

Contact Transcription

Okay, well, hello, nice to meet you. I'm Nicholas. So, I don't know how much you know about what I'm doing exactly, if anyone told you or not.

I heard that you make master theses about building a harm reduction place. Yeah, exactly. So, I'm a student at EPFL in architecture.

And I'm basically doing a study on harm reduction facilities across Switzerland. So, I've interviewed already K9 in Geneva and the director of the ABS Foundation in Lausanne. And so, I also wanted to talk to you or someone from contacts to know a bit more about how contact functions.

And especially the infrastructure in Bern and Biel. Yeah. Because there are some differences with Geneva and Lausanne and I just want to have a few informations about these places.

Okay, about Biel, I cannot talk. I can just talk about Bern. Bern is the first harm reduction place worldwide.

And I worked there since 29 years, so I can talk to you about this. But Biel is not my place. Okay, well, we could talk about the Bern facilities.

Mhm. So, let me just check out the questions. So, first I can give you a few information about the place, when it was built, the capacity per day and the number of personnel and what's the main goal with it.

So, a general introduction to it. Yeah. Harm reduction place in Bern is the first harm reduction place worldwide.

As I told you, built it in 1986. Now, we are since 2011 at Ottlerstraße, it's the name of the street. An old house from the city of Bern.

Contact is a foundation paid by the canton of Bern. So called Leistungsvertrag, the canton of Bern wants something from us and give us the money to do that. Harm reduction goals are clear.

We want to bring away the people from the street, so that the community of Bern and the canton of Bern don't have problems with open drug scenes. And we want to help the people to find a way to use drugs in a harmful and harm reduction way with high medical professional staff. We try to give them possibilities to work at the Kontakthanlaufstelle, to eat, to take showers, to have medical care, social working care.

We do a lot, we are at the Anlaufstelle, harm reduction place in Switzerland. We do the most with the people, not only give them places to consume drugs, illegal stuff. We also have a lot of other things we give to them.

As there is NADA, this is ear acupuncture. We make a kiss, this is structural. Talking with them about their consume rate.

We give them possibilities to do stuff in their free time. We go to museums, we go to art, we go to concerts with them. We do a lot of different things.

The place is a house. There is the Kontakthanlaufstelle with the cafeteria. Possibilities to take showers, possibilities to wash clothes.

Toilets, needle exchange and a yard. Where they can smoke cigarettes and where the deal is tolerated by us. We have consumption rooms for smokers with 12 places.

We have 12 places to consume with needles, injection places. And we have about 6 places to consume by sniffing. The staff is about 30 people who work in the Anlaufstelle Bern.

Per day we are 8 people who work from 12.30 to 8 o'clock. We are open every day of the year. Sundays we are open from 4 to 8. We have per day about 250 different people who come to us.

We have registered about 1000 different people who are active. And about 1600 in global. That's the way we do it.

Okay, nice. So you have the places in Bern. Are there all the amenities in the same place that you were in since 2011? Or do you have multiple? No, we have just one place.

In the early days when the drug scenes were open and heavy, we had two consumption rooms. Now we have one facility. And we just changed the house in 2011.

Before we were in a cave, in a cellar. It was really special. Since 2011 we have a house with a yard with big possibilities to work with the people.

But it's an old house and we need to rebuild the house. Also in 2026 the city and the town of Bern will start to make a renovation of the whole place. We are going to have a totally new facility in 2027-2028.

Okay. Can you tell me a bit more about these renovations? What are the points of attention that you are going to bring? What are the things you are going to change? Which things are you going to keep? What works well or doesn't in this place? What we need is a yard. We have a registration system.

So when you want to come to us, you have to take your card of identity or your passport with you. And then you have to talk with us. Then we make a photo and then you are registered in our contact registration system.

It's not open for the police or somebody else. But you are registered. We know where you live, what you do, what you have for problems, where you need help.

Or if you don't need help, if you have kids, if you have a family, if you have a place to live. Or if you are in other facilities. And then when you have this little card to come in, you can come to the yard.

In the yard there is the deal tolerated and there you can drink alcohol, you can smoke. And there is the cafeteria and the consumption rooms. And what is really important for us is that everything is on parterre.

That people who are older or people who got wheelchairs can go to every place. This is possible. Now in the first floor we have the medical care room and the social workers room.

So you have to take the people up in the first floor. We don't have an elevator. The first thing is we want a yard.

Nobody can look into the yard. No tourists. And we want to have everything for everybody possible to walk in.

We want to have all the offers for the clients have to be on one floor. It is really important for us that everybody can come to our place. People with wheelchairs, people who have problems to walk.

This is the main thing we need. We need a good kitchen, a good bar. We need good places where they can rest after cocaine consumations.

These are more or less the points we need. We need a flexible possibility to take people into the cafeteria. We don't want to consume.

We have to have a possibility to take them to the consumption rooms. Who are separated from the cafeteria, separated from the yard. Also people can just be at our place and drink a coffee.

Without consumations or without deal. This is the main goal we have. Okay, so you talked about this accessibility.

That's important. And also privacy of these yards that can't be seen. I know that, for example, in Geneva they do pretty much the opposite.

It's this huge green box in the middle of an intersection. And the outdoor place is not very well defined. It has this little fence, but it's very visible from the streets.

When I talked to the director, he said that one important part for him is that we don't want to hide ourselves from the community. So how do you see it? Is it different for you? Maybe for the patients it's preferable? Geneva does it in a totally different way. Geneva is a young consumption room, like Lausanne is a young consumption room.

I'm happy that they do it their own way. There's absolutely no reason to criticize that. Just what I have to say is that I heard that Geneva doesn't let in people who smoke because they have problems with aggressive people.

So this is the other side of the medal, if you do it like this. We don't hide ourselves from the public, we hide the clients because they are afraid of the public and afraid of the police. This is the point.

We don't want to hide. We want to make a safe place for the clients. It's a totally different attitude.

We don't want that the community has no problems with people who are different or look different. We want that they are visible. We want that the problem is visible.

But when the people come to our place, we want that they have a safe space to calm down and to find calm and possibilities to do something else than hide from the police and take cocaine and hide from the police and take cocaine. This is not a good idea to bring people to a level. And if you want to do it like this, we had long, long times in Birmingham.

I started 20 years ago, 29 years ago. It was an open scene in front of the Anlaufstelle. People in front of the Anlaufstelle.

A lot of police, a lot of aggression, a lot of problems. And we decided to say, hey, dear clients, what do you want? Every month we have a meeting with all the clients. We say, what do you need? What do you want? We don't do that for us.

It's not a positive thing. We talk to the people and the clients say, please give us a place where not all the policemen, all the tourists and all the dealers can watch us doing our stuff. That is the idea of Bern, just to hide away from the community or to say, no, no, we have no problems in Bern.

It's a safe space for clients. And we do different things. We go with the clients to football matches of the Bernese football club.

We go to museums. We go to hockey games. We want to say to the community, hey, look at these people.

They are here. They're not bad. Not all of them are just junkies, freaks.

These are normal people with problems. Watch them. That's what we try to do.

It is a different approach and a different way. But it's not so bad to do it like this. Okay.

And so the thing I want to know. So to access all these services, you need to be registered. And I think I see it on the websites.

They need to be residents of the canton of Bern. At least, is there a reason particularly for that? Yeah. In the old days, the whole Romonti had no place.

The whole valley had no place. Everybody came to the city of Bern. We can let 100 people at a time.

And when 100 clients are at our place, we just packed full. It's really dangerous. It's not funny.

And from these 100 people, 40 to 50 people were from the Romonti, were from other cantons. We tried to do everything. We sent letters to Geneva, to Lausanne, to Neuchâtel, to Fribourg, to Valais.

Please help us. Nobody said, no, no, no, we don't have a problem. Geneva, Lausanne, Valais said, yeah, no, we don't have a problem.

Drug problems are a problem of the police, not our problem. And then we said, okay, if you don't help us, if you think you can say that Bern is a bad city because of drug addicted people, but you don't take responsibility for your people, then we have to do it like this. It was really hard.

In the early days, we had open for everybody. That's what I would like to do. I would like to reopen for everybody.

All tourists, all people from other cantons, all people. But this is just only possible if all other cantons of Switzerland and all big cities have a harm reduction place for their people. Then it's possible.

It's not possible to say, yeah, you know, we don't have the problem. We don't have the money. It's not possible.

It's a little harsh for me to say that. It's the responsibility of the Romani that in Bern, people cannot come in from other cantons. Freiburg opened now, after 25 years, a little place.

We are happy that they do that. But just to say, that was really heavy. And also in the canton of Bern, we have this problem.

The Bernese Oberland says, no, no, no, we don't have a problem. No, no. And all the people from the Bernese Oberland come to the city of Bern.

And the Bernese Oberland people say, yeah, this left-wing city, it's absolutely clear. Yeah, yeah, yeah. They forget that a lot of people who are in the city of Bern are coming from the countryside to the city of Bern.

But it's clear. A centre, a city, takes a lot of people from the countryside. A lot of young people want to come to the city.

That's absolutely great. But there are not only rich people coming, there are also strange people coming. That's good and that's absolutely correct.

But for that, we don't let in everybody from all the cantons. But what we do, just to say, when somebody is in Bern from Geneva, we have a lot of people from the Romodi, who are in Bern every day. We talk with them and then we let them in for three months.

And then we look that we can bring them back or that they come to Bern. Just to say, we don't let them on the streets. But it was a long, long time in Switzerland.

It was really, really a bad system. After four years of policy, drug policy, everybody works together. Zurich, Basel, Luzern, Bern.

The whole Romodi was not working with us. So we said, sorry. It's not against the social works, it's against the politics of the Romodi.

Just to say, that is the reason. That's the only reason we have not the capacity to let all the people in. Even if we would like to let them in.

Because on a social worker idea, we have to let them in. Because they are all addicted, so we have to let them in. It's our client, these are our clients.

But we don't have the place. It's not possible. Yeah, that's understandable.

Also in this idea of accessibility, you are inside the building. I know the ones in Luzern and Geneva, they create a particular importance to the flow of people inside. So as not to have too many people come and stay static in one place, where it can cause tension.

But always a kind of movement where they are taken in charge right away. And then they go into this room for a specific substance. And sometimes they even have different exits.

So as to not have too much crossing. Is that something also you're considering in the new renovations? And how is it taking place? We have that already. That this is absolutely important.

That there are no longer people waiting in front of a room. We have like in the Swiss post office, we have a number system. You can come to our place, come in, you can be in the yard.

And when you want to consume, you can go to the team and you get the number. The number is written with your name. And there are, how you say, screens all over the place.

When your number is on the screen, you can go to this place. You can go to the inhalation room or you can go to the injection room. You can go to the nasal consume room.

Or you can stay in the yard. You can go to the cafeteria. You can eat.

You can take a shower. But we try to do it like this. You can go to the consumption room.

There are three different entries. You can go to the buffer zone. Exactly.

But in the new place, we don't know if we want to do it like this. The biggest problem is not to go in. The biggest problem is that they go to the same way out.

We would like to prefer to go in and to go out in another direction. But you have to think if you have that, there must be control. The problem is when you need more people.

When you have an entrance people come in. We always have to think we need a good control. We need safe spaces for the people.

But we also need the possibility to hide away from our secure places, doors for our workers. So if you have problems, you have the possibility to go out. In every room where there are workers of my staff, there is always a place where you can hide away.

It's really important. If you don't have that, you are just in a bad situation. Do you understand what I want to say? I'm not quite sure about this hide away idea.

Not at all. Like a fire door, like a door where you can go out. If there is a fire or if there is activity, the staff need a door to go out away.

This door is only for the staff. This is also really important. Okay.

So just a staff exit door. Exactly. Exit door, get out.

Okay. And about the security inside, what kind of security measures do you have in place and how would the conception of the building or the place, how do you manage security in a wide way? As I said, there is always the possibility to hide for the staff as emergency doors. You always have the possibility to go away.

This is really important. If there is somebody who is freaking out and really aggressive and you cannot handle them anymore, we have a direct alarm to the police where we can push two minutes later the police is here. We have the possibility to use the emergency door and hide away.

And we have security people outside of the building, outside of the yard. They control the registration cards of the people. But normally we don't need them.

What we do is it's the most important thing in the consumption rooms or in the harm reduction places is in German it's called Betziehungsarbeit. We work with the people. We talk with the people.

We want to know them. We want to know their story. We want to know what they do and we want to take them for serious and we want to give them respect and we want respect back.

We have absolute strict and clear rules and we have also meetings with the clients to discuss about the rules to find a better way to work together. And this is the main thing about our safety is to work with the people and not just to let them consume or let them be. We work with everybody who is in our place.

Every week you have to talk with us. Every half year you have to talk. A big, big discussion with us one to one.

Is your situation changed? Do you still have a flat housing first? What about substitution? What about your problems with family? We talk that we write that down and so we know how the people are in their lives and that's the most important that they know us and we know them. Then the safety is guaranteed. When you just let people in and let them consume and don't talk with them you got big problems.

I think the most important thing is to have a staff who is really good educated social workers nurses psychiatric nurses who are really good. We have supervisions we have interventions we have further education we let our people go to schools to learn more about people more about drug addicted people and I think this is the solution to have safety. You can have emergency doors and police and everything but if you don't talk with the people you're lost.

That's just not your architect way it's just a social worker way but it's really important. It's very difficult to separate the social from but we don't have a lot of violence and when we have violence normally we can bring it down with talking but if there is violence people have to go out for longer it's possible. When they come back we do with them a special treatment they have to talk with us every day we try to find out what their violence problem is and this is really important.

But from the building of architecture way emergency doors always emergency doors for the staff a bar a place where you can go behind like the bar drinks it's really good to have the bar high also the emergency place it's always good to have a lot of space for people so they can go away if it's too close it's always dangerous. No. Okay.

And so let's talk about the relationship with the the neighbourhoods the like the local community let's say. So how do you entertain a relationship with them and have you had any problems when you arrived in this place in 2011 were there a lot of people against it and how do you how do you mediate that? There's always a problem when you have a harm reduction room in your neighbourhood so for that we have three things who are important for harm reduction rooms they have to be in the centre of the city close to the station everything else they don't have they cannot be in a neighbourhood with a lot of people and families not possible and they need to have possibility to have a yard who is not in the outside of the public like in Geneva it's absolutely cool no problem for us we want to have a place where they can be smoke private in a private space these three points are important so we have the big possibility to go to this place who were in the early days a place to sleep for people who got no beds and a bar and the city gave us this house with the yard and in the beginning all the neighbours were mostly restaurants mostly offices not a lot of private people a lot of shops they had big problems with that so we start to invite them to the Anlaufstelle so we have a so called neighbourhood meeting all the neighbours are coming to the Anlaufstelle in the early days 6 or 8 times in a year now we have 4 times in a year everybody comes who wants everybody gets invitation from the city from the police from us and this meeting is organised by the city of Bern it's in the harm reduction place cafeteria in the morning the police is always at the meeting the Pinto this is like the SIP in Zurich social workers who are going to the streets and our security people are on this meeting all the neighbours are coming and can tell what was good what was bad and we try to find out this is the most important thing you have to take serious also your neighbours and not say it's not so bad don't be afraid you have to take them with you and help them to find a way with these people because there are people who are really in a strange way and they go to shoot the drugs in the houses in the how you say Treppenhaus

And I think in Berlin we have a good relationship with the neighbors. There's nobody who says, we hate you, go away. We have, but it was a long time and a long work.

Okay, so neighbors are mostly commercial, very little residential. Exactly. This is really good because I understand totally when you are in a family quarter, a lot of families, a lot of houses and there is a harm reduction place, it's not possible, it's absolutely not good.

But not every city has the possibility to do that. So like in Chur, the city in Graubünden, they want to open now a harm reduction place. It's a little city.

In Grisuna, I don't know if you understand, if you know the city of Chur. I don't know if it's called French. Yeah, I see.

This is a little city. They have a big problem to find a place who's good. So now they do it in the near public space, like a park.

They do it because the open scene was in this park. So they have a little house close to this park. For a little city, this is really, really a problem.

Lausanne had the first harm reduction place outside of the city a little bit. It was really a problem. They called us and said, hey, we don't have people yet.

It's really different and really hard when they have to travel to go to your place than they stay in the city. So this is really important and we have really the good situation that there are not a lot of neighbors who are private neighbors, a lot of shops, a lot of restaurants. Also, for them, it's not easy.

The restaurants, for them, it's absolutely hard because every bar and every restaurant has a toilet and all of our people want to go to the toilet sometimes. So we talk also at the restaurants. We give them little boxes for the needles.

We talk with them how you can react when somebody is coming. What do you do? The city has a telephone number where you can call. When there are open needles, they come to pick them up.

We have a lot of little stones in the city of Bern to help the neighbors that the situation is better. So I think this is the way. Okay.

Do you see any challenges, any evolution of challenges during the past 20 years, maybe changes in trends and substance trends? For example, in Geneva, they have this huge problem now with crack that is changing a lot the way they work inside this building. So do you have any challenges that are tackled that you want to tackle or so? Yeah, I mean, crack is in Bern since 15 years, a big, big, big problem. When I started 29 years ago, there was a lot more heroin, opioids, and now this cocaine is absolutely number one.

Then there are benzodiazepines were number two and heroin is number three. So we had to work 15 years ago. We started to work with crack people, how we need to, what we have to give to them.

So we started to have resting rooms for them, abilities to where they can come down. And we started to make projects with them outside of consume. That's what I said when we go

to museums or we go to eat with them or we make brunches without consume or we cook with them or we go to the riverside.

I think you have to give them a possibility to go away from this stress with the cocaine. This is important. So for that, we have cocaine is a big problem because people get aggressive.

With alcohol, it's a big problem because people are freaking out. But also benzodiazepines, also the medicaments are really, really a big problem. And what I think was the biggest challenge now is for the harm reduction places is what we do with the young community.

The people are 15, 16, 17, 18 years old. They don't want to come to the harm reduction places because the harm reduction places are like a bar in Geneva where the old punk rockers from 20 years ago go to drink their beer. The young people, no, we don't want to see the old freaks.

We need our own places. So this is a big challenge for the harm reduction place. If there are young people who are, who need a place to consume, how we give them a possibility to come to us and to see it's not only a bar for old farts.

It's also a possibility to consume. This is the biggest challenge. What we do with young people, do they need a harm reduction place for themselves? Can we integrate them into the harm reduction place now? What drugs are number one in this community? I mean, we know that there are a lot of different drugs in the young community.

Cocaine is big, absolutely clear. But now with the opiates, fentanyl, oxycodone is common. It's absolutely clear that we have a challenge with strong opioids.

Opioids, they're common to burn also. We have to work with our staff. How we manage to have overdoses, how we manage overdoses from fentanyl.

Do we have an oxone spray for the nose? What we do, this is a challenge. And the young community is a challenge. And what we do with the community of the people of Bern who don't see the drug problem as a problem.

Because we have a good system in Switzerland, mainly in Bern, that the people think it's not so big problem. Come on, you don't need the money. There's no problem.

They forgot the open drug scenes. These three things are for me the challenges, the most challenging things. And people with psychiatric diseases who are coming to the streets.

Where not the drug are number one, but the psychiatric disease is number one. But they also use drugs. These people are really heavy to talk with them, to work with them.

These three, four things are the challenges for the next 10 years, I think. Yeah, the thing about young people I've heard also in Geneva is a weird issue. Do you have any ideas or comments on that? On why maybe it's not as attractive for young people? Yeah, it's because they think that this is a place for junkies.

These old, long-haired dudes who shoot their drugs. It's not so attractive for young people. They don't like that.

Even if it's not like this anymore. The old population of drug-addicted people from the 80s, they're mostly dead or clean or substituted. We don't have a lot of them.

We have a lot of them, but we don't have a lot of those. We have a lot of people who are from the older generation, the hip-hop generation, who make techno parties, who drifted away in drugs. But I think for the young people, it's not attractive because they think it's dirty and it's sad.

And it's good that they think it like this in one way. In the other way, they consume drugs in a high-risk way, so they need the opposite place. And what we do is now we have a drug check, a mobile drug check near the places where young people are.

Safe spots and drug check. So they don't have to come to the harm reduction place. They can be at their place where they make their parties and check their drugs.

And then there we say to them, hey, if you need a place to talk, if you need a place to eat, you should go to the harm reduction center. So perhaps this could be a little way. I don't know.

When we were young, I mean, when I was 20 or 18, and somebody came to me and said, hey, there is a place that's good for you. I said, fuck you. I know what is good for me.

I don't need old men who told me what is good. So this is always the possibility, always the difficult problem. I think we have to work with people from the young community.

We have to go to the places, but not too offensive. Go to the place and say, hey, if you need us, we are here. But you don't have to come.

I think this is a little bit the possibility we have. Okay. Okay.

Okay. And, yeah, maybe for finishing notes, is there anything, like, what would you add or what would you think would be needed in such places if money weren't a problem, local community wasn't a problem? What would you think would be good things to have for these places that would significantly increase the likelihood of people coming there and having a better place overall? First, we have to change the law. It's not possible that these substances are illegal.

It's absolutely counterproductive, this way of prohibition. We have to do it really quick to legalize it or at least to not criminalize it. Decriminalize it.

It's not good that the police have to take these people to the courts. It's not absolutely necessary. We need really, really quick cocaine programs where people can get cocaine from the state.

It's absolutely clear for me. In Heroin, it was a successful history, a successful story. Now we need to do the same with cocaine.

It's absolutely possible. It's heavy, I know. It's difficult, I know, but we have to do it.

We have to do the next step. Then we have to do stuff with absolutely clear with every restaurant or shop. What we do is we have two times a day of the open doors in harm reduction.

Where we said to every citizen of Germany, now you can come to our place and to see what we do because a lot of citizens think we give them drugs. There are a lot of myths and stories about this place. So we do the day of the open doors two times now.

More than 500 people came to the place to see what we do. I think this is also a really important thing to open the doors, not every day, not give away the safe space for clients, but to give the citizens of Bern the possibility to see what we do, what the whole story is. I think this is really important, that everybody from the city knows what this place is, not think, oh, it's a strange, dangerous place with bad people doing bad things.

No, do it open, help the citizens. These three things I would do in the next decades to change the situation for the people and also to not need so much money from the state to build these places. It would be absolutely nice from your point of view if the houses and the harm reduction places are really top built from top architectures with a lot of ideas from the workers, from the staff members to say what they need.

Then a lot of things are better because now in these houses, normally you don't have emergency doors, you don't have the possibility to give them a place where they can calm down, you don't have the possibility to have wheelchairs, you don't have the possibility to talk with them in a calm way, you don't have the possibility to make good food. These are all things I think that are really important. When it smells good, when it looks good, when the light is good, people are happier.

I hope that your thesis is going to help us to bring up better houses for harm reduction places. Yeah, I hope too. Also something because it started like this.

For example, when I looked at how the center is here, for example in Lausanne, they built the new place in La Riponne, it's quite new. It's a very hospital vibe. The center in Bern or in Thun, the contacts are a lot more warm, it feels a lot more like a house.

I know in Lausanne they wanted to have a very functionalist space where it's easy to clean, easy to look at, easy to contain. Would you say this is necessary, unnecessary? Do you think something more warm would be better for people to come to? I think the consumption rooms have to be like in Lausanne, like in Bern. Clinical, medical, clear, not too warm, not too nice.

They have to be like in a hospital. I think that is good. Now we're doing a consumption that is dangerous.

It's not a place to rest and flash. It's a place to consume and then you go out. But the cafeterias, the yards, they have to be warm and open and clear and nice light and good places to sit down and good possibilities to talk, not too noisy.

This is really important for me. For me, you have to change these two things. The consumption rooms have to be a little like in a hospital because there are overdoses, there is blood, there is a lot of dangerous stuff.

They might have to be like in a hospital, but the rest would like what we do in Bern. I think you've answered a lot of my questions. If you have anything to add simply to it, anything that comes up to your mind? No, just thank you that you do tastes like this.

I think it's really important that we talk about also how to build places like this. It's not only for harm reduction places. It can also be for therapy institutions.

Really important. I think it's really interesting. I wish you success and luck.

I hope you understand what I said. My English is sometimes a little bit strange. No, it's very understandable.

I thank you for your interest. I didn't want to say that Geneva or Lausanne are doing bad. I just wanted to say that Romody had a long time not seen the problem.

But I'm happy that Lausanne is doing something and Geneva also. It's clear to me that these places need attention and need patient-centered design also for it to work as best as possible. It's complementary to all the social work that is the foundation of it.

Of course, the architecture itself can only do so much compared to the rest. It's a very interesting topic so far. Thank you very much for your time.

Thank you very much. If you're finished with your thesis, I would like to read it. It would be really interesting for us.

Yeah, sure. I can send it to you when it's all done. Absolutely.

Thank you very much. Have a nice day. You too.

Thank you. Bye-bye.