavator, available free of charge to all.

Governance Model

Schmitzundkuntz champions grassroots community action, driven by 110 non-paid passionate volunteers reshaping urban social dynamics. The inclusive approach encourages both members and non-members to bring ideas to life, fostering a dynamic sense of community.

With 620 members all across Europe, membership fees ranging from € 60 to € 15 annually ensure accessibility for all, including students and those facing unemployment. This model sustains the organization while reinforcing social equity.

Beyond membership fees, the project recently tapped into public funding, collaborating with, e.g., "Essbare Stadt Köln" ('Edible City Cologne'), which fights overproduction and overconsumption. In addition, local businesses provide crucial support, from supermarkets offering gift cards for low-income elderly to garden centres donating plants and urban gardening supplies.

The Schmitzundkuntz sustainability focus extends to partnerships with local enterprises like organic markets, bike-shops and craft shops, offering discounts to members. Meanwhile collaborations with community colleges and programs like "Aktiv im Alter" ('Active in Old Age'), provide education for senior citizens, and weave a rich tapestry of intergenerational learning and cultural exchange while expanding the initiative's network.





Replicability Potential

The Schmitzundkuntz e.V. initiative demonstrates significant replicability potential, as evidenced by its successful expansion to a temporary field office in Cologne's neighbourhood Sülz. This model of community engagement and resource sharing can be adapted to suit the unique needs of any neighbourhood or local community. The project's flexible structure allows for the incorporation of individual requirements specific to each area, whether it's focusing on clothing swaps, tool rentals, or environmental education.

The key to replicability lies in the initiative's core principles of fostering community connections, promoting sustainability, and encouraging creative problem-solving. By providing a framework that can be tailored to local needs, Schmitzundkuntz offers a blueprint for other communities to establish similar projects. For instance, the collaboration with local schools, showcasing how such initiative can be integrated into existing community structures. This adaptability ensures that the Schmitzundkuntz model can be effectively implemented in diverse urban and suburban settings, promoting sustainable living and community cohesion across different neighbourhoods.

Social and Environmental Benefits

The Schmitzundkuntz e.V. initiative magnificently illustrates the profound social and environmental advantages of community-driven endeavours. By providing a platform for creative expression and genuine connection, the project nurtures an inclusive environment where diverse individuals can thrive and seek support.

The project's innovative approach tackles multiple urban challenges simultaneously. By fostering connections across generations, it effectively combats loneliness and supports mental health. Their resource-sharing model, from tool rentals to clothing swaps and bicycle programs, promotes a sustainable lifestyle that prioritizes repairing and reusing over mindless consumption.

Urban gardening and nature preservation activities engage community members and transform residents into environmental advocates. Participants learn about local ecosystems, developing a nuanced understanding of their immediate natural environment. This educational approach turns passive urban dwellers into active, informed stewards of their local landscape.

Through these multifaceted approaches, Schmitzundkuntz demonstrates how local communities can simultaneously address social isolation, personal creativity, and environmental challenges, creating a more connected and sustainable urban eco-system.

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