

## *Angst in the City?*

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Bad Romance:

The Love-Hate Relationship Between Inhabitants of St. Pauli  
and Their Infamous Hamburg Neighbourhood

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## Bad Romance: The Love-Hate Relationship Between Inhabitants of St. Pauli and Their Infamous Hamburg Neighbourhood

Dumitrița Luncă

### Introduction

St. Pauli (Sankt Pauli) is the most renowned neighbourhood in Hamburg and possibly in Germany, frequented by tourists and inhabitants alike. To the west and northwest, St. Pauli is bordered by Altona, a rather bohemian neighbourhood, now heavily gentrified, while to the east and northeast lay Neustadt and Rotherbaum, the city's cultural and administrative centres (see Figure 1). Sternschanze, a small neighbourhood situated in the north, is administratively and historically also part of St. Pauli, but has a different spirit and identity, which both inhabitants and visitors clearly identify when they talk about where they live or where they go to have a cup of coffee (Dombrowski 2004: 97). To the south, St. Pauli is bordered by the Elbe River and its harbour, a vicinity which has been instrumental in the crafting of the neighbourhood's character. Situated right outside the walls of the Free and Hanseatic city of Hamburg, some of the first dwellings in St. Pauli, established in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, were concentrated around the port and were inhabited by dock workers (Goritz 2004: 51-91). The harbour continues to be an intrinsic part of the identity of St. Pauli, as well as one of its major tourist destinations and economic sectors. The other major tourist attraction and financial resource is the night-life industry, which thrives in the *Kiez*, an area situated around the neighbourhood's most important artery, the Reeperbahn – sometimes called *die sündigste Meile*.<sup>1</sup> A third important facet, on which I unfortunately do not touch in this text, is represented by the eponymous football club, which is almost universally loved in the neighbourhood for their sportsmanship, as well as their social and political stances (Tschuschke 2004: 144-161).

By day, the streets in the Kiez are populated by tourists of all ages, business men and women, homeless people and inhabitants from all strata of society. At night, St. Pauli becomes the city's red light district. It becomes the realm of loud music and late-night *Döner Kebaps*,<sup>2</sup> of party people, of girls in uncomfortable high heels, rowdy bachelor and bachelorette parties, buskers, drug dealers, sex workers and their clients. St. Pauli can be dangerous and charming at the same time. St. Pauli is an area of stark contrasts, with luxury hotels and office buildings, with chic apartments, grocery shops,

1 In German: "the most sinful mile".

2 A popular Turkish dish consisting of meats, assorted vegetables and sauces wrapped in a flat bread.

kindergartens, hairdressers, ice cream parlours, jewellery design ateliers and small cafés, as well as with many bars, clubs, BDSM studios, sex shops and brothels. It is a coveted piece of real estate and many natives of Hamburg, as well as newcomers, long to live in this heart of the city. Some even talk of a “*Mythos St. Pauli*”<sup>3</sup> – the overarching *idea* of St. Pauli, as propagated in the media, in commercials, by tour-group companies and even inhabitants, an idea which includes sex, drugs, gang violence, human trafficking, alcohol consumption, as well as tolerance, brotherhood, diversity, openness, uniqueness (Dombrowski 2004: 101; Pröpper 2004: 110-143).

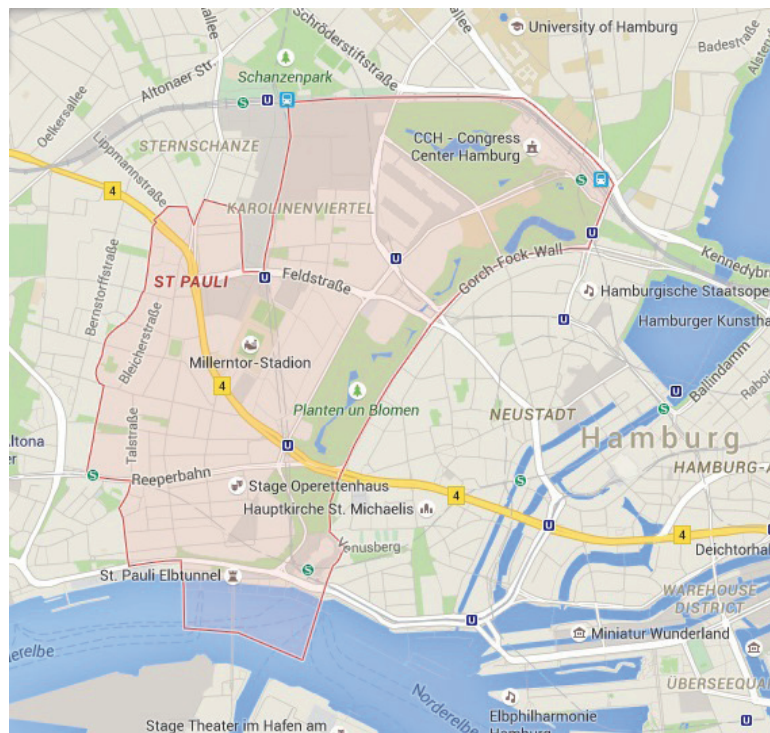


Figure 1: Map of St. Pauli, tucked between the neighbourhoods of Neustadt, Sternschanze, Altona, Rotherbaum and the Elbe River

This research project stems from my desire to understand the neighbourhood I myself accidentally inhabit for the past year. In October 2014, I had already been living in Hamburg for a year, but was desperately searching for a room to rent. I finally, half-reluctantly, found one on Simon-von-Utrecht-Straße, only a few minutes away from the Reeperbahn and its main attractions – Hamburger Berg and Große Freiheit, Davidwache and Spielbudenplatz, to only name a few. The apartment is in a house built around 1900, surprisingly quiet and luminous, with old wooden floors and modern fixtures. It has a balcony in an inner patio – a rare urban oasis – filled with trees and flowers, perfect for morning coffee or summer dinners with friends. Only a few meters away from where I rest my head on the pillow every night, I know

3 In German: „the myth of St. Pauli”

that there are homeless people laying their head on a dirty mattress on the Reeperbahn sidewalk. Some early mornings, when I walk to the S-Bahn station over Talstraße, I see people injecting heroin or smoking crack outside the mission house of the Heilsarmee.<sup>4</sup> Coming home in the evening, I pass by a brothel for transsexual sex workers (Bulgarians, I am told) who wait for their clients in the windows, like a row of back-lit Mona-Lisas. At the beginning of 2015, someone was shot dead in a bar in Hans-Albers-Platz and, a few months later, a man was waving around a shotgun in broad daylight outside my building. But St. Pauli also has small cafés and parks, it has young punks and old ladies walking their dog, it has an extraordinary mix of old and new, of rich and poor, of locals and foreigners. And this mix is attracting more and more people who want to live there, while, some say, pushing out the original St. Paulianers.

The sheer contrast between my own apartment's comfort and the sometimes rough life happening outside its walls, as well as the contrast between St. Pauli's hedonistic reputation and the suffering I sometimes suspect underneath the surface, is a permanent source of bewilderment and inner conflict. It also reflects the duality of St. Pauli— a small neighbourhood where people know each other and pride themselves on being born and raised St. Paulianers, as well as a red-light district, where broken bottles and screams in the night are not uncommon. Of course, I was always aware of the inequalities of the world, but what is startling about St. Pauli is, I think, the fact that all of it is out in the open, like someone walking around with their insides out. The reality of life, as it happens mostly behind closed doors or in the movies or only to other people, hits you in the face while you go to the supermarket to buy a carton of milk.

Through this small research project, I wanted, therefore, to try and meet others that live in the side streets of the Reeperbahn area, in order to ask them how they feel about their neighbourhood and how, if at all, they come to terms with it. In order to reveal the dialectical nature of St. Pauli and the love-hate relationship which I presumed a lot of my neighbours had, I decided to ask two simple questions: (i) What do you like about living in St. Pauli? (ii) What don't you like about living in St. Pauli?

Additionally, I was curious to know if other people perceive, as I do, a strong contrast between the inside and outside of their homes. And if so, how did they feel about such discrepancies. This later question is rather sensitive and during the interviews, I was sometimes reluctant to ask it. Aside from these fixed questions, I let the interviews flow and had no definite structure. Sometimes I asked people about the party scene, about drugs, gentrification and poverty. In actuality, I think my real question was whether, in spite of the all-accepting, party-central fame that St. Pauli has, others also find it hard to live here sometimes, as I do.

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4 In German: "Salvation Army"

## Conceptual Frame, Research Methods and Sampling

This small research project was designed during a Master's seminar, at Hamburg University's Social and Cultural Anthropology Institute. The title of the course, "Angst in the City," played on the ambiguity of the English *angst*, which means anxiety and apprehension, and the German *Angst*, meaning fear. As such, we discussed both sentiments in the context of our current urban scapes.

Questions of segregation, stranger danger, homelessness or migration were all discussed, after which students were to find a topic of their own. As far as I was concerned, I chose to research St. Pauli because I was personally interested. Indeed, St. Pauli can generate both fear and anxiety, but it would be mistaken to connect these to Bauman's concept of the urban space as a "mass industry of strangers" or to his idea of the change from "solid modernity" to a super-diverse, globalized, "liquid modernity". On the contrary, St. Pauli's diversity is at its very core, as is its magnetic power to bring together strangers from around the world (cf. Bauman 2003: 8-15). Nor is St. Pauli a racially segregated neighbourhood, a ghetto or a slum, as a large portion of social-sciences literature might suggest when one reads about "rough neighbourhoods".

Its existence seems more closely related to the concept of deviance, which attracts as much as it rejects, thus generating conflict. Legal prostitution, non-stop bars, drinking in the streets, sex shops and other phenomena are widely accepted within the confines of the neighbourhood, in what Steinert (2005: 473) calls a "normalizing movement". They are however generally not accepted elsewhere in the city, which makes St. Pauli a pressure-cooker ready to explode at any moment. Or better yet, St. Pauli would best be described by Foucault:

*There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places —places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias. (Foucault in Foucault and Miskowiec 1986: 24)*

In order to investigate how people inhabit this particular heterotopia, I decided to interview people that live in St. Pauli, more specifically around the Reeperbahn. I chose two streets, namely Hamburger Berg and Talstraße, for

different reasons. Firstly, these two streets feature a diversity of kiosks, sex shops, bars, clubs, tattoo shops, restaurants, a salvation army, a bike shop, a guitar shop, a dance-shoes shop, a hidden yoga studio etc. Additionally, unlike Große Freiheit, Hamburger Berg and Talstraße are lined with residential buildings, many of which have businesses on the ground floor, so they are both places of trade and of dwelling. The large array of small businesses, where shopkeepers chat with customers and passers-by, while smoking in front of their shop, the certain groups of people meeting regularly in a certain staircase and the sheer feeling of having literally almost all one's needs met within a very small space, is in stark contrast to the anonymous crowds of the Reeperbahn (Dombrowski 2004: 94). And last but not least, I usually take one or the other street on my way from home to the Reeperbahn S-Bahn station, so I have had ample time to observe their daily life at all hours. In fact, observations, informal interviews and semi-structured recorded interviews were my methods of choice for this project.

In terms of the most appropriate sampling method for the theme and field, I decided to use a randomised one and not to make use of contacts that I could get through friends. I wanted to interview people of different ages and backgrounds. By reaching out indiscriminately, I was also curious to see who would respond and why.

I therefore wrote down all the numbers of houses on both Hamburger Berg and Talstraße. By counting windows, I approximated that there were some 200 apartments in all the buildings. (This proved to be wrong later in the process and I now estimate about 600 apartments, many of which have two, three or more inhabitants.) I then set up an email address and got a new phone number. I wrote a letter in both German and English on either side, in which I explained the project and invited those interested to contact me. I printed 200 letters, to which I later added another 120. Because I did not want to intrude on my neighbours' privacy by ringing at their door, and because I felt it would be hard to explain my project over the intercom, I spent a couple of days making the rounds. I approached people going into buildings on both streets, explained the project and asked for permission to leave letters in the mailboxes, thus gaining access in 15 out of a total 38 houses.

In addition to my sample and prior to the beginning of the actual research process, I also interviewed Julia, a guide that works for the St. Pauli Tourist Point. She has been living in St. Pauli for 10 years and I thought it would help me to have some historical background on the area, as well as an initial glimpse into what it means to be a St. Paulianer. I also thought she might have a special way of seeing the neighbourhood from the outside, since, as a tour guide, she may sometimes see it through the tourists' eyes. One other interview was conducted with someone who did not respond to my letter directly, Jan. He is a friend of Tim's, who offered to give me a good contact, someone with a lot of stories to tell and a lot of history living in St. Pauli.



## Respondents

In total, I had nine respondents. As mentioned, two of them (Julia and Jan) I have not met by using my initial sampling method. The other seven (Andrés, Henry, Alexander, Tim, Nico, Marianne and Felix) responded to my letter by email or phone and expressed interest in my project within three to ten days. Their desire to talk about their life in St. Pauli was one of my first small victories, as it confirmed what I had hoped when I had chosen my risky sampling method: some St. Paulianers want to share their experience and are ready to welcome perfect strangers into their homes for it. In fact, five of the respondents (Andrés, Henry, Alexander, Nico and Marianne) invited me to their apartments, which was my ideal scenario, while the other four I interviewed at work. However, seven respondents out of over 300 letters was still a very modest response rate, so towards the end of my research I tried to contact inhabitants of the two streets through friends, to no avail. In the last subsection of the article, I describe my interaction with one of these attempted contacts, a young woman that I did not have a chance to meet in person.

The interviews, which lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, were conducted in English or German (as with Alexander, Tim, Jan, Nico and Felix) and later translated into English. All the names of persons in this ethnography are aliases. Although most of my respondents said they do not mind having their real names printed, I decided to protect their privacy by changing their names.

#	Name	Age	Short description
1	Julia	29	Living in St. Pauli for 10 years
2	Andrés	25	Student, living on Hamburger Berg for 6 months
3	Henry	24	Student, living on Hamburger Berg for 3 years, Andrés's flatmate
4	Alexander	50	Freelance photographer and designer, living on Hamburger Berg for 25 years
5	Tim	Forties	Bar owner, living and working on Talstraße for 13 years
6	Jan	32	Bartender, living on Talstraße for 12 years, Tim's friend and employe
7	Nico	37	Programmer, living on Talstraße for 12 years
8	Marianne	25	Student, living on Talstraße for 6 months
9	Felix	Forties	Bar owner, living on Talstraße since birth

Table 1: Brief presentation of respondents

## Research Results

In the following section, I expand my description of each informant, using both direct and indirect quotes from the interviews. At the same time, I try to summarize their answers to my questions (*What do you like and what don't you like about living in St. Pauli?*), before drawing some conclusions in the final section of this article.

### Julia

Julia is 29 and she grew up in Billstedt, one of Hamburg's less glamorous working-class districts. She moved to St. Pauli ten years ago and has been working for the Tourist Centre for four years. She is very knowledgeable about the neighbourhood and its history. All the tour guides are St. Paulianers (by birth or adoption), so showing tourists the area where they live and the places they love makes their descriptions and recommendations very personal. They are free to choose where they take tourists and what they say about each spot, but they are very careful not to disturb the locals and the sex workers. They seek to present St. Pauli as it is, with both the good and the bad.

Talstraße and Hamburger Berg are on one of Julia's routes and it sounds as if they are some of the more problematic areas. Most of the times, she does not take people on Talstraße, as it is a little too rough, she thinks, and dirtier than other streets around. However, it is becoming increasingly gentrified, with more and more new buildings and trendy eating spots. She tells me that an increased police presence around the central rail station, combined with the closing down of St. Pauli's only open drug use room, where addicts could administer drugs safely, has pushed the hard drug scene towards this street. "For example, if you open your door in the morning and there is somebody smoking crack or doing heroin or stuff, yeah, it's a problem for the people living there, I think." When I ask her about Hamburger Berg, Julia says it has always been a street with bars, mostly for young people, but that now things are different from what they were in her youth.

*J: But maybe it hasn't changed, I don't know, maybe it's just my point of view that has changed. But of course, it's a street where very young people go at night and it's called the Baggermeile,<sup>5</sup> so it's like a flirt area. But flirt is a very positive term. I think it's more like... When I was there, when I was young, there was a lot of sexual harassment. So if you go in the clubs there, it's very tight with people, lots of people, and there were lots of hands, like touching and there ... It was not... For me, now, with a bit of perspective, it was not a nice atmosphere there, I think.*

5 The German word „Bagger” means “excavator.” Colloquially it is used to describe a particularly aggressive kind of flirting.



I ask her what she likes about living here and why she moved here in the first place.

*J: I moved here ten years ago because I wanted to [her emphasis]. Because I thought it's the most... It's the neighbourhood with the most subcultures, where you can be a bit more punky or where things are a little more relaxed. It's a really villagey feeling here or this is the... how you say? The reputation it has. Of course, things have changed here a lot. Like my grandfather, my great-grandfather and my father they also grew up here in St. Pauli and what they tell about this neighbourhood is completely different from what it is now. So... but it still has this reputation of being different, being a bit more with the people and this is the idea I like. And of course, most of my friends live here too. But of course, I don't mind dirt for example or people using drugs or something. I grew up with it, I grew up in Billstedt, I don't know if you know it. So I don't mind, because I'm used to that thing... but I think also that this brand of St. Pauli is used too often. I think people see more in it than it is actually. For me it's like an empty shell that is now pumped up like St. Pauli is so great, but it's [sic] nothing in it because... yeah, all the old stuff that made St. Pauli famous is not there anymore, it's just commercialised. [...] People, I think, take it a bit too seriously, this authentic St. Pauli thing. Like they think... They have so many ideas behind this St. Pauli bubble. So for me it's empty and people try to defend it what is not there.*



Figure 2: Hamburger Berg, view from Simon von Utrecht Straße. A seemingly quiet street by day, a very different sight at night.

*Andrés*

Andrés, 25, is originally from Mexico. In Hamburg he is doing a Masters in Politics and Philosophy. He has been living on Hamburger Berg for six months, but he was already living in St. Pauli before that, a few streets away. He really likes the neighbourhood and finds a lot of things to do here. He is sharing an apartment with Henry. The two of them were the first to answer my letter and they invited me over. I ask him why he chose to live here and what he likes about St. Pauli.

*A: Everyday [there] is something interesting here, that's why it's so cool to live here. The greatest part is that you always see something fun, something weird, someone crazy. I think that gives excitement to your life. Of course in the night it's just people drinking, but in the day you can see the different cultures, you can see a lot of stuff going on, the different characters that St. Pauli has. You have to sit somewhere and just watch the people and you will find them.*

Andrés has a very particular way of seeing things, very matter-of-factly. He has a lot of favourite spots, like Park Fiction, Café Stark, Café May or Sorgenbrecher Bar, where he spends a lot of time watching the people of St. Pauli. He sees what may be problematic for others, like the drugs, the homeless, the gentrification and the party scene. He embraces of all these things. He takes pride in saying “Hi” to the drug dealers at the corner and in the fact that they know him as a local. He chats to homeless people and other colourful characters of the neighbourhood and does not feel pity. “Pity is bad.” Life, in all of its glory is present in St. Pauli and he takes it all in.

*D: Do you think there is a cruel part to the neighbourhood?*

*A: I don't think it's cruel. I just think about the reality of things. Normally, the solution for this kind of neighbourhood is just to put everything beautiful and to count the homeless people out and just push them somewhere in another area. In this kind of neighbourhood with this integration, we have students, we have artists [...] It's nice to have this mix, because you can see reality. That's how it should be ordinarily. I think St. Pauli and also Altona, reflect what should be the integration of people. Of course it's extreme, because of the party scene, but actually the people who make the most mess here are the ones who come to the parties, not those who live here.*

*Henry*

Henry is in his first year studying business and psychology in Hamburg. He is 24 and he postponed his studies in order to work and help his family, after which he took a trip to Australia, a dream he had had for a long time. When he came back, he started looking for an apartment with a friend and he narrowed the search to three places. He said that he ultimately chose the one on Hamburger Berg because he would have regretted later not doing so. He has been living in his apartment, which he now shares with Andrés, for three years. He talks about his neighbourhood with passion and it seems it is an important part of his life.

*D: Why did you choose this one?*

*H: Because it's a colourful quarter and... It's always nice to go out. People, when you tell them that you live there, they ask you like "No way! You're living there? Isn't it too loud?" And bla bla bla... A lot of prejudice. It's nice to tell those people it's not how they think about it. Cause they only see it during the night, partying, seeing a lot of drunk people. But it's also very beautiful if you get to know people from here, very diverse. And every time I go downstairs, I see something new, funny [laughs], what you can tell your friends will enjoy.*

*D: Like what, for example?*

*H: Like yesterday I just randomly walked into some guys doing some capoeira. So dancing, playing music and kind of fight and dancing combination. Or once, I was very tired in the morning, put up my earphones and walked to the station, because I wanted to go to work and just randomly went through... how do you call it? Like when the police try to catch a guy. Like, randomly I was walking through this and I was like "Wow, what's happening here?" It's a very huge range of things that can happen. Or people just talk to you randomly, just nice people talking to you, okay?*

When I ask him about things he does not like so much, he mentions the drug scene, the party scene and the tourists. He tells me about a few bars at the Reeperbahn side of Hamburger Berg which are open 24/7 and the strange look in their patrons' eyes when he passes them by in the morning. But he also defends all of these things, in the light of gentrification and city policies trying to beautify the area. He notices a lot of changes that have happened in the three years he has been living in St. Pauli, like his last favourite bars that

were driven out by rent spikes in order to demolish the buildings and make room for a new building on the Hamburger Berg.

He is not clear about what he means by “beautifying” St. Pauli, but it most probably refers to a series of changes brought about by the increase in the real-estate value of the neighbourhood. As more affluent people and businesses move in, undesirable sights, such as poverty and decay, are often swept under the rug. One such move, to which more than one of my respondents refers to, was the so-called *Esso Häuser*<sup>6</sup> scandal, which attracted nation-wide attention. In 2009, a large 1960-building complex located in a central area of St. Pauli (named after the Esso gas station in front of it) was sold to a construction company which intended to tear it down and redevelop the area. After a campaign and street-protests from inhabitants of the buildings, mostly middle or lower-class, as well as from many St. Paulianers, to preserve the complex, the owners agreed to do some consolidation work. This has however permanently affected the structure of the walls, leading to the abrupt eviction of the inhabitants in December 2013 and the subsequent demolition of the *Esso Häuser*. As of 2016, the new constructions are being erected but, following general uproar and criticism, the new owners agreed to allocate a portion of the future buildings for social housing. Additionally, a citizens’ action called *Plan Bude* got involved in polling St. Paulianers and former *Esso Häuser* inhabitants as to possible ideas and uses of the space.

*H: In the beginning it was worse. Like, we also had some junkies downstairs doing heroin. Like when you opened the door, there was a body there [laughs], like somebody lying there. Or drunk people broke the door, broke the postboxes...[unintelligible]. But you notice the gentrification. The value is rising, because people are doing renovations. The city is trying to kick out the people, to make it more beautiful. [...] For example, the building of the Esso station. The protest where they tried to break the glass and everything... Like how can you kick people out right before Christmas?! [...] It's getting more and more commercial. I mean, it was always like this and everybody knew. But it's different when you feel, like after staying here for longer than two years. Like your favourite bars leave, but problems stay, they're not fading.*

He feels that living here has made him more interested in politics and more aware of social problems. Other neighbourhoods lack this type of awareness because they are not confronted with the problems that St. Paulianers see every day, he thinks.

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6 In German: “Esso buildings,” a former complex of buildings on the Reeperbahn, named after the Esso gas station situated in front of it.

*D: So this is something important for you, that you are in touch with this?*

*H: I never knew that it would be important for me. But I realise, staying here, it's just a hotspot, a melting pot for cultures. [...] Here there's a lot of party and lot of dirt, maybe people do drugs, or be drunk, aggressive. But also a lot of happy people, who just like to share experiences, like to share, just have a good evening or... I like it! [his emphasis]*

### *Alexander*

Alexander is 50 and has been living for about 25 years in the same apartment on Hamburger Berg. Although he says he is not necessarily in love with his street anymore, he is unable to move, due to the rent spike. If he were to leave, he would have to pay much more than what he pays now. But he would not move somewhere further away, either. He finds the location convenient and he likes the fact that many creative people live in the area. I ask why he chose this neighbourhood:

*A: Back then I came from the countryside. I had finished school in the South [of Germany] and all I wanted was to go far away and to the big city. [...] We found it very cool, Reeperbahn, when you come from the countryside ... and St. Pauli... Wonderful, it was a perfect fit!*

When I ask him to tell me a little about the street, he immediately replies that he is tired of the party scene outside his window and the noise, especially on the weekends. He also mentions the tourists, who swarm in without realising that there are real people living here, as well as the people who urinate on the streets and buildings.

*A: What I find hard is the drug scene. It gets on my nerves in the meantime. [Laughs] I can't even go to Penny, here in the corner, without receiving three offers for cocaine.*

We talk about how the street was 25 years ago and he says not too different, as many of today's bars already existed when he moved in and Hamburger Berg was even then a night-time destination. Something has changed, though, in the atmosphere and what used to be a cheap understated bar, like Sorgenbrecher, is now a kind of hip place. "It has gotten younger, as I have gotten older." He does perceive change as somewhat normal and is happy about the new construction site on the street where, rumour has it, a student residence will be built. Students will be able to bring new energy to the street, he says.



I ask Alexander about what he likes in the neighbourhood and he says “Overall I find St. Pauli a very tolerant quarter, with very different people.” He mentions the *St. Pauli selber machen* neighbourhood action,<sup>7</sup> in which he is himself involved, as well as *Plan Bude*, the initiative where St. Paulianers can get directly involved in deciding the fate of the former Esso buildings.

*A: I find it's a really good thing that such social actions exist, organised by the inhabitants of the quarter, which take the problems in their own hands and make them public.*

Some of his favourite spots in the quarter are Café May, Park Fiction and a friend's garden, which, to him, is the perfect St. Pauli spot for coffee in the sun. He is nostalgic about the former glory of the Reeperbahn, with places such as Café Käse, now replaced by a fish sandwich shop, and the emergence of a lot of fancy, touristy, expensive businesses. He also remembers a time when the doors in his building were often open and neighbours were close to one another. Now, he knows a few people and the relationships are rather formal.



Figure 3: Sex cinema and shop on Hamburger Berg

<sup>7</sup> In German: *selber* = informal way of saying „yourself“ or “ourselves” and *ma-*  
*chen* = to do.



*Tim*

Tim has been living in St. Pauli for 13 years. He started working here as a DJ 15 years ago and three years later he opened his first bar on Hamburger Berg. Now he owns five different bars on both Hamburger Berg and Talstraße, which are connected by an inner patio, through which he makes the rounds. He is a night owl, working until 7 or 8 am from Wednesday to Sunday, while three days a week he goes to the countryside to visit his daughter. We met in his office above one of the most famous clubs in the neighbourhood. This interview was one of the most exciting I have ever done, as I felt I got a rare glimpse into a world few have access to – the backstage of the famous St. Pauli nightlife. Over the phone, when he called to say he received my letter and would like to meet, I had not even understood properly who he was. As he speaks, he sounds modest and grounded. It is clear that he loves the neighbourhood, but he keeps a balanced view. One of the first things he said about himself is “I enjoy life in St. Pauli very much.” I ask him why.

*T: [...] I go out and everything is real. When I go to fancy neighbourhoods, I don't know what happens behind the closed doors. It's not that there's only weird people here. There [elsewhere] it's just as crazy, but hidden. Unseen. You just can't see it. The right word for it is yes, real. That's what I love about St. Pauli. Not always beautiful, but real. That's the most important thing for me. And that's why I live here with pleasure. And you get a lot from the people, you get a sense of reality from them. It's like a microcosmos. It also has clear borders. You go 200 meters further and it's over. It becomes social again. [...] I don't have to look very far to find someone interesting to talk to. Even when I go here to the kiosk, on the corner of Simon-von-Utrecht-Straße and Talstraße, do you know it?*

*D: Yes, of course.*

*T: There you're never lonely for too long and you get to know really venerable people that have been living in St. Pauli for 80 or even 90 years and they want to tell their life stories. It's never boring. I love this!*

*D: And what is not so good?*

*T: People that lose themselves [...] I see it very clearly. They just can't manage anymore. For example, the homeless people. I wonder very often “Ok, if I were homeless, I would probably look for a nice spot”, but they chose the spot right there on the Reeperbahn between the garbage bins. Those are no nice spots.*

I ask Tim about the party scene from his perspective, especially since he is directly involved in it. He seems somewhat conflicted about it. The people are too young and there are too many drugs around, especially cocaine and MDMA,<sup>8</sup> he says. We talk about homelessness and poverty in the area and he sounds very empathic. About the new building on Talstraße and the stark contrast between very poor and very rich in St. Pauli, he says:

*T: On one side, I find this mixture good, of course. It makes for an interesting picture. What I don't like is what is behind it. All these rents going through the roof, which pushes everybody to move out, except the rich. And the poor are pushed out. And it's always these big corporations which make the law in St. Pauli, they have control over everything.*

Many of the people he knows are original St. Paulianers. He feels good here, despite everything. Here he can be who he truly is, he says. And he does not understand people that can change how they are and how they act depending on where they are. He stays genuine, a St. Paulianer wherever he goes. Even in the countryside, he says, his neighbours look at him strangely, because he wears black and owns bars on the Kiez. They think living and working in St. Pauli means he sells girls along with the drinks.

### *Jan*

After my interview with Tim, he asked me if I needed more contacts and he promptly called Jan, a friend. He assured me Jan has a lot of stories to tell and sure enough, Jan came to Tim's office ten minutes after the phone call. Jan, who is 32, has been living in St. Pauli for 15 years. He was studying to become a professional nurse for the elderly, but was not allowed to finish his studies, due to an illness. At the age of 18, he started working in a sex shop in St. Pauli. There he met the owner of a popular bar, which also employed girls to entertain the customers. He started working there and, after losing his apartment, sleeping in the bar as well. In 2005, the bar closed down and the owner left him her apartment on Talstraße. Tim and his associate bought the bar and that is how the two met. Now Jan works as a bartender in some of Tim's places.

*D: How do you find living on Talstraße?*

*J: Right now, to be very honest, horrible, really horrible. When I moved in, only real St. Paulianers used to live here. That's all over. New buildings are being built, rich people are moving in,*

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<sup>8</sup> MDMA (3,4-Methylenedioxymethamphetamine) is a recreational drug also known as *Ecstasy* or simply *E*. Similarly with cocaine, MDMA is considered a party drug, used at festivals and nights out.

*but they don't know how to value St. Pauli. There are more and more shared flats and the personal feeling is getting lost.*

What does it mean to value St. Pauli? I ask. He says that the neighbourhood was always for people who live and work here, not for people who just want to live here, but have a “normal” job and then, when they come home in the evening, complain about the party noises.

*J: St. Pauli lives with party, prostitution, party, you know? This is St. Pauli. That's why people come here. [...] Now people want it more chic. Yeah, more chic, but with that, the flair of St. Pauli is completely lost.*

*D: So you like this, this party scene.*

*J: The party scene... St. Pauli was always for people that didn't fit into the normal life. I couldn't have worked in a normal place. I'm just not made for that.*

When I ask him what he does not like, he mentions the drugs. He claims to have never taken drugs. The city politics have pushed drug users from the *Hauptbahnhof*<sup>9</sup> into St. Pauli and he has never seen so much heroin being cooked and injected on the streets like he happens to see now. He is also critical of a new wave of Eastern European sex workers who have lowered the prices, breaking age-old unwritten rules and spoiling the local market. He cannot imagine living somewhere else, but he thinks he will not cope more than seven years behind the bar, although he does not explain what he means by this. He does say that his dream is to have a nice little old bar of his own, where people could come for a chat and a good time.

#### *Nico*

Nico is a programmer and has been living in St. Pauli for 12 years. “I live here because I want to,” he tells me. When he moved into his apartment, it was not yet so cool to live in the neighbourhood and people sometimes looked at him funny, asking him if the area was not too hectic or loud. He says that he soon realised that living here was different from just partying here and life can be quite normal on Talstraße. The atmosphere is different from other neighbourhoods, but it is not something to be afraid of. “It's like a little village in the city. You start recognising the faces.” Another thing he loves about living in St. Pauli is the central location. He works close by, he goes running and cycling by the river and overall enjoys the neighbourhood, with all its businesses.

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9 German word for “central train station”.

*N: The downside is that it's so dirty here. In the summer it stinks here, you probably could smell it too, the entrance of my building is used as a public pissoir. Especially in the mornings, on Sunday morning, one has to be careful not to step in pee puddles.*

He also mentions the people hanging around the Salvation Army or sleeping on the sidewalk in front of it, forcing passers-by to almost step over them. The drug scene is also problematic, as he sees people dealing in the morning on his way to work. He is also annoyed by the noises in his backyard. In the summer especially, there are night tours, where tour guides, sometimes with megaphones, come every fifteen minutes telling the same old text they learned by heart.

*N: But it's clear that it comes with the territory. There are moments when, I don't know, I go somewhere, as I don't party here really, to meet friends. We drink a few beers and have a relaxed evening, then I come home, I get off the S-Bahn and have to fight my way through the crazy action that we always have here on Fridays and Saturdays. That's a little weird. That it's always, always so crazy on the weekends. But it is what it is. But you get used to it when you live here.*

We talk about homelessness and he says he has gotten used to that too. In the beginning he used to call the ambulance when he saw people lying on the street, but now it happens too often. This too is a side of St. Pauli. He is critical towards the gentrification he has been noticing in the quarter, the rent spike and the new rich moving in. It is all too trendy, too "bio" (organically grown), too yuppie for him and it might be the one thing that drives him out as well.

### *Marianne*

Marianne is 25, she is from Paris and currently studying in Hamburg as an Erasmus student. She has been living in Talstraße for about six months and absolutely loves it. However, the first time she came here she was taken aback.

*M: At first I was like "I hate this street, I hate my life now!" and finally I just really like it, because you have all these people in the streets, it's like animated all day and all night long. I really like to hang on my balcony and see all the people going from there to there. [...] I heard a lot of anecdotes with people on drugs, like... But it's really nice at the same time. Even if they are on drugs, they are still polite and nice. [...] Like once they were at the front of my door, the building. And I was like "Okay, it's going to be complicated. There are three guys on drugs and bla bla bla" and*

*I just came and was like “Entschuldigung...” and they were like “We are sorry, it’s our fault, please get in” and stuff. So, yeah ... Even if you have a lot of drugs and drunk people, it’s still really nice. Even, I mean, as a girl, I don’t feel uncomfortable being here, like, even with dresses and stuff, there is like no violence.*

She says she was excited about my project and really wanted to meet me, because she loves the diversity of her street. She also likes how central it is and how lively. She says she does not go much to other parts of Hamburg, as she has everything she needs in St. Pauli. She frequents a lot of the businesses in the area. She has a favourite fast-food place, she is friendly with the bike shop owner and the kiosk owner downstairs.

*M: For me, what is really strange is that you have a lot of families in the building. I don’t know how I would feel with children here. For me, as a girl, it’s ok, but with a family it would be a little strange.*

One time, Marianne inflated her bike tire too much and it exploded inside the building’s hallway. A few moments later, she passed by a family with two small children, all of them agitated and scared. When they saw her bike, they were relieved: “‘Oh, that’s so cool, it’s your tire that exploded!’ Because they thought that someone had shot at them,” she remembers. She says she still feels safer here than in Paris, except after 3:30 in the night, when “people on the streets are creepier.”

### *Felix*

Felix was born in St. Pauli 40 years ago in a family of Serbian immigrants. He owns a bar at Hans-Albers-Platz and a café next to Planten und Blomen (a large park in central Hamburg) where we met for the interview. His parents also owned a bar in the area, so he grew up surrounded by the party scene and its characters. He lived all of his life in St. Pauli, but he begins by saying that he does not feel at home anymore in the neighbourhood. In his account, the past and present are very often intertwined and he says that “people just had more class back then.”

*F: There are too many people that have moved out, people that have gone to school here, to kindergarten, the ones that grew up together, people that have had shops here for 20 years, book-shops, drugstores, most things are gone. There are maybe a few shops left from 20 years ago, but everything else is gone, due to the rent spike. There are just new people there, new people, everything is more expensive, more hip. People think it’s cool to live in St. Pauli, but that’s not St. Pauli anymore.*

He complains about the people who come here, pee wherever they want and throw on the ground whatever they have in their hand. And he misses recognising people's faces on the street, now everybody is a stranger. He remembers all the shops from when he was a child and can draw an imaginary map of the past on top of every new business. Here, where the famous Deniz kebab shop is today, used to be a small grocery; while there, where Café May is today, used to be a key shop for about 20-30 years; and where the cruising spot is now, there used to be a brothel called *Madame Pompadour*.

I ask him whether he thinks that growing up in St. Pauli has shaped his personality, whether it had an impact on his life. He strongly agrees and explains that seeing the effect of drugs and alcohol from early on can be a very good lesson for later. A school for life, he says, implying that growing up surrounded by temptations and their effects on people has actually helped him stay out of trouble.

*F: You would lose your innocence very quickly, you would be confronted very early with all possibilities, and all... yeah. The devil is around the corner, as I like to say. But if you can master this, then you have a great advantage.*

He likes the freedom, the village mentality and the reality of the place. He sees in St. Pauli the most beautiful and the hardest sides of life at the same time. "It is interesting when you see everything exactly as it is," he tells me, echoing some of my other respondents.

## Conclusions

In drawing up my conclusions, I must begin by observing that for all my respondents the advantages of living in St. Pauli outweighed the disadvantages, despite the many problems that they notice. And even though the number of individuals that I interviewed is small, they offered me a good range of ages, social backgrounds and amount of time spent in the neighbourhood. It is, however, not the same for all my neighbours, I am sure.

As I mentioned earlier, at one point in my research, I was trying to find additional respondents through contacts, as I felt my sample was too small compared to the population I had chosen. The young woman whom I had contacted through a friend and who was living at that time on Talstraße was not of the opinion that my respondents shared. She sounded very distressed and said she had had enough of the neighbourhood, enough of all the screaming and the dirt. She refused to meet me at first, but changed her mind later. We were unable to meet, however, due to conflicting schedules. Another woman called me in response to my letter and agreed to meet, but later changed her mind.



<i>What do you like in St. Pauli?</i>	<i>What don't you like in St. Pauli?</i>
People	Drugs
Reality	Gentrification/poverty versus money
Diversity	Dirt
Party scene	Party Scene
Good location	City politics
Self-organization of people	Tourists
Village mentality	That is has changed
Street art	Commercialization

Table 2: Pros and cons of living in St. Pauli, according to my respondents

Table 2 is a compilation of what my respondents liked and disliked about the quarter. On the top rows, I noted the things most frequently mentioned, such as the people of St. Pauli on one side and the drug scene on the other. These were remarked by all of the respondents, although with small differences in their attitudes. While Julia, Andrés, Henry, Marianne, Nico, Tim and Jan said they like how interesting their neighbours are, how colourful, how diverse and how many stories they have to tell, Felix focused more on the people of the past, the original St. Paulianers of his childhood. Alexander liked the people getting involved in social problems, like the *St. Pauli selber machen* and the *Plan Bude* collectives. He, like Felix, as the ones who have been living in St. Pauli for the longest time, 25 and 40 years respectively, remembers a time when neighbours left their doors unlocked and everybody knew each other. In all of the accounts there are clear distinctions between different categories of people: on one side the inhabitants, whether of the present or the past, and on the other side the Others, whether tourists, party people, new people moving in, yuppies or people with ordinary jobs, who refuse to live the way St. Paulianers are meant to be living.

When it comes to (hard) drugs, all mentioned them as an unpleasant side of the quarter, but opinions ranged from condemnation to quiet acceptance of an inescapable state of affairs and even to inclusion, as in the case of Marianne, who says “Even if they’re on drugs, they’re still nice.” In a similar way, gentrification was mentioned by all, in connection to either the contrast between poor and rich, the homeless or city politics trying to beautify the area, pushing the less well-off people out, pushing the problems away. But attitudes here also ranged from condemnation to acceptance. In an interesting turn, Alexander and Henry – the former having made his way to St. Pauli at the time when the latter was still a small child – differ in their views about a particular building site on their street. While Henry misses his favourite bars, now torn down, Alexander embraces the same site, hoping the future student residence will bring new life to the area. The party scene: some love

it, some hate it. For some, like Jan, it is their very livelihood and a sort of historical duty, while for others it is a tiresome business or just too commercial compared to the olden days.

One positive thing that was mentioned by most of my respondents, to my delight, as it echoes my own beliefs, is the extreme sense of reality one finds in St. Pauli. Directly or indirectly, they say one of the things that keep them living there is the fact that the neighbourhood keeps them grounded in real life, with good and bad. As Tim says, all these things happen in fancier neighbourhoods as well, but behind doors, while here you know what you get.

The thing that I had not suspected and which strikes me the most, when listening to all the interviews, is the nostalgia I sense in all but two accounts, Andrés's and Marianne's. Not only are they foreign to the country, which is perhaps irrelevant, they are foreign (or fresh rather) to St. Pauli. Unsurprisingly, Felix, born and raised here, is the one who speaks about the past the most, about the former glory of St. Pauli, about the businesses that have been replaced and the people who are either dead or who have moved out (or on). "There are just new people there, new people, everything is more expensive, more hip. People think it's cool to live in St. Pauli, but that's not St. Pauli anymore," he says. Julia, who has been coming to Hamburger Berg in her teenage years and has grown up with stories from her father, grandfather and grand-grandfather of how it used to be, does not recognise this image in the present day neighbourhood. "[...] All the old stuff that made St. Pauli famous is not there anymore, it's just commercialised." And even Henry, who is 25 and has been living on the Hamburger Berg for three years only, already misses things that have gone and senses a difference between now and then. Alone Andrés and Marianne, young and wide-eyed, while aware of the same social issues as the others, embrace St. Pauli as it is and never speak of "before" – only about "now." It dawns on me that perhaps what people really bemoan is their youth and the moment they fell in love with the Kiez and its ways. Everything seems better and shinier in the past. Perhaps what they remember is this state of grace of the new and the exciting that they experienced, like old couples are nostalgic about the butterflies in the stomach from when they first met. And perhaps I have caught Andrés and Marianne at exactly this time, a time that will become their "before" in a few years' time, when change, inevitably, will happen. The now and then dichotomy seems to mirror Gupta and Ferguson's ideas of imagined and remembered places, although not in the context of displaced people (1992: 11). In St. Pauli, people craft an identity continuously related to time and space, to their idea of what the neighbourhood *should* be and how it *was* before. Those who have inhabited the space for some time, relate to an ideal past, as well as to an ideal possible St. Pauli. Those who are new, are the only ones living in the present. This observation relates back to both Foucault's concept of the *heterotopia*, a

place functioning as an “effectively enacted utopia” (1986: 24) and the idea of the so-called *St. Pauli Mythos*.

Another interesting fact is that all my respondents consider themselves locals, notwithstanding the amount of time they have inhabited the quarter, whether six months or 40 years. Jan, having lived on Talstraße for 13 years, would consider Henry a newcomer after only three, and perhaps Felix, having spent his whole life here, would be right to call everybody else a newbie. But ultimately they are all locals, for to be a St. Paulianer means, most of all, to love St. Pauli as it is.

To conclude with a personal note, the encounters with my neighbours have helped me to deal with the bewilderment and conflict that I spoke about at the beginning of this article: the contrast between the quiet peace of my flat and the disturbing views of homeless or intoxicated people on the street. Each of the interviewees showed me a different facet of “the” St. Paulianer and different ways in which they love the quarter and in which they come to terms with it. Furthermore, at the moment of submitting the final version of this article for publication, almost a full year after drafting the first version, I have myself entered a different stage in my relationship with my neighbourhood. Having lived here for two years already, I recognize the people, the shops and the streets and I notice I feel more and more like home here, in part simply due to the force of habit. I love St. Pauli more also because the time I have spent here has coincided with a period of personal growth, of establishing myself in Hamburg more, of slowly crafting more friendships and having more good memories. By downplaying the bad days and emphasizing the good ones in my own life narrative, I, like my neighbours perhaps, manage to find another reason to love St. Pauli just by inhabiting it. And this might be the final key unlocking the mystery of St. Pauli, the final answer to why we stay despite the problems and why we continue to feed this love-hate relationship with our environment.

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