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Turning Salem's History into an Engine of Opportunity

Ten years after graduating, Patrik Birkle looks back on a decade of global exploration – from Beijing to New York – and explains why the most futuristic thing Salem can do is double down on its oldest principles.

Returning to Salem for my 10-year reunion felt like stepping out of a time machine. The silence of the cloisters offered a stark, hermetic escape from the velocity of my last three years in Beijing and New York City. Here, time moves slower. But as I caught up with friends I hadn't seen in a decade, gratitude mixed with a haunting question. If the 19-year-old Patrik could meet the 29-year-old Patrik, he would be proud. He would also recognize that Salem was the accelerator for that trajectory. But the question remains: How do we ensure that Salem's history and traditions serve as a source of strength, rather than weight, in a world of exponential change? The answer, I believe, isn't about technology. It's about agency.

I've seen this mechanism drive growth in the most disparate places. From Chinese „experimental zones“ to the most successful companies in the world, high-performance organizations share one trait: they create space for agency. They provide tools and vision, then get out of the way and let people build. I recently put this philosophy to the

test, resigning from a prestigious corporate path in New York City. I didn't have a signed contract nor a clear idea for a new venture, just a deep trust that action yields answers that thinking never can. Looking back, I realize Salem was my first „space for agency“. We used to joke about the inflation of student offices – Captains, Mentors, Heads of Service. But those roles were safe harbours for trial and error. They taught us that responsibility isn't something you are given; it's something you take.

In a world shifting from a knowledge economy to an agency economy, these harbours are critical. With AI, knowledge is ubiquitous, free, and instant. The new scarcity is experience – the messy, unscripted wisdom you only get by colliding with reality. You cannot learn experience in a classroom; you can only build it. By doing. This realization drove me to organize the „Salem x Lovable Hackathon.“ My goal wasn't just to teach students about AI and digital products, but to recreate that space for agency using 21st-century tools. But teaching agency is only half the equation.

The other half is acceleration. As we build out this new curriculum focused on business and entrepreneurship, we can accelerate our agency using our „unfair advantage“: Salem's global network. Successful institutions unapologetically leverage their networks to compound success. In Germany, we often view „unfair advantages“ with suspicion, as if success needs to be handicapped to be legitimate. We need to reverse this thinking. In the Anglo-American institutions I attended, alumni networks function as far more than social circles; they are integrated engines of opportunity. I am super excited to support the effort to strengthen this dynamic at Salem. By transforming our network into an engine of opportunity, we don't just teach agency; we accelerate it.

So, how does Salem stay relevant for another 100 years? By doubling down on our strengths: creating more space for agency and leaning into our „unfair advantages“. The best way to honour our history is to ensure our graduates are the ones writing the future.

PATRIK BIRKLE, Abitur 2015

is an entrepreneur, strategy consultant, and endurance athlete. After Salem, he studied at UCL in London and as a Schwarzman Scholar at

Tsinghua University in Beijing. During his time at UCL, he founded a virtual reality production studio with a fellow Altsalemer. This venture plateaued and Patrik decided to start his corporate career at Boston Consulting Group, first in Zurich and

later as a Project Leader in New York City. Today, he is exploring different entrepreneurial ventures back in Zurich. He competed in the Ironman World Championships and wants „Europe to be awesome again“.