

Garden State

Everybody's looking for a patch of green in proliferating cities. In allotment gardens, witnesses to the World War era meet young families, veg stylists meet politicians. Our author Tanja Mocosch spent some time in a paradise on the city's doorstep.

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Oh magnificent gardens: jetty on the island of Billerhude.

When Werner Sabel returned home to Hamburg after four years as a Russian prisoner of war, his family was living in the stone-built garden cottage on the island of Billerhude. His mother and sisters had dug up the bricks in nearby Süderstraße. The Sabel family's house stood there until the Allied bomb attacks in 1943. The women dragged the remains into the garden. The father of the family used them to build the ground floor of what is now a two-storey house. Together with son Werner, he added the second floor after the latter's return. Four children and their parents were to live in it. It was christened "temporary shelter" back in the day. Werner Sabel still calls it "home".





Signs put up by the gardeners saying "drive slow" and "keep exit clear": In their small kingdoms, the inhabitants decide the rules.

"We're really very happy here. And if anyone wants us gone, he's dead meat," says Sabel more than 70 years later – and doesn't mean it as drastically as it sounds. Ingrid, his wife, knows that; she lives with him in the bower of stone – address: "Allotment 114, Plot 500". It's just that the Sabels' history is so closely intertwined with the allotment area here on the island of Billerhude in east Hamburg.

Concern has grown with recent change: The emergency accommodation of the old days is a refuge again today. For those who want "out of the city" – but in less than half an hour, please. There are still 58 residents like the Sabels living on the island. And more than 600 allotment gardeners digging and tinkering there, with more to come.

NEW BUILDS RISING UP NEXT DOOR

Werner and Ingrid Sabel are sitting over coffee in the garden. Behind them is the house. White with dark beams painted on it, almost like half-timber work. Behind it, the River Bille flows lazily from Hamburg's second-largest industrial area towards the city centre. The sun shines, there's a scent of freshly mown grass. The neighbour to the left died recently, Werner tells us. The plot is empty apart from a few stalks of wild grass. If there are no offspring living on the island themselves who want to take over, that's the normal procedure: tear down the house, reassign the plot, build a summer house. From now on, the plots can only be used for allotment gardening. A fate that will threaten their house too at some point, as the Sabels are well aware. Werner Sabel will celebrate his 91st birthday tomorrow.

However, at the moment no one wants to "get rid of" the Sabels and the other residents and gardeners, which is Werner's fear. The City rejected plans from the Chamber of Commerce to make the island into an industrial and residential area. Shortly before his appointment as the German Minister of Finance and Vice-President, ex-Senior Mayor Olaf Scholz visited the island in person and promised that nothing will happen here for at least ten years – as confirmed by the responsible Bezirksamt, the local council office. What's likely to happen here anyway? In a place like the Sabel's garden, where clay pigeons drink out of clay bowls



Walter and Ingrid Sabel are two of the 58 remaining residents on the island.

instead of being shot down? Where all "islanders" are still invited – by an A4 sheet of paper in clear film pinned to a wooden post – to a "free tasting of specialities from Portugal"? Wind chimes tinkle in the breeze. Flags flap gently in harmony. The distant hum of cars on the B5 highway, it could be the sea.

The 38-hectare allotment paradise, just under twice the area of the Binnenalster lake, is unlikely to be there forever. That's indicated by the view from the other shore when you look towards the city centre, with new builds gradually rising up beside dilapidated brick houses. But also when the allotments are completely devoid of people

Perspectives



Marion Tepp shares her gardening experience with followers on YouTube and Pinterest.

on a not-so-sunny Sunday. Then you can't help wondering: where is everyone? Those city folk with an urgent need for peace in natural surroundings? The ones who are on ever-lengthening waiting lists for a garden? The ones who complain about the inexorable shrinking of free space in the city?

MY HOUSE, MY BOAT, MY GARDEN

Marion Tepp is here in all weathers. Her garden is the allotment association's flagship, the first thing you see on the homepage. The best location right on the bend in the island's shoreline. A sleek motor boat in the water. Marion is 49 years old, she has tied her blond-tinted hair into a pony-tail, her skin is as brown as skin can only be if a person gets out into the sunshine at every opportunity. In denim shorts and bikini top, she's busy assembling the new garden shower with a cordless screwdriver. The plot contains a luxury garden cottage of dark timber with white window frames and a black roof. Anyone who wants to can take a look at both the interior and the exterior on Pinterest and YouTube, title: "A Garden Cottage On The River". A miniature

version of the cottage is used as a shed for equipment. And a miniature version of the shed sails on the water as a duck house, under the trailing branches of a weeping willow. There's a four-poster bed on the jetty next to the boat. Posts painted black, wrapped in black tulle. Marion wants to turn everything black this year. She never stops perfecting her plot, adapting it to current trends. A photo album records the development of the garden from the first day. Marion now wants to turn what was initially just a hobby into a profession: redesigning other people's gardens, terraces, balconies. She pulls out a business card.

Ingrid Sabel is glad that there are young people like Marion. The island, well, it would feel deserted otherwise. If Ingrid wanted to, she could row from the terrace to the North Sea in her little boat. But she doesn't want to. Some neighbours' motor yachts raise nothing but a weary smile from her. Nobody needs these things, definitely not here. If at all, Ingrid does the occasional circuit around the island. And even that more and more rarely. "I can still get into the boat easily enough, but out again – that's getting



Her garden cottage is luxurious – she never stops perfecting her plot.



When a small group of gardeners mounted a challenge against Deifts' chairmanship, they had no chance: 353 members of the association came to vote. The clubhouse was so full that one old lady fainted.

Master of the plots: Robert Deifts, voluntary chairman of the Billerhude garden association.

hard," she says. She risked it recently anyway. Somebody from the Bezirksamt now has a plot on the water, she'd heard. Falko Droßmann, head of the Hamburg-Mitte council office and allotment gardener on the island of Billerhude. Ingrid thinks he was holding a party just as she rowed past in the boat. With his husband. Ingrid thinks this new addition is great as well. Somebody from the city council.

SAVE YOUR SPOT – ON THE WAITING LIST

Young people, old residents, politicians. The fact that they all meet here is no coincidence, but the cleverly orchestrated work of a man who lives with a wireless headset in his ear. If you want to rent a plot on the island, you have to get past him first. Robert Deifts, 60 years old, voluntary Chairman of the Verein Gartenkolonie

Billerhude v. 1921 e.V., which is the association of the Billerhude "garden colony". His day job is running a taxi firm. Whenever Deifts' phone vibrates, he taps his ear with his right index finger. He swings from left to right in the revolving chair in his office at the association's base, which of course is another garden cottage. "Abdul! Not much, but what's the matter?" Deifts never has time, but always takes it. Including time to say happy birthday to members like Werner Sabel. Deifts and the other committee members choose who gets a place on the waiting list for the allotment association. When a small group of gardeners mounted a challenge against his chairmanship, they had no chance: 353 members of the association came to vote. The clubhouse was so full that one old lady fainted. Deifts won by a landslide. His opponents were voted out of office to a man. As far as the chairmanship is concerned, says Deifts now, "I'll die in harness."

Preferential candidates for the much-prized waiting list, he says, are young families. To bring life back into the development. And if the →

Perspectives



A guard, an icon, a shrine for the chipmunk? Your garden is what you make of it.



Seaside in the city: the River Bille transforms the allotments into an island.

Perspectives



head of a Bezirksamt should happen to apply, he would presumably have a good chance as well? Deifts grins. Anything to preserve the island.

PARADISE, STILL IN THE MAKING

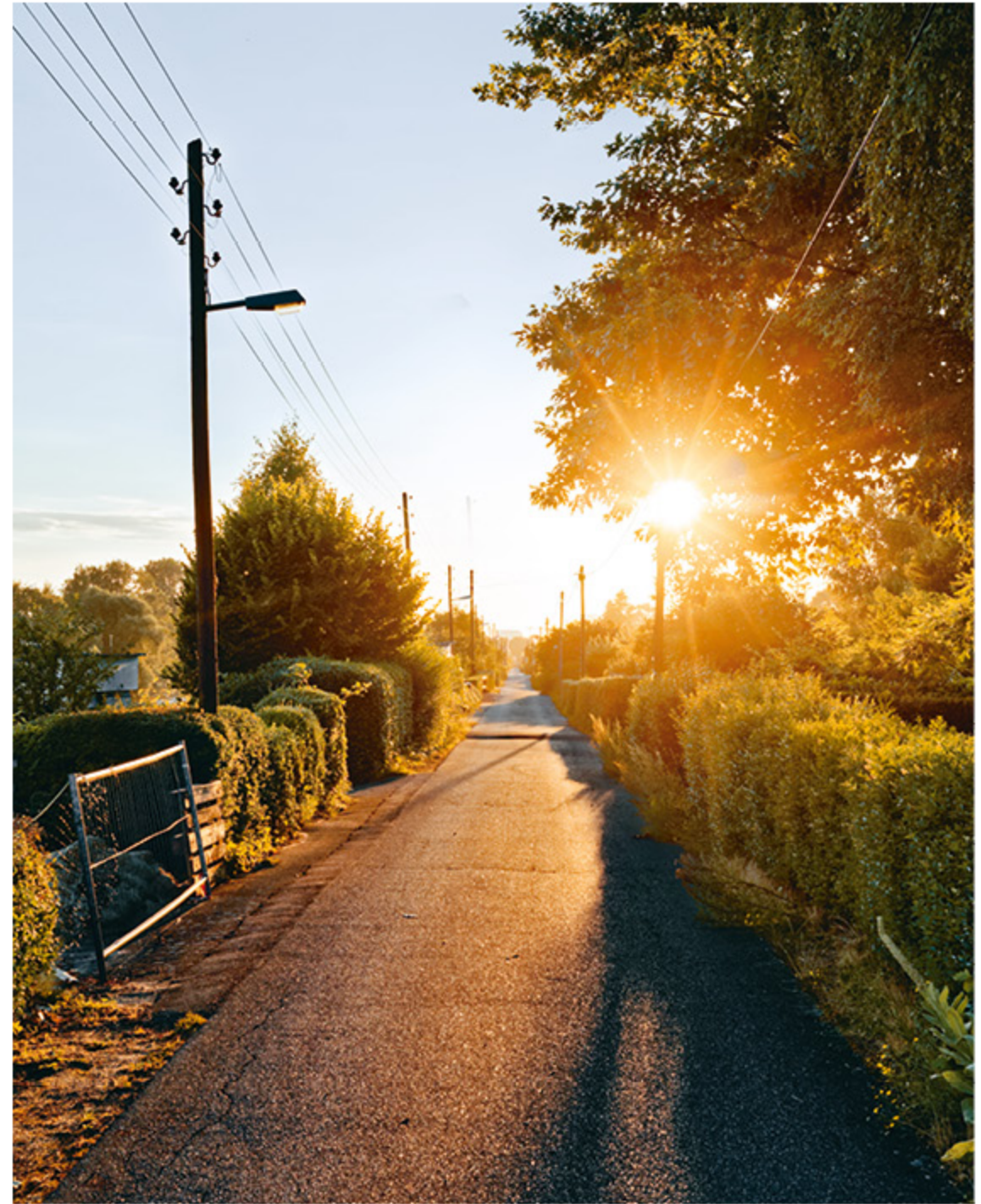
A few plots further along, Marc Jahnke – 46, wife and two kids – is tinkering around in a shed. He’s among the young families on which Deifts is building for the future. Jahnke and his family have had the garden for just under six years. Are they there often, that is, all of them together? Well. When it works out, two young kids, the little one plays football. Then there’s swimming and dancing, more football and apart from that there’s school till three-thirty. The afternoons are hardly ever worth the trouble. Marc often comes, like today, on his own. “I’m here as often as necessary,” he says. That, he tells us, is at least twice a week. “It’s just that it’s a lot of work.” He leans against a tree, looks around. The tree house had just been finished by the time the kids were almost too big for it. “Time and money there, too ...,” says Marc and doesn’t finish the sentence. He still doesn’t want to give up the garden, though. And there’s still quite a bit to do on his 600-square-metre plot.

Resident Ingrid Sabel shoots up out of her plastic chair. “Leeeon,” she calls. “Luuuis. Where are you?”

Next generation gardener: Marc Jahnke keeps the plot in order for his family.

The cats belonging to the family who rent the plot opposite have been in her care for some time now. “They’re almost never there,” says Ingrid. The family, she means, not the cats. It’s no wonder, she says, because they’re another lot who have their hands full. The kids with school, the parents with work. Who’s supposed to look after a garden under those circumstances? Ingrid understands completely. But they had got the cats. Ingrid now looks after the two of them. And they’re so cute, she says. Leon, Luis and Ingrid do a round of the island every morning. Later on, the cats come to the Sabels for their food if there’s no one across the way. Almost every evening.

So are young, routine-driven families really the future of the allotments, as headset man Robert Deifts so devoutly hopes? Or at least the future of Billerhude island? Deifts is confident. He actually wants to create even more plots in the years to come. “Reconsolidation,” he calls it. The demand, he says, can be seen from the waiting lists, it does exist. And if 330 plots turn into 650, in other words the gardens are just half the size, the benefit-cost ratio might work out well-enough.



Bright future ahead: the association plans to create smaller plots to meet the high demand.