



dialog
city



INTRODUCTION

By Eric Leiderer, Mayor of Aschaffenburg

DIALOG CITY is an EU project coordinated by the Aschaffenburg City and Abbey Archives in consultation with our European partners in Austria, France, Italy and Greece. The people and the city of Aschaffenburg are particularly proud of this project!

Digital transformation as an opportunity

Digitalization has long since influenced our everyday lives. It is changing our work habits, our communication, our mobility, and our social interactions. It offers enormous opportunities but also presents us with major challenges. This is precisely why it is invaluable that with the DIALOG CITY project - the name of the city of Aschaffenburg's digital strategy - we are embarking on a path that shapes digital transformation in a peoplecentered, inclusive way, and through constant dialogue with citizens. DIALOG CITY is much more than a digital project: It is a social laboratory that focuses on the people in the cities. Our goal is to shape digitalization in such a way that it benefits all citizens – regardless of age, origin, educational level, or social status. Digitalization must always make people's lives easier and enrich them culturally.

Community and participation

It is therefore a particular concern of the project to focus on the entire urban community. We want to break down barriers, enable participation, and promote cultural diversity as a strength. Low-threshold offerings and open (analog) exchange are the keys to overcoming digital hurdles and leaving no one behind. Above all, the voices of older people or socially marginalized groups, who are otherwise less heard, should be actively included.

Dialogue as a driver of innovation

As the project name suggests, dialogue is at the heart of DIALOG CITY. Digital transformation is not a process imposed from above. It thrives on the active participation of citizens. That's why we in Aschaffenburg invite everyone to contribute their ideas, wishes, and even their criticism. Open exchange fosters creativity, and mutual understanding can foster trust and acceptance. Digital and analog dialogue is the engine that drives groundbreaking innovations and makes cities future-proof.

A strong network for Aschaffenburg

The City of Aschaffenburg sees itself not only as a project coordinator. We want to provide a digital infrastructure through which ideas and initiatives can flourish. DIALOG CITY opens up new opportunities for effective collaboration between cities, associations, and institutions in the European countries. We sincerely hope that DIALOG CITY has laid a solid foundation for further, future-oriented collaborations.



DIALOG CITY

A HOLISTIC APPROACH TOWARDS A DIGITAL CULTURAL INFRASTRUCTURE IN EUROPEAN CITIES

Digital transformation is more of a mindset than a purely technical innovation. Hence the overall goal of this project proposal is to create a socially inclusive, environmentally friendly, and economically sustainable urban digital environment.

By developing new practices on how to connect digital innovation directly to citizens' physical participation, DIALOG CITY aims at contributing to increase access to culture through a dialogical approach. Co-creation is at the core of our project idea encompassing a CITIZEN ARCHIVE PLATFORM for the cultural heritage sector and an innovative design thinking toolkit on FUTURE LITERACY. Four FESTIVALS serve as physical and digital cultural platforms to reach diverse audiences.

An ART FOR PUBLIC RESIDENCY PROGRAMME invites artists to develop ideas for urban interventions dealing with local or global topics that are of great significance for the respective urban society based on participatory approach.

The CITIZEN ARCHIVE PLATFORM is a web tool to archive all kinds of data-based objects of various citizen groups, direct engagement and mediation with the audience in the interpretation, communication and presentation of cultural heritage will be widened.

The creation of a FUTURE LITERACY toolkit and the subsequent implementation of workshops by trained artists, the methodology has outstanding potential to give citizens and stakeholders a compass in the face of the increasing complexity of our globally interconnected world.

DIALOG CITY builds partnerships between small and medium-size cities in five European countries – Austria, France, Germany, Greece and Italy - based on collaboration comprising city museums, city archives, cultural organisations, urban activists, social architects as well as training facilities.

This way, it includes different viewpoints and creates the basis of a humane-centred digitization and ongoing 'user engagement'. This also enables a sustainable network where creative solutions are continuously developed in the most diverse areas of society.



THE UN-CONFERENCE IN ASCHAFFENBURG LAUNCHING THE PROJECT

On September 23, 2022, the city of Aschaffenburg played host to the Un-Conference (or Bar Camp) of the EU-funded DIALOG CITY project. The Un-Conference served as the official kick-off event for the project: A holistic approach towards a digital cultural infrastructure in European cities. The one-day event, held at the Aschaffenburg University of Applied Sciences, brought together international experts, project partners from five European countries, stakeholders, decision-makers, artists, and citizens, both in-person and digitally, to discuss the future of citizen-oriented and participatory digitalization.

Unlike traditional conferences with rigid agendas, the Un-Conference adopted an open-space format, emphasizing critical discussion, exchange and networking. The event began with an official launch of the EU project, attended by key figures including the Bavarian State Minister for Digital Affairs, Judith Gerlach, the Mayor and Digital Officer of the City of Aschaffenburg, Eric Leiderer, and the president of the University of Applied Sciences, Eva-Maria Beck-Meuth. The project's central premise – that digital transformation is a mindset shift rather than purely a technical innovation – was highlighted.

The following sessions facilitated open dialogue on diverse themes such as Participation and Citizen-Oriented Digitization, Urban Development, Art and Public Space, Future Literacy (as an innovative design thinking toolkit), Personal Digital Archiving and Digital Rights. The discussions confirmed the importance of the project's key pillars: a Citizen Archive Platform, the methodology of Future Literacy, hybrid festivals and an Art for public residency programme.

DIALOG CITY is designed to encourage dialogue, participation, and cultural innovation in urban environments. The project seeks to promote intercultural understanding and develop new models of civic engagement. Archives, libraries and other cultural institutions are going to play an active role here, so the tenor of many speakers.

For these reasons the Un-Conference marked a promising beginning for the DIALOG CITY project. The proceedings were visually documented by a Graphic Recorder, which served as a creative, immediate summary of the discussions. By bringing together a diverse array of organizations, experts, and citizens in a collaborative setting, the event set an approach to a digital culture that serves people and enhances the quality of life for everyone.



DIALOG CITY PARTNERSHIP

The DIALOG CITY consortium brought together seven project partners from five European countries, uniting a diverse range of complementary expertise. This collaborative team was instrumental in successfully advancing the project's objectives, supported by two associated partners who joined for key project events.

The partnership's foundation included two pioneering city archives: the City and Abbey Archive of Aschaffenburg (DE), one of northern Bavaria's largest archives, and the Culture-Historical Museum of the City of Graz (AT). Both institutions are recognized for their leadership in participatory approaches, accessibility, and the use of digital tools. They jointly led the development of the project's Citizen Archive Platform.

Other core partners took ownership of specific programmatic pillars. The civil society organization CulturePolis (GR), with its strong record in participatory methods, collaborated with two Italian vocational training centres – CIAC, Centre for Vocational Training and Employment Services and CFP Cemon, a Vocational and Educational Training centre operating in the southern Piedmont - to develop and deliver the futures literacy programme, Our Common Future.

The realm of public engagement was driven by partners specializing in art and urban design. Cirko Vertigo (IT), a leading contemporary circus organization, partnered with the Commune di Mondovì to produce the first Hybrid Festival in 2023. A second Hybrid Festival was hosted in 2024 by the City Museum of Graz in close collaboration with the Graz city archive. Meanwhile, the creative urban planners and social architects of Association Quatorze (FR) implemented the first Future Festival in Montpellier in 2025, in collaboration with the Festival des Architectures Vives.

Acting as the Lead Partner for this four-year European journey was the City of Aschaffenburg. The project was framed by two landmark events: the DIALOG CITY Un-conference in 2022, held with the Aschaffenburg University of Applied Sciences, and the final conference, „Where do we go from here?“ in late 2025. The City and Abbey Archive Aschaffenburg also organized a second Future Festival in Aschaffenburg in 2025, engaging numerous local collaborators.

This strategic fusion of archival science, education, artistic innovation, and urban planning expertise generated a sustainable impact, contributing to the development of a more holistic urban digital infrastructure.

CITIZEN ARCHIVE PLATFORM

ARCHIVING OUR CITY

Within this work package various methods to support Personal Digital Archiving were developed and implemented. The centrepiece is the CITIZEN ARCHIVE PLATFORM (CAP), a solution that currently holds a unique position in Europe. It is a web-based platform that supports the process of transferring personal digital data to an archive or other cultural heritage institution (e.g. a museum). On this WordPress-based website, private individuals can upload data, and archivists can curate this data and, after a positive assessment, download it as standardized information packages. The upload process is managed by a custom-programmed plugin, with data management controlled via an SQL database.

A series of workshops with experts as well as citizens in Graz and Aschaffenburg were conducted to gather requirements. The archiving and provision of the submitted data are handled by separate infrastructure presupposed in the respective archive. By the end of the project, data had been collected using the platform as part of collection campaigns in Graz and Aschaffenburg, which will now become digital archival material.

Furthermore, courses and a board game were developed within this work package. They teach essential storage methods, key points for digitizing documents and photographs, strategies for data selection and reduction, and even estate planning. The focus is on empowering citizens to acquire core digital competencies.

All developed software components and archival methods were presented and discussed at professional conferences during the project. The code, along with technical and organizational documentation for adapting the Citizen Archive Platform into one's own infrastructure (Transition Framework), will be provided longterm on GitHub.

The project results were presented at three festivals in Graz, Aschaffenburg, and Montpellier, as well as at various professional conferences in Europe and beyond, and through individual meetings. This successfully inspired a number of cultural heritage institutions to prepare or plan the adoption of the platform into their own organizations, with these archives and museums signing a Letter of Intent.

ARCHIVING OUR CITY offers completely new and innovative approach for the preservation and archiving of personal digital data in the future.



OUR COMMON FUTURE

CREATING A FUTURES LITERACY TOOLKIT

At the heart of DIALOG CITY's ambition to strengthen democratic innovation and civic participation lies the Futures Literacy Programme. Based on the UNESCO methodology of Futures Literacy Labs (FLLs), this programme enabled citizens to explore and imagine alternative futures for their cities – and their lives within them – through artistic, participatory, and locally grounded workshops.

The programme began by training a group of artists and cultural practitioners as mediators of Futures Literacy. Equipped with creative methodologies and facilitation skills, they became key actors in engaging local communities. Their dual role – as artists and civic facilitators – helped bridge imagination with participation, ensuring the workshops were both inclusive and deeply rooted in local cultural contexts.

Between May and September 2025, those trained artists delivered 18 workshops across five European countries, engaging people of all ages and backgrounds in cities such as Aschaffenburg, Thessaloniki, Patras, Graz, Montpellier, Paris, Mondovì, Torino, and Grugliasco. Each workshop followed a structured process of collective imagination: revealing assumptions, building alternative scenarios, reframing the present, and co-designing local actions. Facilitators combined cultural tools with anticipation exercises to create welcoming, creative spaces for deep reflection and playful experimentation.

Futures Literacy, in this context, is not about predicting the future – it is about learning how to use the future differently. Through this approach, DIALOG CITY empowered local communities to develop a stronger sense of agency, expand their capacity to navigate complexity, and build bridges between citizens and decision-makers. The use of visual storytelling, speculative design, and collaborative scenario building strengthened emotional connection and intergenerational exchange.

The programme also resulted in a practical Toolkit and a Training Guide, ensuring its impact can be sustained and transferred beyond the project's lifetime. Most importantly, it demonstrated how cultural participation and future thinking can help shape inclusive, human-centred smart cities.



DIALOG CITY FESTIVALS

The first of the Hybrid Festivals took place in Mondovì, Italy (2023), bringing together artistic experimentation, participatory creation, and digital connection. Over three days, the event combined livestreamed performances and collaborative workshops with citizens, blending physical presence and virtual engagement across borders. A highlight was a 24-hour performance format that unfolded throughout the city, encouraging both local participation and remote viewing.

In Graz, the second Hybrid Festival (2024) explored the intersections of memory, technology, and civic imagination. Over several days, the programme delved into themes of personal digital archiving and collective foresight, inviting participants to reflect on how cities preserve and project their identities into the future. The festival culminated in launching the Citizen Archive Platform, a collaborative tool designed to safeguard shared urban histories while enabling citizens to actively contribute to their evolving story.

The Hybrid Festivals evolved into Future Festivals in 2025, marking a shift toward more tangible, community-rooted engagements. In Montpellier, this new format took shape within a historic building in the old town, where an abandoned youth hostel was reimagined as a space for cultural renewal and temporary housing. Within this restored setting, artistic residencies and architectural interventions came together under the theme of sensorial pleasure and shared experience, highlighting the link between urban revitalization, creativity, and social inclusion.

The Future Festival in Aschaffenburg continued this trajectory by introducing a temporary pavilion near the city's historic core. Serving as both an artistic workspace and a public meeting place, the pavilion became a hub for dialogue between residents, artists, and researchers. Exhibitions, performances, and citizenled discussions centered on themes of transformation, industry, and community participation, transforming the site into a living laboratory of ideas for the future city.

THE FUTURE PAVILION

stands as a lasting symbol of these encounters – an adaptable 15 m² structure shaped by principles of reciprocity and shared creation. It offers a space for gathering, exchanging, and celebrating togetherness. Designed for assembly and reuse, it can be reconstructed in different contexts, embodying both sustainability and connection. Over time, its modular wooden frame may evolve into a greenhouse, a nurturing extension where ideas and relationships continue to grow. Economical in resources yet rich in meaning, the pavilion reflects the essence of the Future Festivals: open, collaborative, and rooted in the shared desire to shape a more connected urban future.



DIALOG CITY SHAPE YOUR CITY!

An exhibition on display from June 13 to September 14, 2025 in Aschaffenburg

The Aschaffenburg City and Abbey Archive organized an exhibition about the project DIALOG CITY, which presented the organization, development, and activities of the initiative through images, texts, and films – from the hybrid festivals in Mondovì and Graz to the creation of a digital citizens' archive and the design of a Future Literacy Methodology.

Officially part of the Aschaffenburg Cultural Days and the DIALOG CITY Future Festival, the exhibition gave more than 1,500 visitors the opportunity to learn about the project and its participants, reflect on the digital transformation of cities, and take away valuable insights.

The exhibition began with the forward-looking guiding question: "How do we want to live in the future?" Its concept was primarily based on providing insights into the project's work and organization, while also highlighting the challenges of digitization in the cultural sector. The explanatory texts, enriched with visual material, described the partner organizations and the project's individual components – such as the festivals, the Citizen Archive Platform, and the Futures Literacy Toolkit.

The exhibition also emphasized the local dimension of the project in Aschaffenburg: it presented the city's digital strategy, the Digitalladen, and digital initiatives such as *heimat:hub*. A map illustrated the connections between the project's partner organizations, spanning from Greece to France and from Germany to Austria and Italy.

Another focal point of the exhibition was the four artist residencies in Mondovì, Graz, Aschaffenburg, and Montpellier. The impressive "Wall of Mondovì", created by Anne Fehres and Luke Conroy, adorned the exhibition space, as did the AI-generated fabric panels by Lisa Maria Baier, which made visible the women workers of Aschaffenburg's paper industry. The "Salt of Montpellier", developed by culinary artist Alexandre Benetas-Ottobrini during his residency, was also featured. In addition, videos documented the artists' working processes.

A prototype developed during the Game Jam at the Future Festival (July 2025) also found its way into the exhibition space, inviting visitors to engage playfully with ideas about the cities of the future. In an interactive corner, guests could reflect on the future roles of archivists.

Overall, the exhibition demonstrated how a culture of dialogue can shape and guide the creative and sustainable development of European cities. In doing so, it helped raise awareness of social and cultural developments – such as the use of artificial intelligence – taking place across Europe.

DIALOG CITY FINAL CONFERENCE

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

On 5 and 6 November 2025, the DIALOG CITY consortium gathered online for its final conference, entitled Where Do We Go From Here?, marking the conclusion of our Creative Europe-funded journey. Partners, artists, researchers and citizens from across Europe came together - online and physical - to reflect on four years of collaboration and exchange - and to imagine what might follow.

The discussions revisited the key outcomes of the project: the Citizen Archive Platform, empowering communities to preserve and share their digital heritage; the Our Common Future Methodology, supporting civic creativity and critical thinking; and the Dialog City Festivals and Artist Residencies, which brought art and participation into urban spaces across Europe.

Beyond celebrating achievements, the conference looked ahead - exploring how cultural innovation, digital participation and artistic practice can continue to shape more connected and inclusive European cities.

SUSTAINABILITY IN A NUTSHELL

The sustainability strategy of DIALOG CITY builds on three interconnected pillars designed to live on beyond the project's funding period. The Citizen Archive Platform (CAP) will remain active through institutional anchoring in partner cities, offering communities a free and accessible tool to preserve their digital heritage, integrated into public archival services.

The Futures Literacy Toolkit will continue through a "train-the-trainers" network of artists and educators, open-access dissemination, and partnerships with schools and cultural organisations to embed future thinking in education. The Dialog City Festivals and Art for Public Residencies could evolve into a replicable model for other cities, supported by a "Dialog City Network" sharing resources, formats, and experiences.

Together, these pillars form a transferable framework enabling small and medium-sized European cities to foster cultural participation, imagination and collaboration - ensuring the spirit of DIALOG CITY continues to grow.



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