

## Join me on a trip to... Damanhur



*Damanhur. I just happened to stumble on it online. Pictures of stunning, underground temples, hidden in an Italian mountain caught my eye. Why hadn't I, nor anyone else around me for that matter, ever heard of this place? I immediately knew that this would be my next destination. I reached out to the extraordinary Damanhurians. Attended an intensive initiation program with a group of equally extraordinary companions. I received the warmest possible welcome from Butterfly, Ant, and Fieldmouse. I was moved to tears by the beauty of the temples of Damanhur. I fell in love with the natural surroundings of the Italian Alps. I danced among alien paintings, hugged trees, ate delicious organic food, created community-building art and learned, at night during a rain shower, how an oracle ritual is done. I greeted people with folded hands, saying "Con Te" (with you). The hustle and bustle, the logistics and the very hard work in Damanhur often made me laugh. I found the answers to many of life's questions. And I am still puzzled by the almost naïve belief in extraterrestrial beings, time travel and the power of spiral-shaped jewelry. Sometimes it felt a bit like Hogwarts, Harry Potter's school. I'm impressed by what is being achieved, built, collected and created in Damanhur. And above all, I have grown to love the people and the place.*



## Damanhur: a utopian as well as a very practical community in the heart of Italy



In the fall of 2024, I went on what has been probably one of my most extraordinary journeys so far. I visited the community of Damanhur in Italy. Damanhur is a spiritual and ecological community, located in the hills of Northern Italy, north of Turin. This community, often described as a utopian experiment, was founded in the 1970s and has developed into a blossoming network of ecovillages with a strong focus on spirituality, art, and sustainable development. Damanhur is both a physical place and a philosophy that is all about mutual connection, esoteric knowledge and a holistic way of life. Damanhur has a great, spiritual purpose.



Apart from the fact that I had never had to rely this heavily on my anthropologist eyes, these people and this place have deeply touched my heart. It was special, complicated, confusing, and strikingly beautiful. As the Damanhurians themselves like to put it: Damanhur is **complex**. After their first trip to India, you hear most travelers and anthropologists sigh: “I can’t tell you what it was like, India is just indescribable, you love it and hate it at the same time.” After my 10-day visit to Damanhur I experienced the same confusion and culture shock, though magnified. Damanhur is utopian. And utterly concrete. Above all, Damanhur is many things. Strange. Strikingly beautiful. Complex. This complexity derives from the fact that you can look at Damanhur in so many ways. In this article I will look at Damanhur with the eyes of an anthropologist, and from different perspectives.

Next, I will share my lessons learned from Damanhur that can benefit our organizations and society as a whole. Because there’s so much that we can learn from tribes all over the world and because Damanhur has discovered so much about building tribes and reaching goals.

## Damanhur as sociological experiment

Damanhur is a **sociological experiment** about building the ideal community, a tribe. Damanhur is the largest community in Europe. Many spiritual communes that came into existence during the free-spirited hippie age of the 1970s, have already fallen apart. Damanhur not only persisted, but it also managed to grow. Even now, 11 years after the death of its founder, which is always a very difficult transition. Children have been born and raised in Damanhur and the community has established a solid base. The political and social structures of Damanhur are extremely fascinating and can teach us a lot. But it is also strange, in a funny way, as the residents of Damanhur exchange their given names for animal and plant names.

*I couldn't help but giggle while dealing with the preparations for my trip, receiving e-mails signed by Butterfly and Ant Cilantro. Fieldmouse Hazelnut picked me up from the airport. Cobra was my art teacher. And Macaque Monkey taught me about development work in refugee camps. After a while I got used to it. It was nice to ask someone for how long they had had their name and why they had chosen that name. When you have been living in Damanhur for a while and you feel that you are ready for it, you exchange your given name for an animal name. The name change doesn't happen overnight. You propose a name that you think suits you. Next, you will talk to 100 Damanhurians and discuss whether they think this name is suitable for you. This is an extremely useful process. Thanks to these conversations you get to know the community even better, and vice versa. The community will then say "yes" or "no". There's a story about a man with a considerable ego who proposed to be called Eagle. This could have caused some friction since the name of the founder was Falcon. The community decided to name the man Caterpillar instead. Despite his initial disappointment, Caterpillar is now happy with his name. Later you can add a plant name. When you show great spiritual awareness or when you take on a leadership role, you will receive a third name, after a crystal.*



Damanhur has a complex social structure aimed at promoting collaboration, diversity and personal growth. The community consists of different core families, called "nucleos", that live in ecohouses across the area. Each nucleo has its own dynamics and autonomy, while together they form a close-knit unity. Residents contribute to the community by taking on different roles in for instance agriculture and art, but also in spiritual and scientific activities. The focus on community life means that individual possessions and personal ambitions are subordinate to the common goal. Decisions are being made based on consensus or by representatives from different councils. Outsiders sometimes call Damanhur a sect or cult. The crucial difference however between Damanhur and many other spiritual communities, is that at Damanhur no one profits at an individual level in terms of money or power. Damanhur is built on democratic principles, is diverse in terms of material needs and it has decentralized ownership. Common funds from contributions go towards the construction of temples and collective facilities such as schools, stores, and land purchases. Damanhur is not rich in the

material sense of the word and many things are old and broken. However, in terms of connection, knowledge, artistic possessions, and immaterial assets, Damanhur boasts an incredible wealth.



*I was amazed by the diversity in Damanhur. Every single day I discovered a new form of living or different project. Diversity and change are core values, deeply rooted in the philosophy of Falco. On the one hand there are people who live in communal groups like the ones you would expect in a community like this one. On the other hand, there are couples and single individuals who are connected to a nucleo but who prefer to live alone in a tree hut, a mushroom house, a leaking hut made of reed, or an*

*artistic design home worth a couple of million euros with a marble bath tub and a sunken fireplace under a crystal the size of a bed. There's a nucleo of ecovillages where families with children each live in their own completely carbon-neutral homes. There are temple artists, craftsmen and women, spiritual workers, doctors, farmers, plumbers, lawyers, and IT professionals who earn a living through remote work for employers in the United States. There are rich people in Damanhur, poor people, gay couples, and traditional people and you come across all political preferences and clothing styles. There are young people who don't want to live in Damanhur but do want to stay connected. There are passersby who join the community for a while and people who decide to never leave after just one day in Damanhur. There are many Italians, but just as many foreigners.*

## **Damanhur as a political, economic and social alternative**

Damanhur is also **politically, economically, and socially** an alternative system. With its own stores, food chains, and distribution of labor in diverse – and sometimes very original – ways. The people who live here don't have a lot of faith in the sustainability of the current capitalist world economy that is exhausting the earth and causes people to grow increasingly lonely. Damanhur offers an alternative, a different way of living and achieving results.

Damanhur was founded in 1975 by Oberto Airaudi, better known as Falco Tarassaco, or Falcon Dandelion. Falco was a visionary, a spiritual leader who from a young age had experienced the paranormal and who showed a keen interest in ancient spiritual traditions. He envisioned Damanhur as a community that would function as a laboratory for the human evolution in which spirituality would not only be an inward exploration, but just as much a collective undertaking.

Falco developed the philosophical and esoteric fundament on which Damanhur was built, based on the conviction that humanity can live in symbiosis with higher, universal powers. Falco was incredibly impatient to get things done and possessed the uncanny ability to empower people to achieve great things. He initiated the construction of the underground temples, the purchase of vast plots of land and the sacred forest, fought against the opposition from the orthodox catholic environment, continuously sought participation, defused conflicts during the initial phase of Damanhur and left behind countless letters with assignments for the future. Falco remained the heart and driving force behind Damanhur until his death in 2013. In his will, he appointed several spiritual successors and a practical governing council, the once yearly elected Nial. These are now in charge of Damanhur, together with the elected representatives of the nucleos.



*Falco continues to live on in Damanhur. In a revered tree in the sacred forest. In a statue in the temple. In the many temple paintings. In photo portraits in every nucleo and every house in Damanhur. And above all in the countless miraculous stories and in the hearts of the Damanhurians. He often manifests himself. In dreams, in visions, in a butterfly that, out of nowhere, lands on your shoulder while you're talking about Falco.*



The leadership within Damanhur is remarkable in the sense that it isn't based on a single, hierarchical system but on an ever-changing network of roles and responsibilities. They call this "the circulation of powers" in which leadership positions and responsibilities are shared. The community is governed by different councils and associations, each with a specific focus, such as economy, culture or spirituality. These councils consist of the elected representatives of the nucleos with the purpose of making decisions according to the wishes of the entire community. Damanhur emphasizes the necessity of a political system that is both dynamic and inclusive, without the rigidity of the traditional power systems.



*Would you like something new or different in Damanhur? Introduce a new living arrangement, start a nucleo or apply for an art grant. You can suggest an experiment or a project. If it is well substantiated, you will quickly get it approved and, if necessary, you will receive the required support and funds. As a result, you are likely to be even busier than before, since it often means you will be the one taking the lead. I had to laugh at the constant*

*hustle and bustle in Damanhur. It feels like an anthill of hard workers, and after 10 days, I was exhausted. You're always dealing with logistical issues. Who needs to be where in which car. Besides being deeply spiritual, Damanhurians are not the kind of people to sit on a yoga mat meditating for hours. Being active, building and undertaking new things are a form of devotion and commitment to the community. Earthly and spiritual matters are constantly intertwined. It is completely normal for someone to say: "I have to leave this real estate meeting because I am about to enter my silent period and connect with an entity." In Damanhur you can pay with money but also with devotional hours. Time is a currency and considered the greatest gift you have to offer to another person or the community. On a dedicated website you can register your devotional hours. On there you would read things like: I completed 4 hours of temple maintenance. Or: I babysat the neighbors' kids for 5 hours. Or: I connected 4 trees to the eternal network. Parents of children under the age of 3 are not required to do devotional work as this is considered an integral part of parenthood. In Damanhur, connection and living together is materialized in a way that I personally found exemplary, compared to the capitalist society that revolves entirely around monetary profit.*

## Damanhur as artistic and constructional project



In Damanhur the **artistic perspective** as well as the focus on **creativity, architecture and experimental construction**, are hard to miss. When you visit Damanhur, you will above all be overwhelmed by the almost supernatural beauty of the underground temples and all other artistic expressions in Damanhur, created in the blink of an eye by untrained artists. Strange houses, smart eco-constructions, incredible murals, a unique and exclusive language, sacred dances and jewelry with supposed magical powers deliver an Alice in Wonderland experience to anyone who visits Damanhur. "How on earth... did they manage to build this in such a short time, with untrained people and so few resources..." sighs everyone who visits Damanhur for the first time. And whether it is your taste or not, everyone who sets foot in the underground temples of Damanhur for the first time, is left speechless.

The "Temples of Humankind" are the most spectacular and mystical aspect of Damanhur. Falco commissioned a group of 12 people to dig out an underground temple, in a secret spot in a mountain of the Italian Alps. The group managed to work on it in secret for 15 years. This alone is spectacular and nearly unimaginable if you consider that this job was done manually with little more than small drills and shovels. Just think of the rubble that must be secretly removed at night, the ventilation, the water supply and the materials. Moreover, the diggers and artists lacked any kind of training or experience in art or construction. In 15 years, they excavated an underground structure with temple halls, a network of tunnels, a hall of mirrors, incredible murals, mosaic floors, mystical alchemical spheres filled with water, and hidden doors reminiscent of the Egyptian pyramids. Depictions of every animal and human species on Earth, aliens, and mystical beings from various religious traditions adorn the walls. There's a labyrinth of countless stained-glass panels, dedicated to every religion and deity imaginable, crafted in exquisite Tiffany glass. An Islamic and a Christian panel sit side by side with an Inuit deity. Religious leaders and shamans were consulted during the creation of each panel to ensure accurate representation. The construction of the temples continues to this day, growing larger and more complex. Every day, new mosaics and stained-glass panels are created in the workshops, and new tunnels are being excavated. In secret codes that still need

deciphering, Falco left behind instructions for new parts of the temple. The Temples of Humankind are a never-ending project.

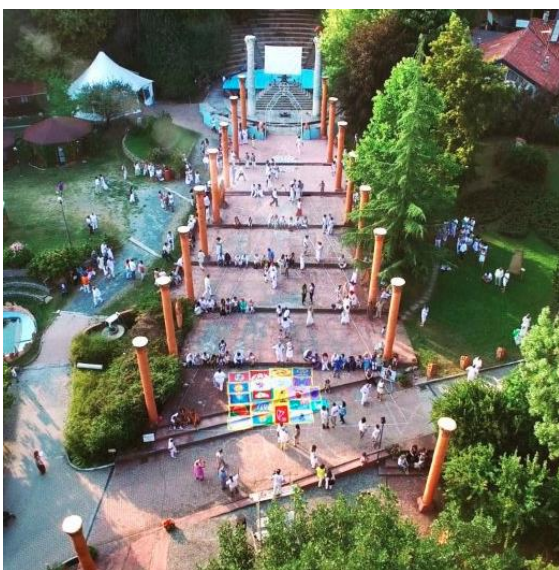


After 15 years, the Italian authorities discovered the construction of the temple. Following threats to close the complex, after all no building permits had been issued, everything changed when they entered the temple. The Italian government passed a special law that underground structures with the exact measurements of the temple, could be built without building permits.





*Of course, I was skeptical when I first visited Damanhur. People who believe in aliens and carry animal names... Yeah, right... Until I set foot in the temple. As an anthropologist I have met many religious, new age and spiritual communities. In these communities there is a lot of talking, and there are a lot of opinions. In Damanhur there are a lot of... creations. Damanhur is tangible and concrete. Whatever you may think of their ideas, and whatever your artistic taste, even the most skeptical person has to admit that the temples of Damanhur have been built with near-superhuman dedication and beauty. We often say: back in the Middle Ages people knew how to build cathedrals, but they don't anymore. Damanhur proves us wrong.*



In addition to the underground temples, there is a temple complex above ground called Damil with a colonnade, amphitheater, and a collection of statues. It is the place where great rituals are performed by the residents of Damanhur, with huge fires, sacred dances, music, theater. Beautifully decorated robes, crusader-like swords and the forest location make it into an experience that balances between magical sacrificial rituals and a performance by the local theater company. There are full moon rituals, initiation rituals, days of commemoration of the dead, and seasonal transitions. Impressive and compelling.

And as if this weren't enough, there's the Sacred Forest. The sacred forest was heavily damaged by a big amount of pesticides and logging. Damanhur bought it and restored it to a healthy ecosystem full of special animals, trees and plants. The forest is the place where lost tree souls find safety, and where – through spirals – one can meditate among the trees. Falco's tree of life is there.

*In Damanhur art is everywhere and has a spiritual and social meaning. During a workshop I learned to work in an artistic way on community building. With a group of 14 people we made statues out of clay. Our assignment was to depict "yourself in relation to the others". Next, we brainstormed about the question what "community life" meant to each of us. What you would need, to feel at home. On an enormous piece of paper, we each painted the ideal place in a commune. Then came the hardest part. You were asked to move over a few*



*places on the co-created painting and to change someone else's drawing. Respecting what was there and space for your own uniqueness. I struggled; what can you change and what not? A metaphor for the constant change that is a given in Damanhur and the space that is given to newcomers and new generations, to change and not to remain stuck in the old ways. After all the changes had been made, each of us placed their own clay statue on a place where you would like to live in the commune. This way we formed a community with diverse individuals, on a changing field, with different nucleos, where everyone could be themselves. An amazing exercise, definitely useful for creating organizational tribes.*

## **Damanhur as a system of purpose**

You can study Damanhur from the perspective of **belief and purpose**. Even though Damanhurians prefer not to call their philosophy religious, also because it clashes with Roman Catholic Italy, from an anthropological perspective the system of purpose does contain all the elements of a religious community. Most religions studied by anthropologists, are centuries old. Damanhur is a "new" philosophy, even though it contains ancient elements from other religions and spiritual jargon. It is interesting to witness first-hand the creation of a "young" religion, including the establishing of the rules, symbols, initiations and rituals. Like everything else in Damanhur, the system of purpose here is complex. Rituals have great meaning in the life of the Damanhurians and they spend a lot of time on them.



“Entities” are being honored in Damanhur. These could be people, plants, stones, alien energies and powers. From the present, the past and the future. This means that Damanhurians are protective of their lives and their bodies. Smoking and drugs are forbidden on the compound. Food is organic. Coffee is consumed in moderation. Exercise is being encouraged. Banning alcohol from the lives of Italians had proved to be too difficult, but when you are drunk, you can expect to be confronted about it. Relationships are entered mindfully, and it is true that sexuality is free for everyone, but sleeping with a different person every night is not considered positive behavior. Unlike in many other spiritual communities, Ayahuasca and other plant medicines are not allowed and psycho pharma only in

case of serious mental distress. During covid there was a big debate around vaccination, and it was decided that everyone was free to make their own choice in the matter. Most people in Damanhur have not been vaccinated.

Time is an interesting concept in Damanhur. It is considered fluid, flexible and traversable. Falco said he had traveled back from the future to guide the people in Damanhur into the future. Falco was, according to the stories of the Damanhurians, a “normal” person, yet with the unusual gift of remembering past and future lives that the rest of us have long forgotten.

Human imagination and connections are limitless. Damanhur is the land of unlimited possibilities. According to legend, Falco and some of his closest followers, went on several journeys through time. The belief in reincarnation is a pillar of their philosophy. The aim is to return to an increasingly higher energetic dimension or appearance. Many Damanhurians know each other from previous lives. From the hidden and sunken mythical city Atlantis. That’s why people easily connect. Even I was greeted as an old friend.



Damanhur has a fascination for extraterrestrial life. Damanhurians believe that there is a connection between humans and other forms of consciousness, including alien beings. Damanhurians consider the universe full of life and intelligence, and they believe that there are other civilizations out there that can contribute to spiritual evolution. You can learn about these connections and the possible influence of extraterrestrial life on earth and humanity. Communicating with these beings is possible through rituals, their unique magical language and gestures. The ideas of intergalactic collaboration and unity are an important part of the Damanhurian worldview.

Extraterrestrial life forms or entities are difficult for us humans to perceive. But in the paranormal experiences of Falco, they managed to take such shape that we are able to recognize them. Entities in Damanhur let themselves be seen, or caught if you so wish, in spirals and “selfs”. Spirals are literally spiral-shaped circles or stones and crystals. Spirals are everywhere in Damanhur. You can perform all kinds of meditations in these spirals, and they have an artistic character. Selfs are different expressions of entities. Selfs are paintings with many graphic abstract forms.

*One evening I was invited to a dance celebration in a stunning design home in Damanhur. Spiral-shaped, with a view over the valley, a marble bathroom, a ceiling of didgeridoos and selfic paintings everywhere you looked. It took a while before I understood that the house was not only inhabited by the woman and her child, but also by the paintings, the selfs. I was studying it for quite some time, and I still am. Is a self or a spiral a symbol representing an entity (alien) or is it the entity? It is neither. I couldn't believe it at first and kept asking. A painting, a self, is a living, animated being and so is a spiral. And it is also a reference to an entity. Therefore, from an anthropological point of view, the philosophy of Damanhur can be considered a Pantheistic or animistic religion. This means that objects that are considered lifeless in the Western world, such as stones or a stream, are seen as living beings. These convictions are by the way also making a comeback in the West. In New-Zealand rivers have been given legal rights, so that they can file a claim in case of pollution.*



Besides these somewhat extraordinary beliefs to outsiders, the philosophy of Damanhur is at the same time very concrete. There's the 'School of Meditation,' a name with a playful twist. In Damanhur, they pride themselves on not just sitting around meditating all day, but on taking action. Building temples, teaching, community building, and caring for nature are all considered acts of meditation in action. When you join the School of Meditation, you commit yourself for life to doing good deeds, as well as engaging in interpersonal psychological research, spiritual development, and growth. Performing sacred rituals in the temple is a form of Meditation. Special lessons and assignments prepare you for death; you honor your loved ones with a beautiful farewell letter. But something as concrete as installing plumbing in a new house or building a self-sufficient food village in an African refugee camp is just as well a form of Meditation. Damanhur is an NGO registered with the UN.



*The excitement of the Damhurians over signs of synchronicity and magic made me cheerful. Life in Damanhur is magical. Signs of connection and beauty are noticed everywhere and are joyfully shared with others. When I walked out of the temple on the last day of my journey, a butterfly landed on my shoulder. Immediately a couple of people around me started jumping up and down and nodding at me. During a ritual to connect me to Damanhur, 'just like that' a visitor's phone went off, playing beautiful music. Immediately it was pointed out how special that was. In Damanhur beautiful caterpillars appear, lights flash, flowers grow in winter, people read each other's thoughts at the right time and in the right place. Synchronicity and magic are a given in Damanhur.*

## Damanhur as a repository of memories

Linked to the system of belief and purpose, Damanhur can be considered **a catalogue, a library, and a legacy**. Their apocalyptic worldview regarding the future of the earth, is the reason why they “collect” memories and tribal and spiritual knowledge. They bundle “memories” and capture them in energetic fields, connections, artistic expressions and encounters.



*In the shop with all kinds of “selfica”, objects and pieces of jewelry made from copper wire, silver or gold with glue and crystals, I was explained the different ways these could be used. One of the things you can do to support the mission: walk three laps around a beautiful tree with a pendulum, a copper ball with a crystal on a string that is uploaded in the temple. In this way you connect the tree with the worldwide network of trees and with the temples of Damanhur and other dimensions, preserving its soul for eternity and giving it strength and connection during its time here on earth.*

The core mission of Damanhur is to promote a harmonious society in which man, nature and universe are in balance with each other. The people of Damanhur strive for spiritual evolution and believe that humanity is capable of developing its full potential and connecting with higher dimensions of consciousness. This pursuit is supported by shared projects around ecology, art, education, and scientific research, all aimed at strengthening this interconnection. “Life is sacred and has to be honored in all its forms,” is one of their basic principles. They combine personal development with shared responsibility to offer a model for a sustainable, peaceful world.

Although Damanhurians are by no means gloomy and march through life full of energy, they do have an Armageddon-like view of the future. The way we have treated the earth, means that it will likely become inhabitable. This will however not be the end of spiritual life or soul life. Falco believed that humans, plants, animals and other entities will continue to live on in other dimensions, in other physical forms and in other places of the universe. To achieve that, however, we do need a proper spiritual preparation which will take us another 600 years. The Damanhurian community will have to exist for this long. This also means that Damanhur is preparing itself to survive in times of war, pandemics and climate hardship by setting up water and food supplies and be self-sufficient. By the way, it is not the first time that the earth has ended. In Damanhur lots of people believe that many of them already knew each other from previous reincarnations, and especially from the sunken city of Atlantis. Therefore, we already know how to survive as souls.

To make sure that our being won’t disappear, it is necessary to collect memories for the new life forms. Damanhurians spend loads of time collecting and preserving memories and establishing links and connections between humans, plants, animals and tribal entities. For instance, they help trees reconnecting with each other on a spiritual level by protecting them, planting forests, singing to them and giving them power through selficas. Damanhurians visit tribes of dolphins, whales, gorillas, and elephants to remind them of their mutual connection. Just like the photographer Jimmy Nelson, and in a way also me, they collect knowledge about

disappearing tribes. They invite tribal leaders and shamans from around the world to “upload” their knowledge and energy to the magical temples of Damanhur. There is a secret temple in one of the woods where hundreds of crystals contain the energy of a religious group or tribal society, brought there by the leaders and shamans themselves. Besides being spiritual labor, creating these memories is in a concrete way also a time-consuming and costly enterprise that is being executed with the strongest possible commitment.

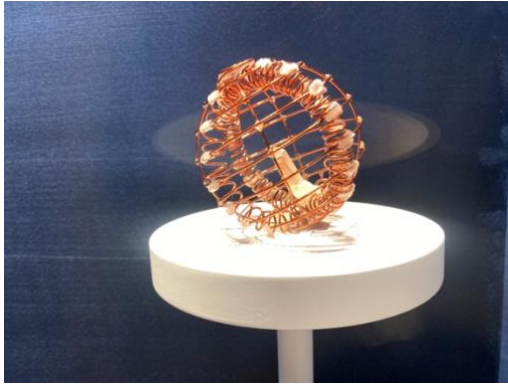


*A group of Damanhurians gathered in a big, hidden dome-shaped tent, in a secret place in one of the woods of Damanhur. On the ground was a spiral made of hundreds of beautiful crystals and gemstones, bigger than any collection of crystals and gems I had ever seen in one place. Some crystals had name tags. Of the tribe that had stored its energetic memories in that crystal. Under a huge umbrella, in the pouring rain, he entered. A small man in a beautiful robe and traditional hat. It was one of the shamans from the Amazon rainforest. Protector of a medicinal plant and one of the last survivors of his people. After a welcoming speech, a ritual followed in which the shaman sang his own Amazon song and, while he continued singing, chose the crystal that belonged to him and his people. The energy of his tribe, that is likely to die out soon, is now forever stored in the collective memory of Damanhur and humanity as a whole.*

### **Damanhur as experimental workshop and laboratory**

Damanhur is a place where discoveries are made. Research, continuous change, technology, and thinking in unlimited possibilities, make of Damanhur an enormous **repository for experimental projects**. Damanhurians can request an “experiment” or project. This can be, but is not limited to, an architectural, social, technological, spiritual or medical experiment. In Damanhur new things are being discovered and tested. “Impossible” is not in their vocabulary. Damanhurians are hardworking people, they form a kind of anthill of all kinds of people, engaged in all kinds of projects and connections all around the world. Damanhur lives, vibrates, and is sometimes really exhausting because of the continuous focus on development and change. In Damanhur the urgency of safeguarding a world in decay is palpable daily.

One of the more mysterious technologies that is being used inside Damanhur, is “selfica”. Selfica is a self with magical properties. Selfica is based on the conviction that it is possible to create energetic structures that can carry intelligence and awareness. These structures are made of metals, ink and other materials, and are being shaped according to specific geometric patterns that have the capacity to concentrate and direct energy. This selfic technology is used to heal, meditate and strengthen personal and spiritual growth. The Damanhurians believe that selfic objects are capable of extracting and focusing energy from different dimensions which makes them a powerful tool for transformation.



*It was one of my biggest struggles and my biggest culture shock in Damanhur: the belief in the magical properties of selfica. Beforehand, I thought that this would probably hold both the secret and the sting of Damanhur. That there would be a profitable business model behind selling selfica to – desperate – people to make a lot of money. Upon entering the beautiful showroom filled with selficas, and while being treated with all kinds of spheres of copper wire and super glue on my body, I was skeptical and on*

*guard. I tried to stay neutral, but I had a hard time taking the jewelry and constructions of copper wire seriously. It felt like being in Hogwarts with all the pins and pendulums, which on the other hand made me happy and curious like a child. Only after I had spent more time in Damanhur, I understood the sincerity and the internal logic within their own model of purpose. A selfica is a self that, when you use it properly, you can use to connect energies. In this way, a self becomes an instrument or magical tool. And yes, the selfica bring in money. But that money does not go to the creators, it goes to the construction of the temples. Spiritual money had a spiritual destination. Moreover, nothing is being mass-produced. Selfica are hard to come by; the demand outweighs the supply. Some of the big selfs can only be bought once you have done all kinds of trainings, which means that they are outside the reach of most people, no matter how much you would be willing to pay for them.*



Another fascinating innovation from Damanhur is the “Music of the Plants”, a research project that explores how plants communicate and respond to their environment. Damanhurians believe that plants have consciousness and are able to interact with humans. With special equipment, the electrical signals of plants are being converted into musical tones, which enables a unique form of communication between man and nature. This project fits in with the broader philosophy of Damanhur that everything in the universe is connected and capable of working together. It was fascinating to witness how different plants make themselves heard in a different way and that when another person enters the room, the plant will sing a higher or lower pitched tune.



Many social experiments in Damanhur are about leadership, membership, and living and working together. One story tells how Falco, after an internal disagreement, took a group of Damanhurians on a wild journey to learn how to deal with conflicts better as a community and as a result to live more harmoniously. There is a ritual where people have to try to take over an animal street apart in a playful way, which symbolizes the unlearning of old patterns and habits. There is also something called holy 'deadlines'. When you start a project, you pick a deadline by which it should be done. We do this in organizations as well, except in Damanhur a deadline is also a kind of holy entity. You will work nights if you have to, to make your deadline. Although everybody is busy in Damanhur, deadlines and other people's time enjoy the utmost respect.



*The experimentation with living together and social constructs, are the highest added value of Damanhur for me as an anthropologist. A solidarity fund for the sick and pregnant women, the truly lived execution of diversity and inclusion and the always open-minded attitude towards change are extremely inspiring to me. What a relief in comparison to the increasing loneliness and emptiness of everyday society. Although I am not sure if I would be fit to live in such a devoted community, it is definitely an attractive alternative in comparison to a world with depressed youths and lonely elderly people in unnecessarily big houses while there are homeless people out on the streets. The continuous changing of perspectives is a deep-rooted core value of Damanhur and that to me is the essence of the anthropological observation. In Damanhur people often make a gesture with the palm of their hand up and then down: "On the one hand I find... but on the other hand I find..." Looking at things from different angles is being taught from a very young age.*

## Opposition and social environment

Like many utopian communities, Damanhur has also encountered opposition and skepticism from the outside world. It wasn't easy to live like a commune in a strict catholic, traditional rural community. In the 1980s and 1990s rumors were going around about cult-like activities. The community is also frequently faced with legal and social challenges that often revolve around land ownership and illegal construction. Local authorities watched them with suspicion, especially because of their unorthodox spiritual activities and the self-sufficient nature of the community and of course the construction of the temples without building permit. Despite all this, Damanhur has managed to survive and has been recognized as cultural heritage of artistic and spiritual importance. Damanhur is a UN recognized NGO and the driver of the worldwide network of eco communities.



Today the Temples of Humankind attract thousands of visitors and the residents are actively involved in dialogue with the outside world, openly sharing their vision on sustainability, spirituality and living together.

Damanhur is a source of fascination and inspiration for those who are searching for new ways of living together and new forms of spirituality. It is a place where the boundaries are fading between what's material and

spiritual in nature, and where the search for connection and evolution are at the core of everything that the community does.

## Lessons from Damanhur



### **What leaders and organizations can learn from Damanhur: leadership by connectivity**

When you walk through Damanhur as an anthropologist, you immediately feel that this is not just any community, but a special tribe. Damanhur offers a different perspective on organization, work and leadership. Not the classic hierarchy that we often use in western organizations, but a fluid, circular leadership that feeds off the energy of collaboration, spirituality and the respect for nature. Value is not only expressed in money, but also in dedication and purpose. Time is considered people's most valuable possession and is therefore something that you should treat with the utmost respect. Above all it is important to have a higher purpose, to build temples and cathedrals, if you want to encourage people to take action.

What can we, as leaders and organizations, learn from this community that revolves around the idea of the collective human being?

## 1. Leadership is not about power but about the circulation of powers



In Damanhur leadership is not about fixed positions, titles or authority. Instead, it is about chosen and temporary roles. Leadership rotates and transforms itself. The concept of “circulation of powers” means that different individuals take on temporary leadership roles, depending on what the community needs. In our western organizational models, we tend to anchor leadership up to the point where people start clinging to power. Damanhur shows us that leadership is a shared responsibility, a role that is passed on from person to person.

**Lesson learned for leaders and organizations:** View leadership as a dynamic process. Dare to let go of power and trust the power of changing roles. This stimulates innovation and ensures that the organization moves along with changing circumstances. Change is a constant given. New generations are allowed to change old structures.

## 2. Living and working together for a higher purpose



In Damanhur, the collective is above the individual. There is a common goal that transcends everyone: the spiritual evolution of humankind and the earth and the construction of temples. What leaders and organizations can learn from this is that a higher purpose, greater than the sum of all parts, unites and connects people. While we are often fixated on personal growth and profit

optimization, Damanhur promotes the idea of collective growth, where each action, no matter how small, contributes to the bigger picture.

**Lesson learned for leaders and organizations:** Define a higher, collective goal within your organization. This ensures a deeper connection and stronger engagement of employees because they feel that they contribute to something greater than themselves. Build temples and cathedrals.

### 3. Ecology and economy go hand in hand



Damanhur has a sustainable vision on both ecology and economy. The eco-friendly way of life, from agriculture to energy supply, reflects the conviction that everything is connected. The community creates a circular economy in which sources are being shared and waste is being minimized. This principle teaches us that sustainability doesn't have to be a buzz word but can be integrated in daily operations. Damanhur thinks in terms of cycles, where waste becomes again a resource and time is an investment in the future.

**Lesson learned for leaders and organizations:** Implement sustainable practices on all levels of your organization. Be aware that economy and ecology must work together for a sustainable future, both inside and outside the organization. Remember that time is also a form of energy that should not be wasted.

#### 4. Rituals and purpose in the organization



Ritual and art form the core of daily life in Damanhur. The community built the Temples of Humankind, underground cathedrals full of symbolism, meant to strengthen spiritual connection and awareness. Rituals, whether they are religious, spiritual or secular, offer people a way to give meaning to their work and their relationships with others. In many organizations this meaning or purpose is lacking; work is something you do to survive, not to connect.

**Lesson learned for leaders and organizations:** Introduce rituals in your organization to strengthen its culture. Whether these are shared moments of reflection, milestone celebrations or creative expressions, these rituals can promote purpose and connection.

#### 5. Impossible doesn't exist: continuous innovation and change

Change and diversity are no byproduct but a constant in Damanhur. Already in Falco's time he could have a standpoint, present it to the community and end up with a completely different outcome. In Damanhur it is appreciated if you go against the norm, if you offer a different perspective on current affairs or simply want to change something. Nucleos are encouraged to invite people from different age groups, backgrounds and with different talents. In Damanhur it is just as difficult to have the younger generations commit long-term to the community. But it is one of the goals and there is complete acceptance of the fact that every generation brings new ways of living together. Damanhur has megalomaniac projects and innovations, that might have you raise your eyebrows as an outsider. Still, it gives you an enormous sense of energy, urgency, and unlimited possibilities and means that everyone is always busy. Damanhur is buzzing.

**Lesson learned for leaders and organizations:** If you want to see change and diversity in your organization, make it a goal instead of a means. Don't appoint a diversity manager but view a difference of opinion as the basis for organization and decision making. Don't implement a change process or reorganization but implement change every single day. Always create mixed teams and always involve young people with each project and decision. Innovate constantly, even if an idea is too big to become reality.

## 6. Collective instead of top-down decision making

In Damanhur, decision making is a shared process in which consensus and collective wisdom play a central role. While many companies and organizations engage in top-down decision making, Damanhur moves organically, like a flock of birds that change course together. This type of decision making promotes engagement because everybody feels responsible for the outcome. However, it also requires patience and the willingness to listen to the wisdom of the collective.



**Lesson learned for leaders and organizations:** Focus on collective decision making. It may take more time, but the outcome is usually more sustainable because everybody takes ownership of the chosen direction.

## 7. Opposition as a catalyst of growth

Like many alternative communities, Damanhur has faced opposition, from both the authorities as from the local community. Instead of retreating, however, the Damanhurians engaged in dialogue. They were open to criticism and learned from their environment without compromising their own principles. This flexible attitude taught them to use resistance as a catalyst for growth, instead of viewing it as a threat.

**Lesson learned for leaders and organizations:** Opposition is not the enemy, but a chance to learn and grow. Welcome criticism and engage in dialogue with stakeholders, without losing sight of the core values of your organization.

## 8. Creativity and spirituality as the core of innovation



In Damanhur creativity is not only a way of expressing yourself, but also a source of spiritual connection. Art and creativity serve to gain deeper insights and to connect the community and the universe. This shows leaders that creativity is not only a tool to solve problems, but also a way to connect on a deeper level with yourself and the other.

**Lesson learned for leaders and organizations:** Promote creativity and spirituality as the driving forces behind innovation

Give employees space to think and act outside the box. Creative freedom can lead to unexpected but powerful outcomes. Invite artists to your strategic planning.



## 9. Live and lead with the end in mind

Damanhur has an apocalyptic worldview. Nevertheless, the Damanhurians are not sad or gloomy, on the contrary. The Damanhurians are excited about the prospect of mortality of each individual, the community and the earth, even though they recognize and fight the suffering that comes with it. For the Damanhurians, part of the spiritual path is to face dying and to make arrangements for your own funeral and write letters to your loved ones in case you should die unexpectedly. Falco left behind countless letters for his successors and organized a democratic form of government for when he would no longer be there. His succession was well-arranged, perhaps one of the reasons that Damanhur continues to exist even after Falco's passing, even though he is terribly missed.

**Lesson learned for leaders:** Lead and live with the next generations and succession in mind. Show transparent leadership and remember that you will never be irreplaceable. Take care of your legacy and pass on knowledge. Divide your power and don't be corrupted. There will be life after you, no matter how charismatic you are.



## **Final thought: Leadership in connectedness**

The most important lesson Damanhur teaches us, is that leadership is all about connectedness and working together for a higher purpose. Connectedness with each other, with nature, with spiritual and ethical values. Driven by a greater goal. Leaders and organizations can integrate these principles by choosing an approach that puts collaboration, sustainability, creativity, and purpose at the center and that allows us time to remind us again and again of this higher purpose.

Damanhur reminds us that leadership is not about power or control, but about putting in motion the collective energy of the group. An energy that, when properly directed, is a power that makes organizations resilient and future-proof. It is a leadership of the future, rooted in the wisdom of ancient traditions. Build tribes, temples, and cathedrals.



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