Chemnitz
Kulturhauptstadt
Europas

PARTICIPATION PLAYBOOK

Prototyping *Creative Methods* for *Youth-led Culture*

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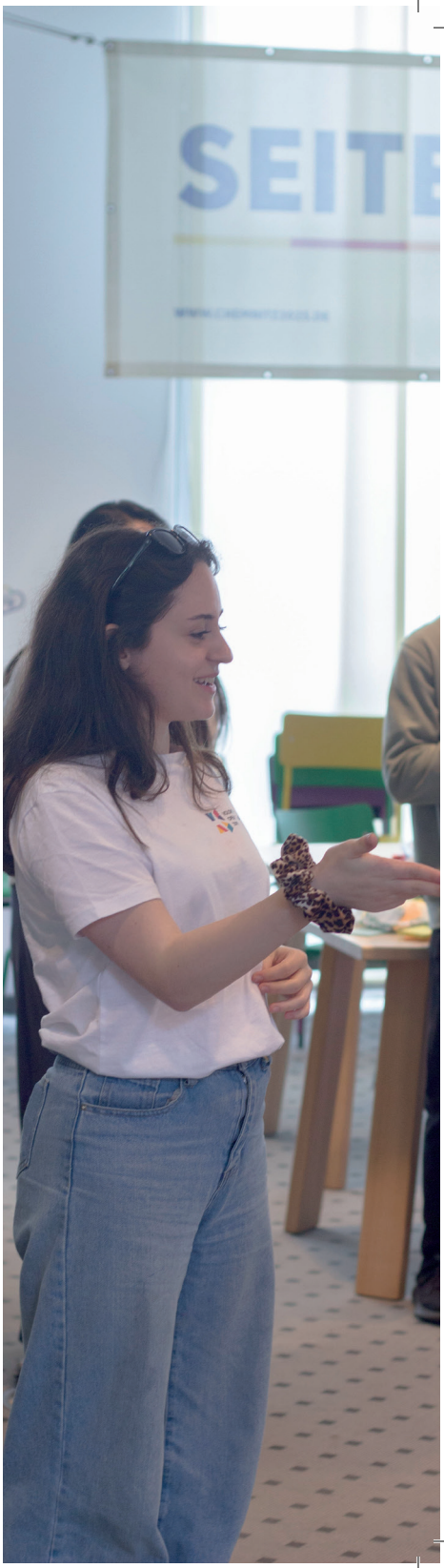
CREATE-U

TEAM GENERATION

Empowering Cultural Participation ***Together***

In April 2025, Chemnitz, European Capital of Culture, hosted the ***„Erasmus+ Youth Exchange C the Unseen“***. For five days, young people from six countries came together to connect, create and learn from each other. Using playful and creative methods like Design Thinking and Theory U, they explored **how youth can take an active role in shaping culture**. The exchange was not only about the results but about the way of working together: building trust, sharing ideas and co-creating.

This document captures the spirit of the week and shows how cultural institutions across Europe can work with young people in more humane and sustainable ways.



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Why Participation Matters *An Invitation to Co-Create*

For many young people, culture can feel like something made by others, in places where they do not always feel welcome. But what if they were not just invited in, but asked to help shape it?

This booklet shares a **practical approach** for working with young people to co-create cultural projects. It offers simple tools, ideas, and tips that youth, youth workers, and cultural organizations can use to make activities more engaging and relevant.



THE FOCUS IS ON

- ***overcoming*** participation barriers with formats that are relevant, inclusive, and fun
- ***giving*** young people hands-on tools, inventive approaches, and leadership skills
- ***encouraging*** peer-to-peer learning that reflects real-life experiences
- ***supporting*** organizations in moving from top-down planning to co-created cultural initiatives

What emerged from the youth exchange captures both the ideas co-created by the participants and a starting point for further experimentation and application. The key principle is simple: **youth engagement is not a checklist; it is a shared process of building trust, relevance, and agency.**



GIVE A BACKSTORY

Chemnitz 2025 ***Context for Youth Participation***

European Capital of Culture Chemnitz 2025

In 2025, Chemnitz celebrated its year as European Capital of Culture under the motto C the Unseen, highlighting people, places, and stories often overlooked.

With a strong industrial heritage and a spirit of creativity and transformation, the city hosted festivals, exhibitions, performances, workshops, sports, and community events. These activities opened new cultural spaces and invited locals and visitors to discover the region in unexpected ways.

Focused on themes that reflect the region's identity and potential, encouraging collaboration, participation, and fresh ideas for building stronger, more open communities.

Civic engagement was one of the main pillars of the European Capital of Culture, and one prime example of this was the youth participation program. CREATE.U supported young people in co-creating cultural projects, gaining practical skills, and building confidence. Within this framework, the Festival Crew was established; a group of young participants who contributed to various cultural activities in the city. One of their major initiatives was the **Betonblühen Festival**.

Betonblühen served as a concrete example for the importance of youth participation. It also inspired the ideas and prototypes that participants developed during the exchange.

Betonblühen, meaning "Concrete in Bloom," transformed city spaces into hubs of creativity, dialogue, and fun. Each day had its own focus: ROOTS opened with a youth conference on future perspectives, BREAK OUT brought urban sports, dance, and literature, SPROUT offered art workshops and exhibitions, BLOOM filled the city with music, jam sessions, and



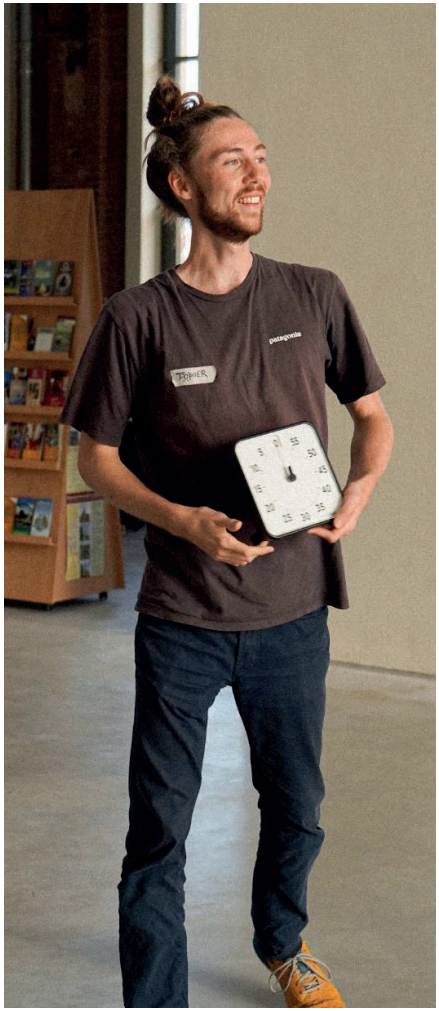
INVOLVE THE COMMUNITY

parties, and AFTERBLOOM closed the festival with a flea market, games, and an international brunch.

Building on this process, the team organized the ***„Erasmus+ Youth Exchange C the Unseen“*** in collaboration with facilitator Topher Lack.

Topher Lack facilitated three workshop days regarding the Design Thinking process and Theory U framework. From 2020, his mission is to transform education eco-systems like schools, universities and cultural communities into agile, co-creative and human-centered spaces for encounters and innovation. As a Design Thinker, organizational developer, Learning Culture Coach, Community Musician and M.A. in Educational Sciences .

www.topherlack.de





Behind the Scenes ***Organizing the Exchange***

ERASMUS+
YOUTH EXCHANGE
2025

PARTNERS

The project brought together five partner organizations from current, former, and future European Capitals of Culture: Foundation Liepaja 2027 (Latvia), Tartu 2024 Foundation (Estonia), OPENS (Serbia), and Asociația Timișoara 2023 (Romania), plus Volontari Open Culture 2019 (Italy), continuing the legacy of Matera 2019.

BEFORE THE EXCHANGE

Each partner selected six participants, mixing newcomers and those with cultural experience, while ensuring diversity in gender, background, and ability. Preparatory sessions held individually by the partner organizations helped teams build group spirit. Moreover all participants received a pre-departure info pack with travel details, insurance, and intercultural tips.

DURING THE EXCHANGE

The program took place at Jugendherberge Chemnitz for accommodation and workshops, and the Chemnitz 2025 office for group work and presentations. The week began with a youth-led city rally and included creative sessions in photography and songwriting, city walks, energizers, reflection time, and intercultural evenings. It concluded with final presentations and a celebration night.

HELP ORGANIZERS
TO CREATE A
COMFORTABLE
WORK ENVIRONMENT

Frameworks for Change ***Design Thinking & Theory U***

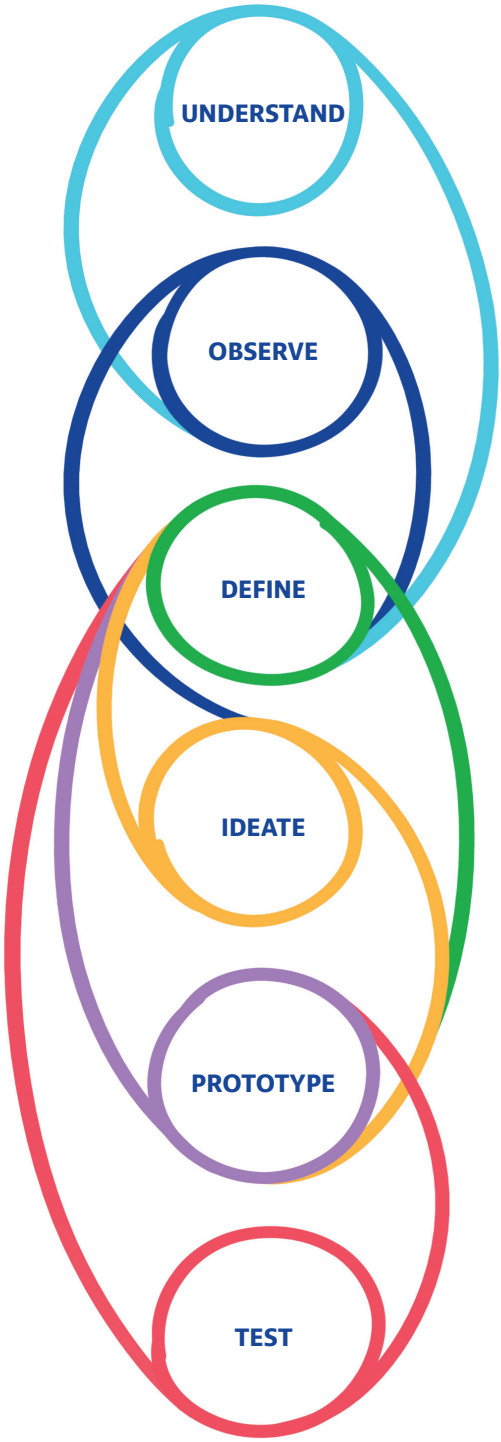
Involving young people in cultural projects is important, but it can be challenging. How do you reach them? How do you keep them motivated? And how can burnout be avoided during busy periods? Answering these questions requires practical, people-focused methods that put young people and their experiences at the center.

In our ***„Erasmus+ Youth Exchange C the Unseen“***, we combined **Design Thinking** and **Theory U** to guide young Europeans from diverse countries and backgrounds through a shared creative process. Design Thinking provided a hands-on approach that kept participants involved and focused on creating practical solutions. Theory U supported the process by helping build trust, encouraging deep listening, and making space for new ideas that could be tested and applied beyond the exchange.



DESIGN THINKING

Design Thinking originated from the fields of design and engineering, notably popularized by the Stanford d.school and IDEO, a global design and innovation consultancy, and nowadays also by the Hasso-Plattner-Institute in Potsdam. It is a human-centered methodology aimed at creatively solving complex problems. Central to its approach is empathy, enabling practitioners to deeply understand the needs, emotions, and motivations of the people they design for.





DESIGN THINKING CONSISTS OF SIX ITERATIVE PHASES

1. UNDERSTAND ▶ Engage with experts, research, and share knowledge to build a common understanding of the challenge. *→ participants shared their knowledge and perspectives to build a common understanding.*

2. OBSERVE ▶ Collect insights through fieldwork, interviews, and direct observation, empathizing with the people affected. *→ in this project, including the target group in the teams allowed participants to share their own views and empathize with those affected by the challenge.*

3. DEFINE ▶ Synthesizing gathered insights to identify clear, actionable problem statements, establishing a foundation for creative solutions. *→ the participants used interview results to create personas representing typical users, helping them ideate more effectively and sustainably.*

4. IDEATE ▶ Generating a diverse set of innovative ideas and potential solutions through collaborative brainstorming and creative thinking methods. *→ Activating the knowledge of body, mind and heart, the design teams stretched their minds and tried to look beyond obvious solutions and come up with original and impactful ideas.*

5. PROTOTYPE ▶ Building tangible, simple representations of ideas, quickly testing assumptions and learning through hands-on interaction. *→ The tactile approach allows to create a more realistic setting for testing, whether the idea actually works.*

6. TEST ▶ Iteratively evaluating prototypes through user feedback, refining solutions to more accurately address identified needs and enhance functionality. *→ Here it is important to always be able to link iterations of the prototypes to actual user needs, quotes, observations and facts. Through allowing ourselves to fail early and often we efficiently co-create towards a sustainable solution.*

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DESIGN THINKING

Using **Design Thinking** in our co-creative sessions with our diverse group proved highly effective. It encouraged open communication, helped participants understand each other's perspectives, and turned differences into strengths. Everyone could freely share ideas and work together toward practical, innovative solutions.

This approach also brings real benefits to social and cultural projects. By focusing on empathy, it ensures innovations are relevant and meaningful to communities. Its iterative process of prototyping and testing speeds up idea development and refinement, paving the way for sustainable, impactful, and community-driven solutions.

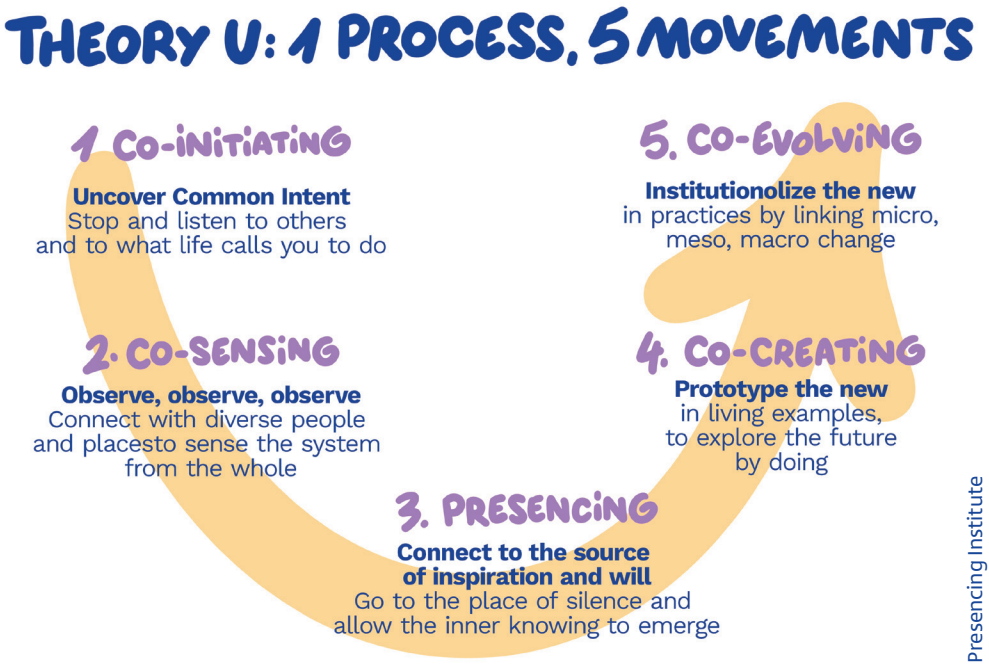


THEORY U

Theory U, developed by Otto Scharmer and colleagues at MIT and the Presencing Institute, is a meta-model for deep individual and collective transformation. It offers a path to escape habitual reactions and surface-level fixes by engaging with the root causes of challenges through a process that combines listening with inner presence, and intention with action.

The five movements of Theory U

Theory U also identifies seven essential capacities developed during the journey, such as suspending judgment, redirecting attention, sensing with heart, presencing, prototyping with body/mind/heart alignment, and performing in systems contexts.



© Presencing Institute

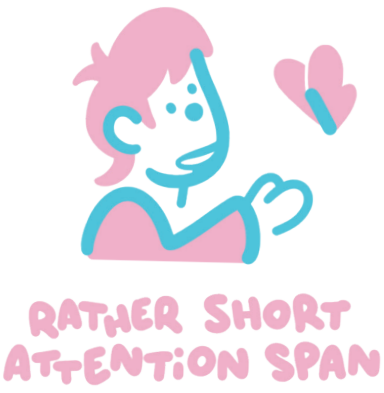
ENABLING TRUE TRANSFORMATION

Theory U intentionally encourages participants to go deeper: to uncover not just symptoms, but underlying structures, beliefs, and habits that shape challenges. By cultivating **presencing**, it helps individuals move from reactive thinking into spaces where new insights emerge organically. This makes possible not only creative ideas but also shifts in identity, intention, and collective awareness, leading to real transformation and innovation.

DRIVING INNOVATION IN SOCIAL AND CULTURAL SECTORS

Theory U's empathy-centred and awareness-based architecture makes it highly suited to social and cultural innovation. It helps uncover deeper systemic patterns and emotional needs, not just superficial issues. When prototyping emerges from presencing, it can lead to culturally grounded, sustainable ideas that may evolve into new social business models. The iterative Co-Creating and Co-Evolving phases support early experimentation and scaling, turning social and cultural prototypes into real-world, systemic impact.





CONNECTING THEORY U AND DESIGN THINKING

DESIGN THINKING AND THEORY U ALIGN POWERFULLY.

- Both start with **empathy and deep observation** (Design Thinking's Empathize / Observe aligns with Theory U's Co-Sensing).
- Both stress framing meaningful **problem definitions**.
- Both embrace **rapid prototyping and testing** (Design Thinking's Prototype and Test phases correspond to Theory U's Co-Creating and Co-Evolving).

Importantly, the bottom of the U - **Presencing** - provides the internal shift needed before effective innovation. This is why during the process we integrated several moments of meditation and awareness practices. Prototyping becomes more powerful because it emerges from a clear, heartfelt intention and insight. The right side of the U is where action flows naturally from inner clarity; putting learning into practice, testing, evolving. This approach not only produced concrete project outcomes, it also shifted mindsets. Participants left with stronger skills to collaborate, innovate and apply their learning to cultural projects in their own communities.

From Ideas to Action ***The Design Thinking Journey***

A core outcome of the exchange was five youth-designed prototypes created in international teams. They tackled real challenges in youth participation in cultural life, such as emotional support, volunteer onboarding, visibility, collaboration, and motivation.

PROTOTYPING PARTICIPATION: YOUTH-LED CONCEPTS IN PRACTICE

A core outcome of the exchange was the creation of five youth-designed prototypes in international teams. In groups of 4-6 people, the teams worked in the different phases of the design thinking process. They worked asynchronously on their challenges but regularly (every 2-3 hours) came together to discuss their progress. At the beginning, each group defined a guiding How might we...? question that framed their challenge. In total, **5 prototypes** were developed in a process that was not about creating polished final products, but about testing ideas and transforming personal and group experiences into practical tools. The prototypes took various forms from digital apps, physical toolkits, communication concepts, to visual aids. What united them was a focus on youth-led problem-solving, emotional intelligence, and real-life relevance.

PROTOTYPING PARTICIPATION: FINAL CONCEPTS

FURTHER INFORMATION

This booklet provides a short overview of each prototype. You can access more detailed information on the design thinking stages and thoughts behind the development of the prototypes through the QR code.

1. P-Bridge App

WE FEEL UNCOMFORTABLE + WE DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO

Team Tutti Frutti

How-Might-We ... **create a safe platform that bridges the gap between young people with cultural project ideas and organizations seeking participants?**

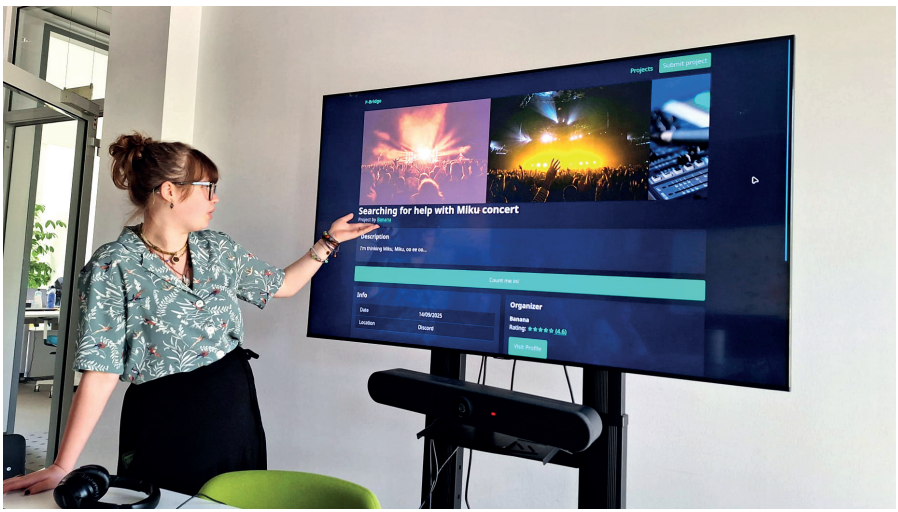
Many young people in Europe have ideas for cultural projects but lack partners, while organizations often have projects without participants. This gap leads to missed opportunities. The group explored how to make first contact more inviting and how to keep engagement alive. They mapped the typical participant journey, from the excitement of a new idea to the stress of planning, the challenge of finding collaborators, the pressure of responsibility and the disappointment of dropping out. This showed where support is most needed.



Roberta Ruggieri, Singh Nandhni Gabriela, Anna Galbāliņa, Arianna Bochicchio, Jonas Loris Zschirpe, Pārsla Nīcgale

From there, they created the P-Bridge App concept, a digital platform inspired by LinkedIn and Tinder but tailored for culture. It offers a safe, low-barrier space where people and organizations can connect through profiles, skills and interests. Features include role tags for clear responsibilities, „connection challenges“ for playful commitment, and a feedback system for trust. An announcement section supports pitching and recruiting, while an Apply–Connect–Join process lowers the fear of over-commitment. Gamified boosters and interactive events help sustain motivation.

Testing showed that participants valued the safe environment, personalised matches and familiar social-media style navigation. For anyone applying the concept, the lessons are clear: start small with one or two features, make onboarding friendly, and build an active core community early. Iterate with feedback, keep it free and transparent, and work with local cultural groups to mediate and promote. With this approach, isolated ideas can grow into collaborative projects with real impact.

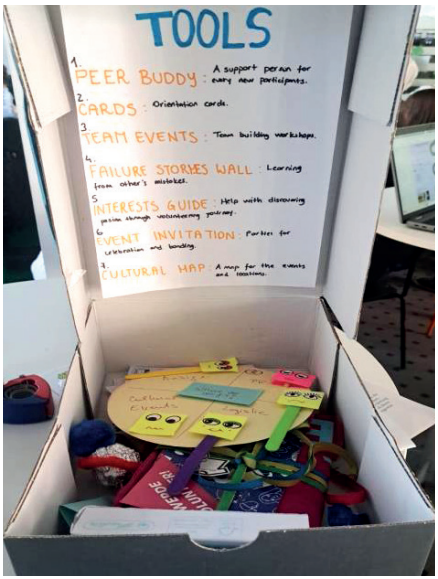


2. The Volunteer Toolbox

Team The Ownership Collective

How-Might-We ... **help new or less experienced volunteers feel confident, prepared, and included from the moment they join a cultural project?**





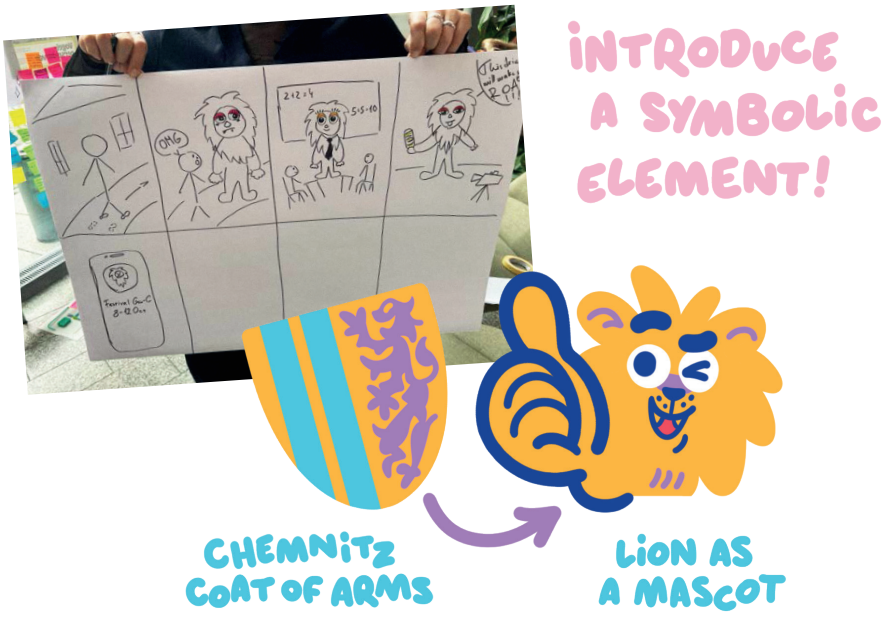
A tangible Toolbox with orientation cards, buddy systems, failure wall stories and team tickets helps volunteers feel supported and connected. Feedback suggested adding reflection journals and anonymous support, making it especially useful for schools and NGOs running short-term projects.

Burcu Günes, Alvar Kepler, Mona Mentes, Ayşe Küçükmutlu, Roxana Loredana Precup, Martina Gaudiano

3. The Lion Mascot

Team C the Brand

How-Might-We ... **create an emotionally resonant and consistent branding system that helps events attract and retain attention?**



This prototype introduced the Lion mascot, inspired by Chemnitz's coat of arms, as a storytelling figure that evolves with each event and appears on social media or its own blog. Its playful identity and consistent presence make events more memorable and relatable, turning marketing into emotional branding with lasting cohesion and symbolic storytelling potential.

Gvozdić Milica, Sofija Nestorović, Patrick Thomson, Ance Pakalniņa, Anni Oja, Elisabet Rähn

4. Safe Space App

Team Steady Flame Girls

How-Might-We ... **help passionate youth maintain emotional balance and prevent burnout in high-energy cultural projects?**

The Safe Space App supports reflection, peer connection, and time management with features like anonymous check-ins, motivational quotes, buddy chats, and calming music. Testing showed a strong need for youth-focused, emotionally intelligent tools. The prototype addresses gaps in existing project management tools by linking productivity with well-being and can also be adapted for workshops or printed formats.



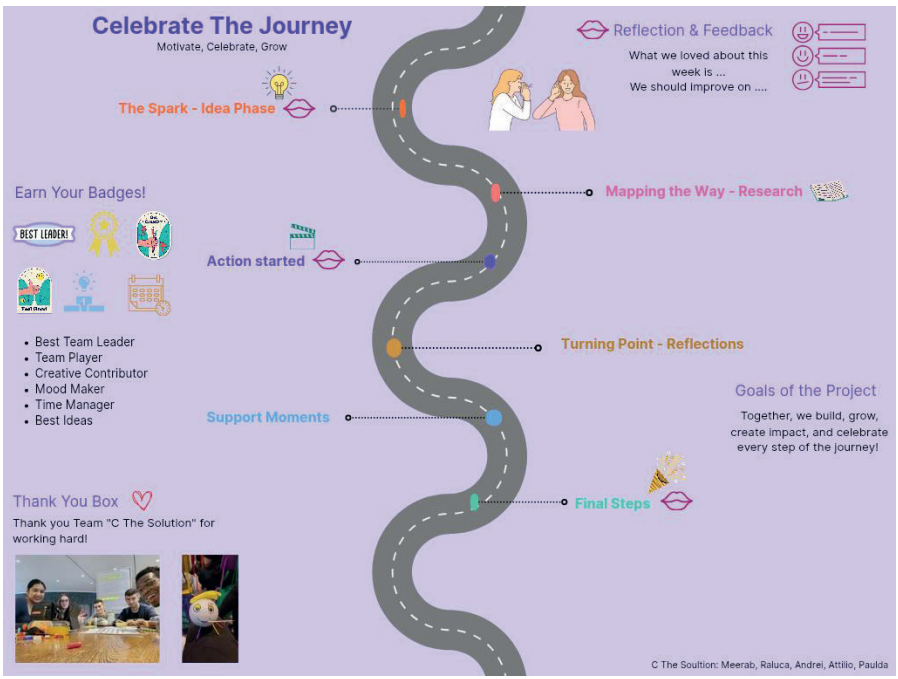


Eliise Maremäe, Marta Kātiņa, Miljana Jerković, Jovana Jovanović, Miona Petrović, Jurca Andreea

5. Celebrate the Journey

Final student challenge response – Collaborative team work

How-Might-We ... **reflect on our collective journey and propose forward-looking improvements based on lived experience during the youth exchange?**



Participants co-created this final prototype using insights gathered during the program. Teams suggested contextual solutions to enhance emotional safety, accessibility, and structural flow in future exchanges by using real project moments, challenges, and feedback. Recommendations included improved pre-event communication, clearer team roles, and dedicated time for peer-led reflections. Experience was highlighted as a source of data, and efforts were made to cultivate continuous learning and improvements that originated from the grassroots level. This prototype, while less material, models a methodology of participatory evaluation and systems thinking.

Raluca- Diana Sturza, Meerab Fatima Hussain, Andrei Jurca, Attilio Di Lena, Paulda Lionetti

Measuring What ***Matters***

GOAL	ACHIEVEMENT
Empower youth to co-design cultural engagement tools	100% of teams produced actionable, tested concepts
Foster peer-to-peer and intercultural learning	Participants from 6 countries co-created and tested methods together
Improve emotional sustainability in youth projects	All teams integrated reflection, motivation, and well-being into their ideas
Generate adaptable, youth-led methodology content	Two creative toolkits emerged from direct youth experience
Build confidence and practical skills	Most participants stated they feel better prepared to lead local initiatives

The project's effectiveness was assessed by combining qualitative feedback (gathered during the exchange and at its conclusion) with the final group outcomes, particularly the prototypes that addressed actual challenges of youth participation in culture.

Stories, Quotes *& Numbers*

Initial feedback showed strong participant engagement and satisfaction: over 85% of respondents rated their experience between 8 and 10 out of 10, with 36% giving a perfect score. **Participants particularly appreciated informal and social activities**, such as the game night and city rally, **which helped build trust and community** in ways traditional workshops could not. Hands-on sessions encouraged collaboration, and participants valued the freedom to express themselves openly.

In the final feedback, over 86% of respondents rated their satisfaction between 8 and 10, with one-third awarding a perfect score. Participants described their experience as "Interactive", "Revealing", "Transformative :)" and "Productive and fun". Some shared personal reflections:

"I felt heard and like I'm really part of the team."

"I felt really inspired and energised... being part of a team where I could contribute directly, rather than just observing, made the experience very meaningful for me."

When asked about future applications, participants highlighted concrete intentions:

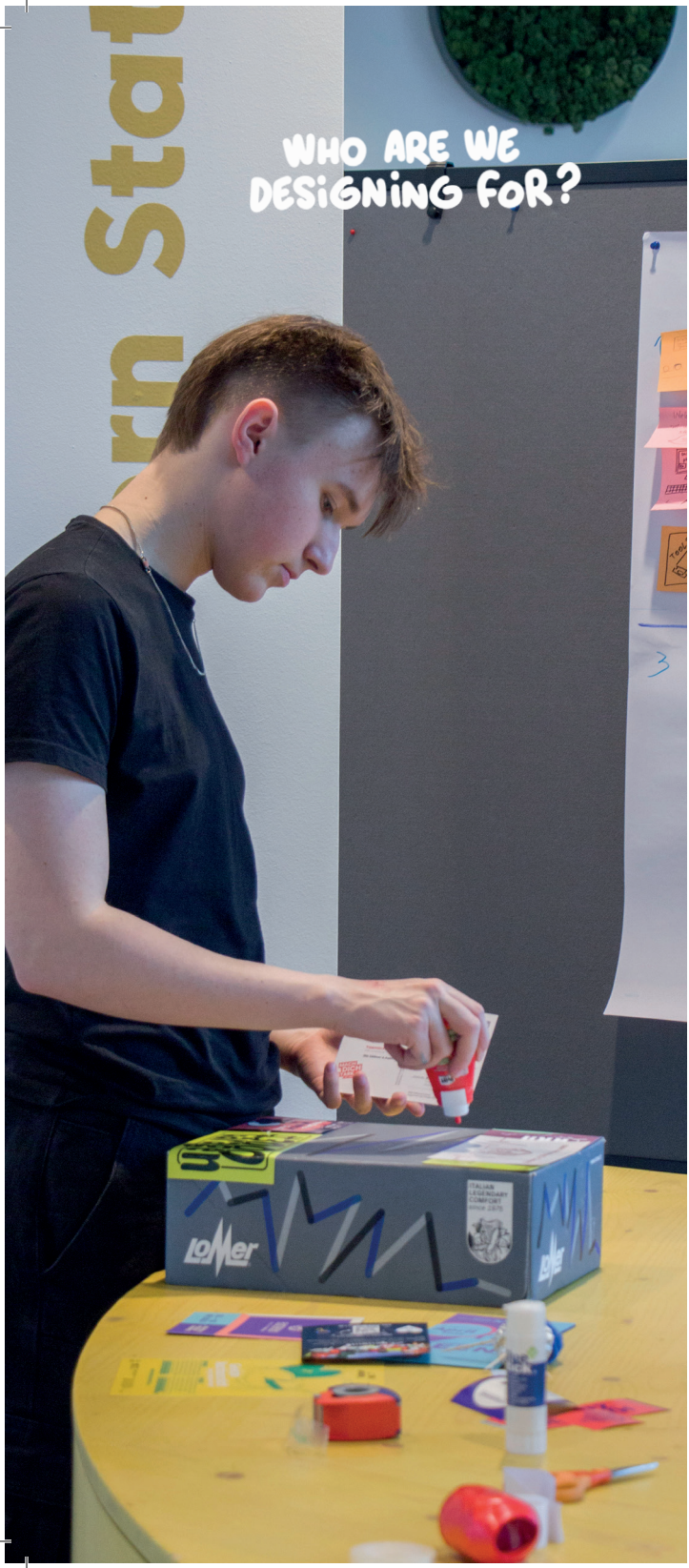
"At the Kaleidoskop Festival in Novi Sad this September, and also in youth work in general."

"I realised how important motivation is in building participation strategies. I worked on a simple prototype during the project to reflect this idea, and I'd like to improve and apply it in future intercultural projects or events."

Overall, feedback shows that **participants gained a deeper understanding of youth participation** and project design, increased motivation to engage in cultural initiatives, and a stronger appreciation for teamwork, intercultural learning, and empathy. They valued creative, hands-on activities such as prototype development, fieldwork, and workshops, and many plan to apply these insights in future youth work, including event planning, collaboration with local institutions, and improving communication.

Closing the Loop: ***Conclusions on Youth-Led Culture***







KEY INSIGHTS FROM THE CO-DESIGN EXPERIENCE

(IF YOU WANT TO DESIGN YOUR OWN) →

WHAT WORKED WELL

- **Balance of Theory and Practice**
  Quick insights on Design Thinking and Theory U were immediately followed by hands-on exercises, keeping energy high and learning practical.

- **Deep Connection and Motivation**
  Applying Theory U helped participants connect deeply, fostering trust, empathy, and a clear understanding of each other's motivations and needs.

- **Multicultural & Multi-Professional Enrichment**
  The participants' diverse backgrounds enriched discussions and sparked innovative, culturally aware ideas.

- **Linking Challenges with Real-world Cases**
  The strategy of using actual challenges that were faced by the Festival Crew organising the Betonblühen Festival, grounded the sessions in tangible reality. It fostered relevance, motivation, and meaningful collaboration.

- **Balanced Schedule**
  A careful mix of intense, focused, co-creative workshops during the day with leisure activities in the evenings and weekends, maintained participants' energy, encouraged informal networking, and promoted overall wellbeing.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NEXT TIME

- **Room Environment & Air Quality**
  Workshop spaces should ensure consistent fresh air circulation. Poor ventilation over extended periods affected concentration and reduced overall effectiveness.

- **Exclusive & Consistent Workshop Space**
  Secure a dedicated space reserved exclusively for workshop activities. Having other groups or individuals frequently passing through sometimes was a little disruptive.

- **Stable Workshop Location**
  Maintain the same room for the entire duration of the exchange. Moving between different spaces sometimes broke with the continuity of the workshop flow.

- **Optimized Input Duration**
  Shorten theoretical inputs even further and allocate more time for practical application and prototyping, enabling deeper and more thorough engagement.

- **Increased Visibility of Final Presentations**
  Invite more stakeholders, guests, or local partners to the final presentations, maximizing impact, providing further feedback and validation, and potentially opening doors for future collaborations and opportunities.

CONCLUSION

The ***„Erasmus+ Youth Exchange C the Unseen“*** in Chemnitz successfully demonstrated how young Europeans bring all qualities needed to co-create meaningful solutions to face social and cultural challenges in just a fraction of time. It also proved the powerful synergy between Design Thinking and Theory U, creating an environment ripe for genuine innovation, personal growth, and cross-cultural collaboration.

Firstly, the thoughtful selection of the 42 participants, who were highly motivated and passionate about both social and cultural impact, proved to be crucial. The diverse group, composed of young Europeans from various professional backgrounds and countries, provided a dynamic and fertile ground for co-creation. Secondly, linking authentic, current challenges, such as the Chemnitz festival scheduled for October 2025, to broader common issues in cultural projects across Europe created an immediate sense of meaning, agency, and connection. Participants saw their work not only as theoretical exercises, but as genuine solutions that could be practically implemented and scaled. Thirdly, the didactic approach, continuously integrating mind, heart, body, and hands into the methodologies, enhanced the depth of learning, engagement, and creative output. This holistic framework significantly raised the quality and authenticity of the outcomes.

Finally, the seamless collaboration between the organizers from Chemnitz 2025, the workshop leaders, and all partner organizations facilitated both an efficient organizational process and a harmonious, vibrant learning environment. This alignment made the exchange impactful, enjoyable, and deeply rewarding for everyone involved, leaving behind valuable experiences, actionable prototypes, and empowered young European changemakers ready to drive innovation in their own cultural contexts.


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Generous Neighbours
t's Moving!



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CHEMNITZ KULTURHAUPTSTADT EUROPAS 2025

Die Beauftragte der Bundesregierung für Kultur und Medien

SACHSEN

Diese Maßnahme wird mitfinanziert durch Steuermittel auf der Grundlage des vom Sächsischen Landtag beschlossenen Haushaltes und durch Bundesmittel der Beauftragten der Bundesregierung für Kultur und Medien sowie durch Mittel der Stadt Chemnitz.

KULTURHAUPTSTADT EUROPAS