



Growing Green Cities

Where Beethoven found inspiration for his *Pastoral* symphony and Schubert wrote his songs, a new initiative seeks answers to a sustainable future

by **Eden Vered**

The Viennese floodplain Lobau is a 22 km² natural refuge for a dazzling variety of species of flora and fauna. Considered a biosphere reserve by UNESCO, the Lobau has been protected since 1976 and is today a part of the Danube-Auen National Park. It also provides clear drinking water to nearby Vienna and is a popular recreational area for nudists.



With the opening strains of Beethoven's *Pastoral* symphony, I close my eyes and imagine the burgeoning life of the *Wienerwald* (Vienna Woods), the pulsing biodiversity of the lungs of our city illustrated in music. Chipper strings portray a sunny countryside while the woodwinds join in shortly after, mimicking the twittering of birds. The composer went for long walks through these woods during his years in the city, inspiring him to write his symphony. Vienna's Green Belt has played such an important role in shaping its culture, we often take it for granted.

But the effects of climate change are forcing us to re-think. Deforestation, it turns out, is one of the major drivers of the Earth's warming trend, resulting in nearly 50% more carbon dioxide than the energy-related carbon emissions from the entire United States and more than double the EU – according to research conducted by the World Resources Institute (WRI). Preservation and restoration of forests are key to limiting climate change

and can provide a cost-effective way of reaching the needed carbon dioxide reduction by 2030.

But can a city alone contribute meaningfully to these climate goals? The new global initiative Cities4Forests says yes and is teaming up with cities worldwide who are willing to commit to change. Vienna, Europe's greenest capital (according to Compare the Market research), is already on board.

VIENNA GOES GREEN-ER

In Vienna, safeguarding green spaces has long been a focus of development strategies. As far back as 1905, Vienna Mayor Karl Lueger established the Green Belt. By its 100th anniversary in 2005, it had grown to more than 21,000 hectares (51,890 acres). A prime example is the Donauinsel – a 21-kilometer-long park created in the 1970s as a byproduct of the dredging of the Danube for flood control. The man-made island now provides a favorite recreation area for residents and habitat for local wild life. "This is important," says Stefan Schindler of the Umweltbundestamt (Austria's

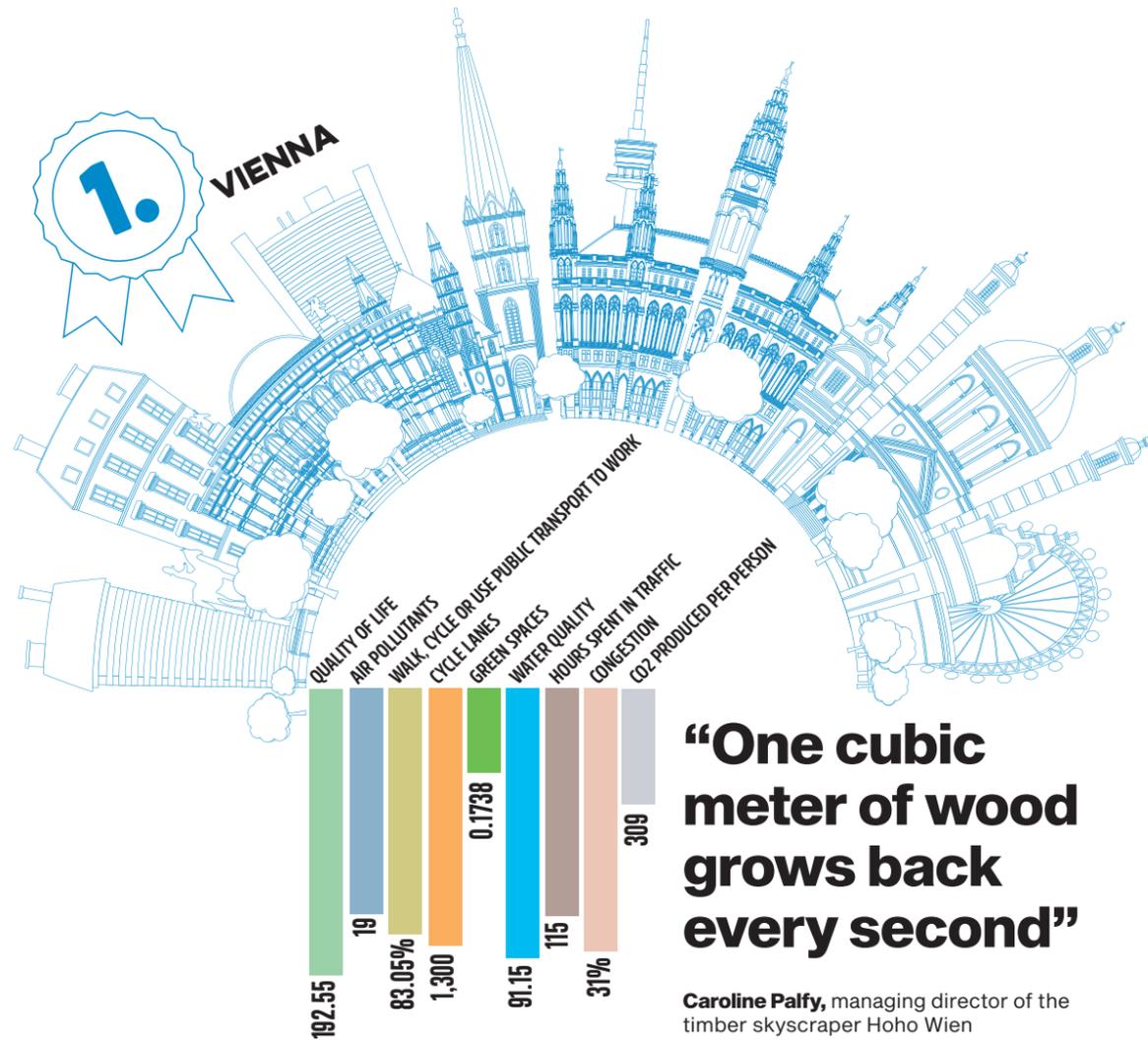
GREEN CANOPY

Cities and their residents benefit in multiple ways from trees and forests.

Inner Forests (trees within cities) support human health and wildlife as well as cleaning the air. Another important benefit is cooling urban heat islands (higher temperatures in cities in contrast to their rural surroundings caused by human activity). To encourage change, C4F's project offers assisting in managing urban forests, getting involved in the development of urban planning and establishing new forests to expand the Green Belt of Vienna as part of activities that have been carried out by the Department of Forestry and Agriculture of the City of Vienna for 30 years.

Nearby Forest (trees in watershed surrounding the city) contribute to cleaner air and reduce flooding, are to be managed through maintenance of protection areas, tending to meadows, plating of shelter woods and seeding fallow land as well as environmental education.

Faraway Forests, usually tropical, are known to detain carbon and are a source of medicine for humans and generate rain. But with no tropics in the area in Vienna's case, C4F's strategy to managing faraway forests consists of safeguarding the quality of Vienna's drinking water by means of nearby natural civil culture regimes; game management, sale of timber and maintenance of footpaths and roads.



Environmental Agency). “Some birds and species have already vanished and, approximately 30 species of butterflies are now extinct. Vienna’s greening infrastructure is there, but in times of global biodiversity and habitat loss, a higher level of conservation must be aimed for.”

Today, some 50% of Vienna’s land area is covered by green spaces “and this is no coincidence,” says Ulli Sima, Vienna city councilor for the environment, rather, part of the city’s ongoing “urban green space policy.”

However, new challenges are on the horizon. Climate forecasts claim predict future summers will be even warmer, with up to 100 days of temperatures exceeding 30 degrees Celsius per summer. On top of that, Vienna is projected to grow to two million inhabitants by 2027, requiring more housing, more jobs and the development of high-quality green spaces – pressures that together set Green Belt STEP 2025, Cities4Forests and other similar initiatives in motion.

Overall, the Austrians seem to be ahead of the game on sustainable development – the world’s tallest timber-framed building is already in the works in Vienna’s urban lakeside (Seestadt, as of 2018).

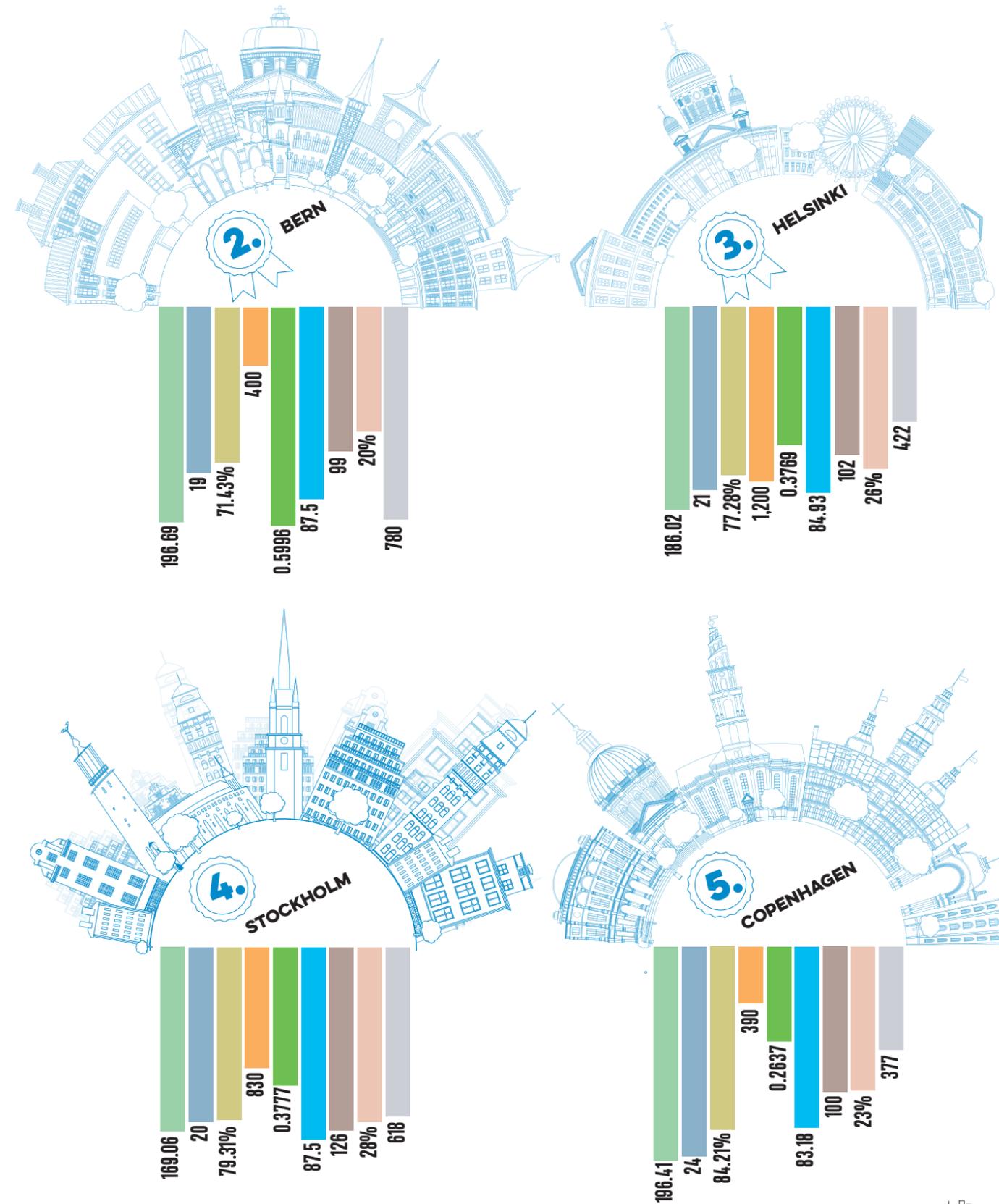
“Austrian forests produce 30 million cubic meters of timber a year,” reports Caroline Palfy, managing director of the high rise. About 26 million are logged; the remaining 4 million remain in forests, she says. “In other words, one cubic meter of wood grows back every second.”

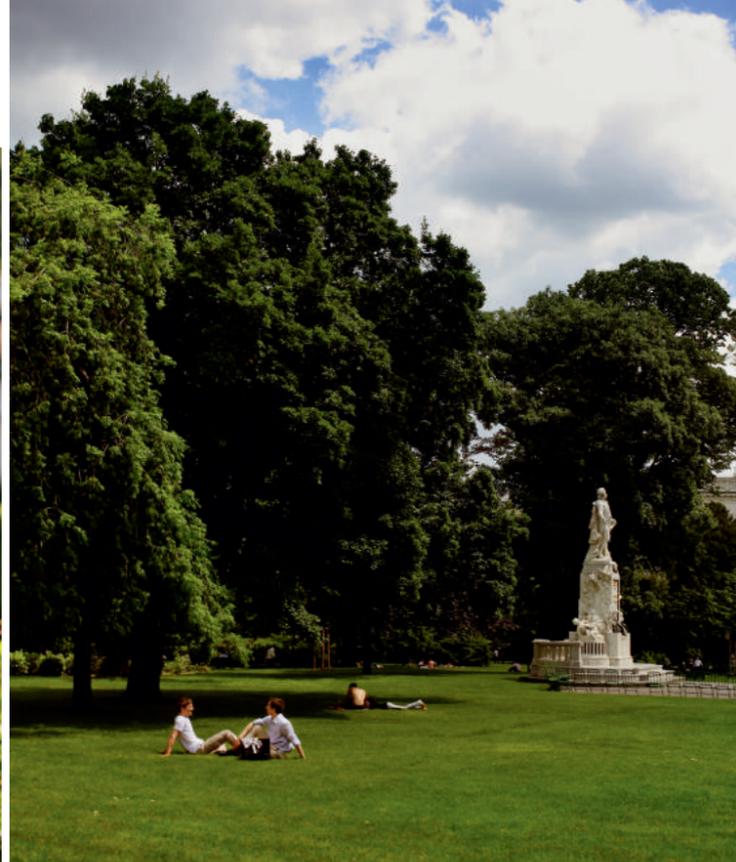
Increasing wood construction can reduce greenhouse gas emissions, as timber has a natural ability to store and lock away carbon while timber plantations generate large volumes of wood residues able to replace fossil fuels as an energy source.

URBAN FORESTS

Urbanites easily forget the importance of forests. For one thing, they are still a viable source of food: Some 76 million tons of forest food are consumed globally, including an estimated 50% of fruit, which comes from trees – with the rest from shrubs (berries) and ground plants (melons and tomatoes), also found in forest settings. “Both landscape and cityscape must be equally developed,” explains Todd Gartner, Director, Cities4Forests & Natural Infrastructure Initiative, World Resource Institute. In just the first few months, 52 cities have signed on to the coalition,

PHOTO: PREVIOUS PAGE: WERNER BELTO; ILLUSTRATION: THIS PAGE: DEPOSITPHOTOS





one of which is Vienna. The initiative hopes to stimulate governments and city residents to work together and gives member cities technical support on sustainable practices. “Cities worldwide are becoming increasingly aware of the challenges inflicted by climate change, but don’t always have the expertise to cope in an effective and sustainable manner,” Gartner says. The initiative hopes to mitigate the negative effects of deforestation by focusing attention on forests in all settings: inner city, nearby and faraway, and explain how urban development that is conscious of forest management can help a city reach sustainable goals (see sidebar previous page).

NO COMMITMENT ISSUES

Vienna’s strong commitment means that participation in Cities4Forests will launch this spring. “We don’t develop policy,” says Gartner. “We assist cities who want to do so.” They also bring examples of the payback: “Take a look at Washington, D.C.,” he says. “They invested a lot of money in green spaces to cope with storm water and ended up saving when in Hurricane Sandy, tree-covered areas suffered significantly less economic damage.”

Success in reaching environmental goals requires a collective effort between governments and households. A report by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) determined that a paper recycling rate of 66% globally would reduce pressure on forests by 153 million cubic meters per year – the annual wood production of Russia.

In Vienna, public support is strong, making ambitious planning possible. One project, The Vienna

Green Façade Module, a simple, cost-effective plant solution for street-side façade greening, is already being tested in Favoriten in the 4th district. Property owners and residents in the trial area are participating in the development and a total of 50 green modules will be presented this spring.

Concern about biodiversity is another area of collaboration between city and residents. In the Common Swift project, residents are helping the Department of Environmental Protection (MA22) spot and record breeding sites of this city-loving bird as part of a wider effort to protect the city’s plants and wildlife.

Coming up out of the U-Bahn at Stubentor, the lovely Stadtpark is spread out before me, on this unseasonably warm day in early spring. But perhaps this is the new normal, I think, folding my coat over my arm. The pleasures of the warmth, the sounds, the smells are darkened by a sense of urgency. The Schlegel text to one of my favorite Schubert songs, *Im Walde*, suddenly takes on new meaning.

*“Eternal rushing of gentle springs,
charms flowers of their pain.
Though grief beats alluringly against our hearts...”*

*The urge for unprotected life, the savage battle
of strong impulsion, turns to fairest brimming love...
and the breath of creative air can be felt
moving through the soul.”*

The song of the forest, the song of life, is there for us to hear, if we are listening.  

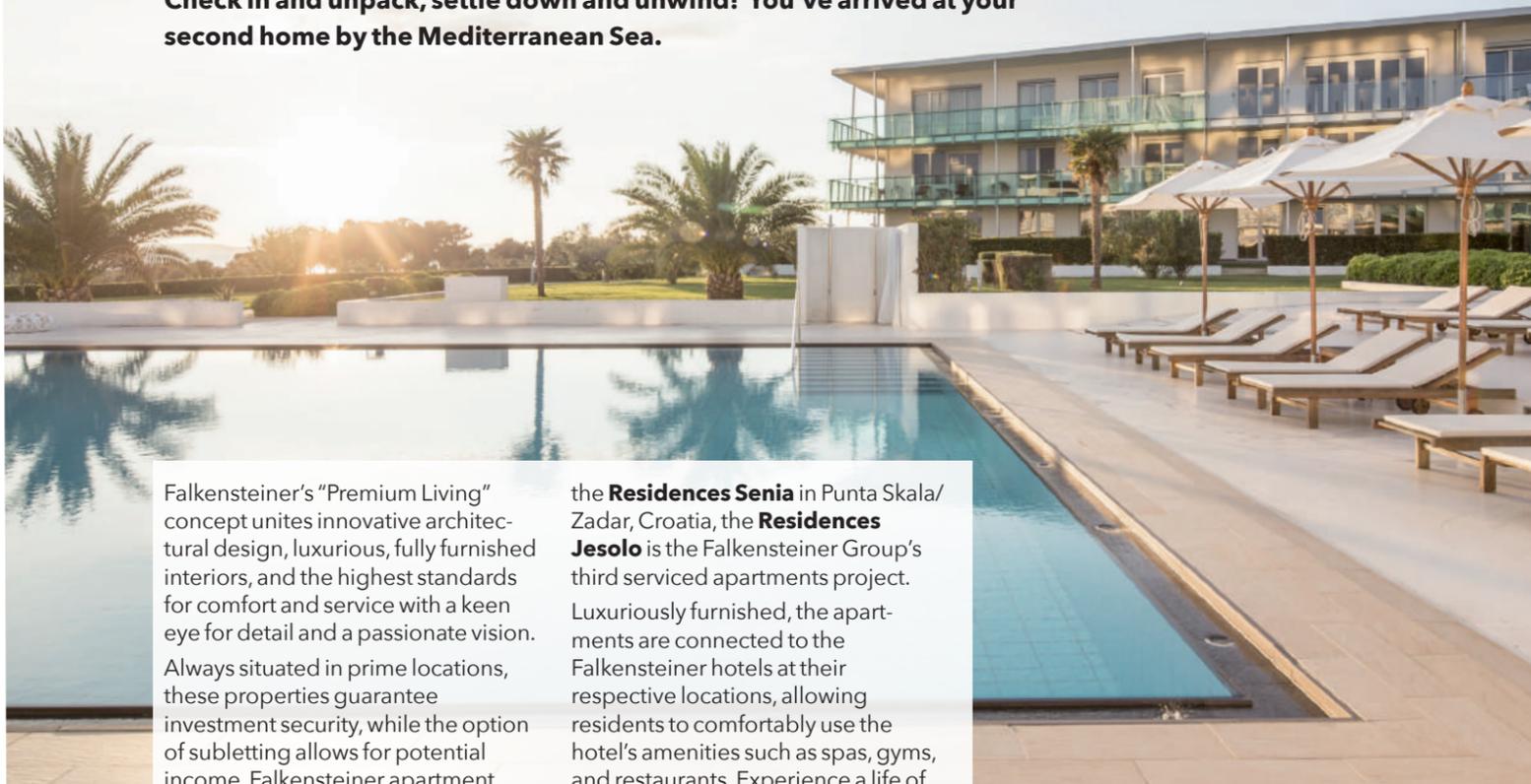
Green spaces like the Stadtpark (left) and the Burggarten form part of Vienna’s inner forests, which help to clean the air, offset heat islands in the city, support human health and wildlife – and are some of the best places to spend a relaxed Sunday in the city.

PHOTOS: WETTER BILD

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