

Case Study Report

Integrating competences for a co-creative urban planning culture

New approaches for the development of public open spaces

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Abstract

Current planning practice in Germany is insufficiently prepared for a solution-oriented approach to competing user interests. The planning instruments provide leeway for public participation (§3 BauGB), but do not define how participation is to take place. This means freedoms, but also procedural insecurity. In administrative contexts, this manoeuvring space is not used. Public presentations and workshop formats and further „participatory processes often miss their target: instead of bringing diverse perspectives together and weighing arguments on their foundation to reach a consensus, processes are often characterized by ignorance, polemical polarisation and the amplification of a lack of trust in institutions“ (Selle, 2021). Participation stays on the level of citizen consultation and planning processes last several years. New approaches that create truly open, honest participation processes are needed.

Using the case study of a project to the re-design of an inner city square, initiated and organized by civil-society, an attempt is made to develop a planning approach that is more likely to do justice to civil society's demands for real engagement and collaboration. It uses co-creative methods and the principle of experiencing city planning as its foundation. Because theory-based development planning is considered inadequate for achieving liveable cities.

Keywords

Co-creation, planning culture, competences, planning instruments, participation

1. Introduction

Current planning practice in Germany is insufficiently prepared for the solution-oriented handling of competing usage interests. This requires new approaches to finding solutions, as well as honest and open participation processes.

Although the planning instruments in Germany provide options for participation processes at all levels (Scholl, Elgendy and Nollert, 2007), it is not precisely defined how these should take place. This uncertainty, if understood as a potential, opens up freedoms, especially at the municipal level, and with this freedom, room for debate around 'the right approach'. At the moment, as a result of such debates in conditions of uncertainty, the existing room for manoeuvre is not readily used by municipalities (Selle, 2021; Brown, 2018). In addition, planning processes are very lengthy and ineffective with concern to its strategical cohesion over time: usually many years pass between the decision to plan, the first draft

design and the implementation. This can lead to drastic mismatches between the ideation and principal plan, meanwhile shifted conditions and a finally outdated implementation.

In this case study, the example of the civil society-initiated and organized project "Shaping the inner city collaboratively - Kopstadtplatz" in Essen's city center is used in an attempt to develop a proposal for a planning practice that meets the current needs for more intense and concrete participation and collaboration, rooted in an open understanding of democratic-participatory innovation (Smith, 2009; Michels, 2011). The basis of this proposal are co-creative methods and the credo of a vivid experiencing of inclusive urban development, instead of the classic segregation of planning roles, abstract theorizing. The classic approach leads to a lack of proximity between planning and its results, and the specific needs and creative potentials of a wide range of interest groups.

2. Planning and participation practice in Germany

2.1. The multi-level system of spatial planning

Balancing and considering competing interests across different scales is at the core of planning. Municipal planning practice in Germany is embedded in a multi-level system of spatial planning (Fig. 1): The European Union and the Federal Republic have framework functions only and provide basic legislation. The Federal States, Regions and municipalities have actual planning competences. The planning laws, binding spatial plans and spatial development programmes made by the federal states have to be implemented by municipalities. These plans define the objectives for the spatial structure, in particular the desired settlement and open space structure, as well as the locations and routes reserved for infrastructure. At all levels, from federal republic to municipalities laws, plans and programmes have to be coordinated with sectoral departments and expert planning. Additionally the public has to be involved.



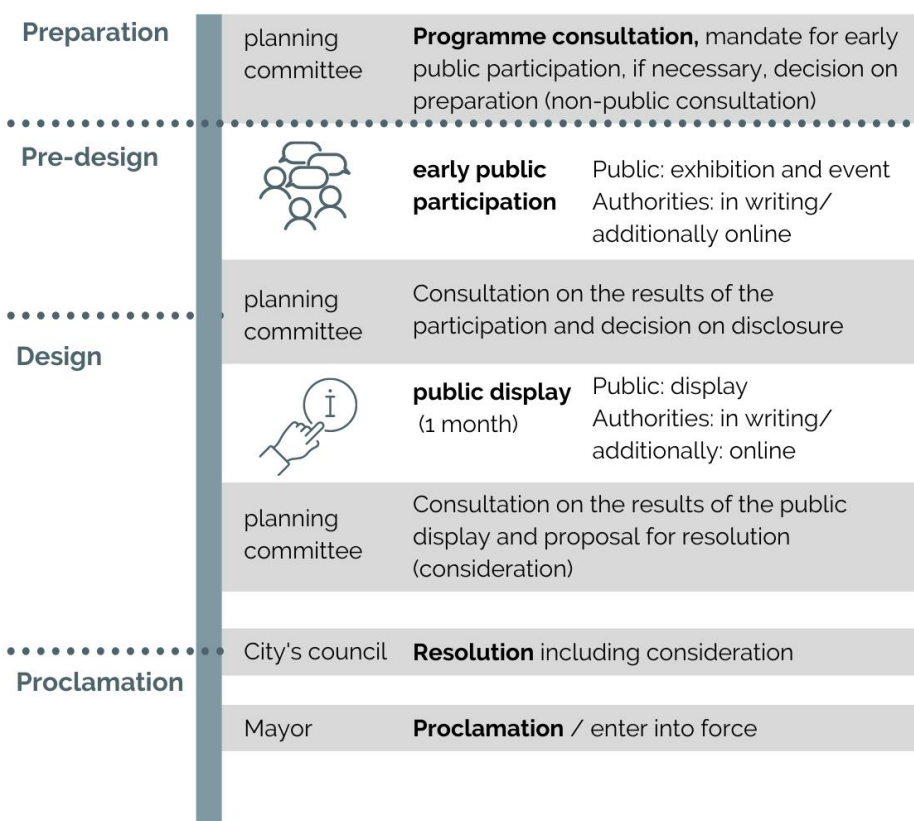
Figure 1. The multi-level system of spatial planning in Germany. Source: own visualization (2021).

Spatial planning in Germany aims to create equal living conditions and to compensate spatial use conflicts. It focuses on a "sustainable ordering and development of space, [...] oriented towards reconciling the economic, ecological and social functions of space" (Ebert, Tölle and Wdowicka, 2012).

A counter-current principle applies to the interactions of planning levels and scopes. Ideally, planning partners are on an equal footing, can develop their respective planning ideas, and evaluate each other. This balancing of interests is particularly difficult in times of substantial crises and the need for a societal reorientation. For example, in the context of challenges of sustainable development in response to climate change. It creates higher demands than traditionally addressed. The entire planning and solution finding is affected, requiring a reconfiguration of the participation mechanisms (Kamlage and Nanz, 2017).

2.2. Participation in municipal planning

Since the 1980s, technocratic planning has given way to a more communicative or collaborative planning approach, because "citizens were less and less likely to be 'planned over' by the planning bureaucracy without contradiction" (Blotevogel, 2018, p. 798), the basis of the current regular planning process (Fig.



2).

Figure 2: Regular Planning process in municipalities. Source: own visualization 2021.

In German municipalities, construction projects are realized through urban land use planning. The regular process provides for early public participation (Fig. 2), meaning: "the public shall be informed as early as possible of the general objectives and purposes of the planning, of substantially different solutions that may be considered for the redevelopment or development of an area, and of the likely effects of the planning; [the public] shall be given the opportunity to express it and to discuss it" (Section 3 (1) BauGB). The wording of the paragraph shows the problem outlined at the beginning: the legislation does not define how participation is to take place. This opens scope for process design and creates uncertainty about

the right approach. In an administrative culture, designed to operate within precise guidelines to avoid mistakes, such existing leeway for co-creative action is not utilized.

Participation in regular planning processes mostly takes place on a purely informational level. Authentic participation begins when some decision-making power is shared, stakeholder groups are allowed to actively engage in planning and decision-making processes, thereby taking on shares of process ownership (Straßburger and Rieger, 2019; see Figure 3).

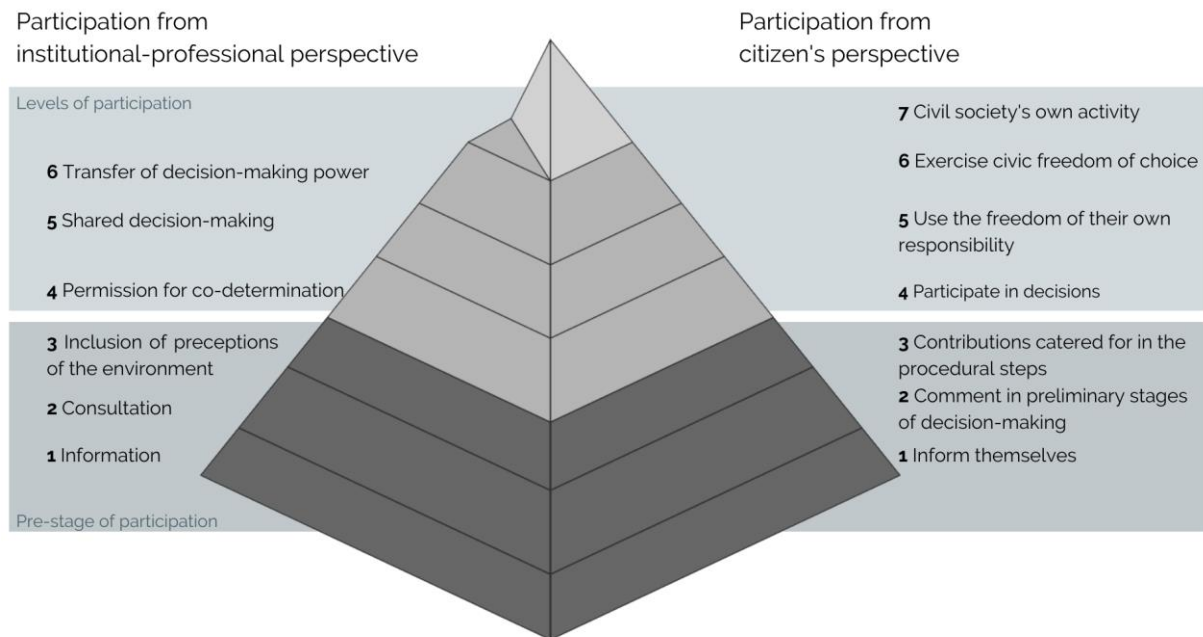


Figure 3. Participation Pyramid. Source: Straßburger and Rieger 2019.

Currently, when planning projects are presented to the public, or workshops on planning projects are organized, participation is mainly at the level of citizen consultation. Urban planner and expert for citizen participation Klaus Selle stated that a gap between aspiration and reality means participation procedures often miss their goal. Instead of bringing perspectives together, weighing up based on evidence and factual arguments and reaching consensus, participation processes are characterized by ignorance of all parties and polarizing polemic discussions. Furthermore, it is not clarified what leeway for design and decision-making is given within a participation process. All these factors promote citizens' frustration with the official process, increasing distrust in institutions (Selle, 2021). This distrust increases the desire for real participation (Wu, Wang and Rouyer, 2020), suggesting an openly engaging approach effects balance.

3. The case: Designing the inner city collaboratively – Kopstadtplatz, Essen Germany

3.1 The space: Kopstadtplatz in the northern city centre of Essen

Kopstadtplatz used to be the center of Essen's inner city, but is now located in a transitory space between the consumer-oriented center and the northern residential and university district.

The square has a mixed use character. The interplay of different uses and the multiculturally very diverse population and business structure give the square a very heterogeneous characteristic. The built structure has major deficiencies. Numerous parking spaces, as well as a street, frame the square on three sides.



Figure 4. The Kopstadtplatz in Essen. Source: Nies, Altmann and Baksi (2021)

Positive features are the central location of the square and the large tree population. At the same time, a clear zoning is missing. The street separates the southern part of the square from adjacent buildings, whereby the square's shape is cut up and public open space shrinks. The remaining space lacks variety, furniture, as well as experiential quality. On weekends it is a 'free parking' zone, further reducing quality of stay. Partially inadequate lighting creates anxiety spaces. Entrances to the square are inconspicuous and visually not integrated into the environment.

In recent years, there have been repeated attempts to upgrade the northern city center and the Kopstadtplatz to make it more attractive through several measures. The residents would like to see a permanent revival of the square, but this could not be achieved by any measures tried to date.

3.2 The co-creative process

The project was initiated in response to the call for tenders of the Ministry of Urban Development of North Rhine-Westphalia for the two-stage competition "Future Urban Space" in December 2020 (MGKKBG, 2020). Innovative concepts were sought that create lively and natural urban and street spaces. Until April 2021, cities and municipalities, project developers and their urban designers, as well as civic initiatives were able to submit project ideas for the first phase of the competition.

At the end of January 2020, the coordination team formed: A project developer and consultant involved in local sustainability initiatives took over the coordination and moderation of the participation process. Two landscape planners supported with their technical expertise. The team worked in this constellation for the first time. All three were involved on a voluntary, pro-bono basis.

The coordination team started with planning the process for the co-creative competition entry. The process core were two workshops with representatives of actors and interest groups located or active at Kopstadtplatz (Fig. 5).

The process had to take place completely online due to contact restrictions in the Covid-19 pandemic. The entire city of Essen had been in lockdown since November 2020. It was expected that stakeholders would be less willing to spend much time on the screen, and virtual formats are a hurdle for the activation of people.

Future of the Urban Space Kopstadtplatz - Process of Collaboration

Nies, Altmann, Baksi 2021

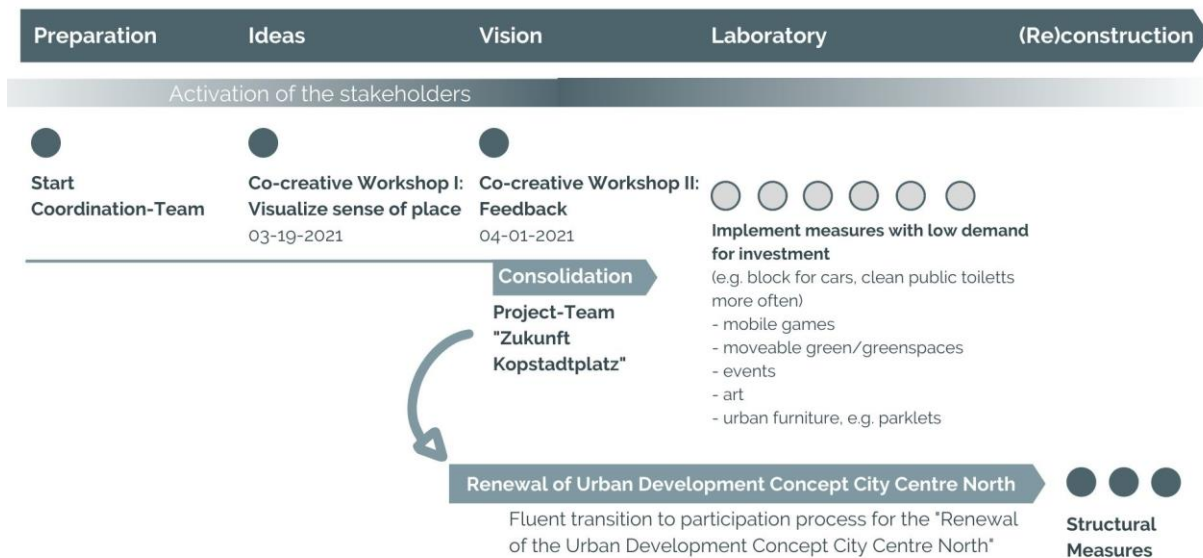


Figure 5: Co-Creative Process. Own visualization (2021).

Representatives from different actors and interest groups were invited to participate in the workshops with the help of existing networks. Despite the hurdle of an exclusively online format, representatives from all relevant stakeholder groups entered into an open exchange:

1. Local actors: bring their interests, commitment, and initiative into the process. They set up temporary measures and exchange information with administration and politics.
2. City administration of Essen: Was present in the form of Essen Marketing GmbH (city management), the Green Capital Agency (sustainable development) and the City Agency (citizen participation). Urban and Transport Planning joined later. Their role is to involve local actors in decision-making processes concerning the development of the square and the inner city north.
3. Local politics: Local city-district and city council representatives of all three major parties (CDU, SPD, Green) took part. They give political support for implementing measures and prepare council decisions.

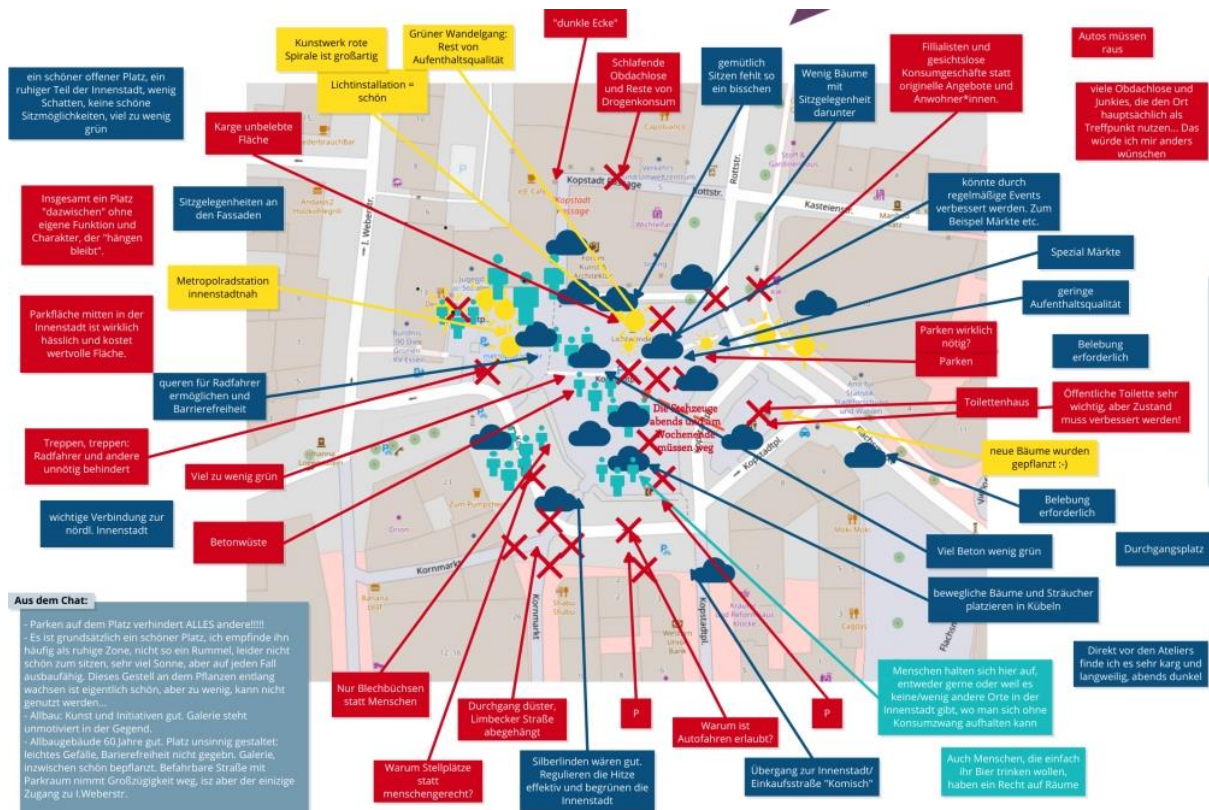
These participants of the creative workshops, together with the coordination team, formed the project team.

The activation of participants happened via e-mail and Facebook-events, which were shared in relevant groups. More than 40 participants were activated for the first workshop. 38 participants took part in the second. The participating persons in both workshops were largely identical and all stakeholder groups were well represented.

Both workshops were held as a video conference on a working day in the evening (2.5 hours duration). The coordination team moderated the event, supported by two employees of the University of Duisburg-Essen. A virtual whiteboard was used for the co-creative work. A short technical introduction at the beginning made the start easier for those with little or no experience working in virtual whiteboards.

The method of community mapping (Perkins, 2007) allowed participants to work together on an equal footing right from the start. There were no upstream discussions with decision-makers. Everyone contributed their personal perspective.

The first creative workshop aimed, first, to map how participants perceive the space. Second, to find out whether the different positions of the stakeholders would allow the development of a joint draft in a few weeks. On the virtual whiteboard, they simultaneously evaluated their personal perceptions of the place



in its current form on a map of the square, and subsequently discussed.

Fig. 6: Perceptions of the square by the actors - result of the first creative workshop. Own visualisation 2021.

Then, wishes and needs regarding the use of the square and its new design were collected and discussed. The participants maintained an open-minded and objective relationship with each other. Controversial perspectives were discussed in a solution-oriented manner. Overall, there was great agreement on the direction the further development of the square should take.

From the results of the first creative workshop, the landscape planners developed two design proposals. These were evaluated and discussed by participants of the second workshop. The favored design was finalized by the coordination team and prepared for submission to the competition. During the workshops, it was repeatedly made clear that the results produced were only proposals, with no claim to implementation.

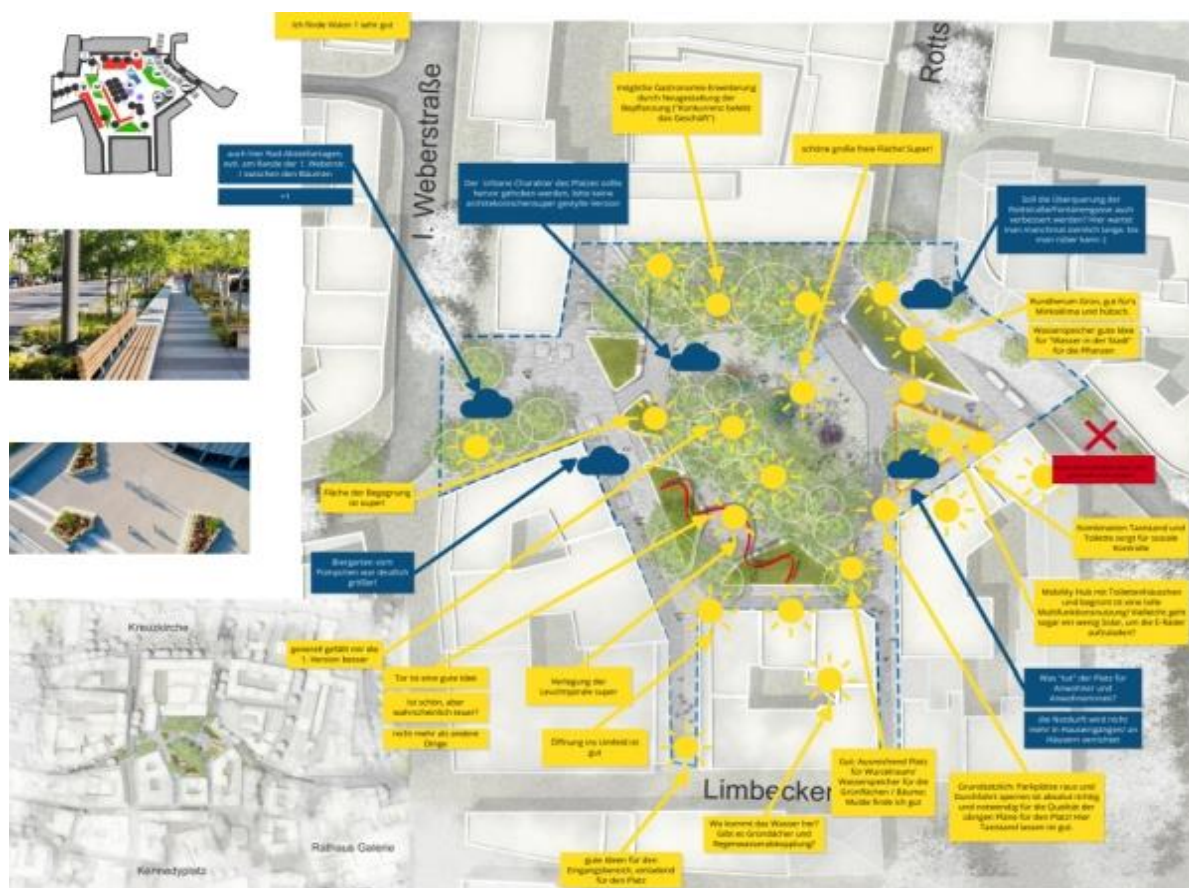


Figure 7. Feedback Variants - result of the second creative workshop. Own visualisation 2021.

The heads of the departments for urban planning and the environment were kept fully informed throughout the process and the results via e-mail and phone calls. The city planning office welcomed the civic engagement in principle.

3.3. Follow-up and further development perspectives

The participants were highly interested in re-designing and revitalizing the square within the framework of an experimental city space. Therefore, they decided they would actively advance the project as a team, regardless of funding through a placement in the competition. The two workshops were followed by further meetings to discuss next steps, such as the willingness and possibilities to take responsibility for the implementation of individual measures, and the planning of the further process.

In June 2021, the jury of the state competition awarded prizes to 25 of the 45 project ideas submitted in phase one. Kopstadtplatz was one of five civic concepts receiving 3,000 Euros each, and entered into phase two of the competition. The funds allow the realisation of first small measures.

In the second phase of the competition, the award-winning projects will be able to work on their ideas in depth up to the design planning. A prerequisite for civic initiatives is that they can prove the support of their municipality. So the project team must first obtain the support of the Office of Urban Development and the Office of Roads and Transport of the city of Essen. These offices are mainly responsible for development concerns within the municipality. Both offices were informed about the progress of the process via the responsible departments but did not actively participate for capacity reasons.

One of the city administration's requirement for its support is that the project focus is on planning mobile and temporary measures, not yet on permanent conversions, so the steps to redesign the Kopstadtplatz would not conflict with the city's plan to revise the Integrated Urban Development Concept for the northern city centre. The city shows an interest and willingness to incorporate results produced up to now into the concept. Ideally, the conceptual revision process will not only take up the results, but also build on the co-creative participation approach, so participants can stay active in this process of shaping their own environment.

A letter of intent is currently being prepared to underscore these intentions. It is to be signed by all those already involved in the process as well as relevant responsible municipal representatives. The aim of the next workshop in autumn is the programmatic design of the experimental space. Submission of the design is scheduled for Phase 2 in January 2022.

4. Proposal for a co-creative planning practice

The initiated planning process for the redesign of Kopstadtplatz shows that co-creative processes are suitable for bringing together a spectrum of local actors, administration and politics in a solution-oriented process that weighs up different perspectives and produces results quickly. Based on (a) the experiences of the case study described above and (b) reported experiences from other processes, we recommend bringing together local actors, city administrations (with their respective affected departments), and politicians from the very beginning of the planning process when redesigning public spaces and creating experimental spaces (Fig. 8).

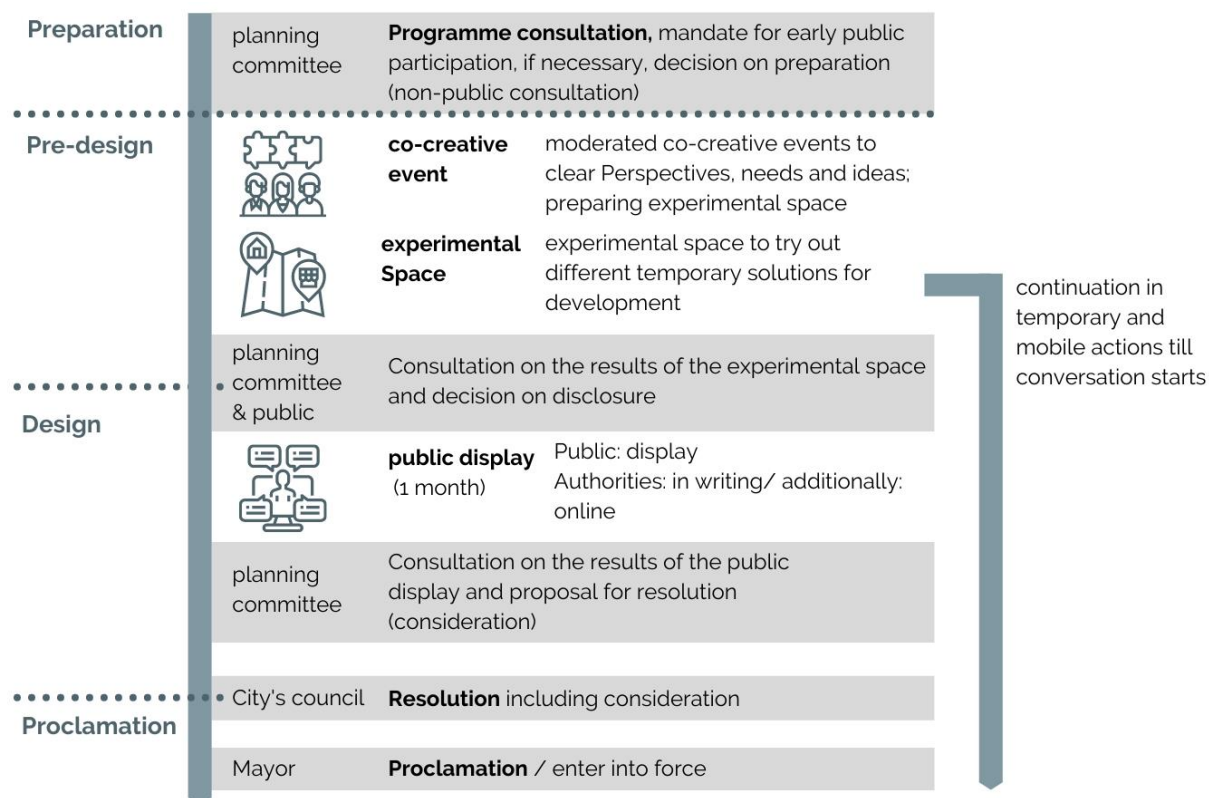


Figure 8. co-creative planning process in. Own visualisation 2021.

As a principle, the process should be moderated by a neutral party and all participants should be considered as competent actors:

- Local residents, service and general business owners: Experts of local conditions.
- Urban planning and technical departments: Experts for efficient and functional design of infrastructure and ensuring compliance with technical laws.
- Other departments of the administration: Experts in different fields (e.g. youth and family, integration, culture, business development, etc.)
- Politics: Responsible decision-makers for future development strategies and interface to higher-level planning and development processes.
- Academia: Experts for transformational research, as well as providing assets for neutral process observation of the process, and, if necessary, as a source of input.

Even though, urban planning is legally responsible for steering planning processes, it is a key actor within the process with its own interests (Fürst, 2018). Thus, it loses the position as a neutral moderator, which it needs, however, to guide an open process that considers all perspectives and interests equally. To facilitate the process, an interdisciplinary team of moderators with expertise in co-creative and collaborative transdisciplinary cooperation, as well as knowledge of urban planning, is useful.

The freedom legislation in Germany provides for authentic participation processes should be used. Instead of remaining at the merely informational level, processes should actively involve stakeholders in the visioning, planning and decision-making processes. Only open, transparent participation can reduce people's resistance to new developments, particularly in times of crisis and societal re-orientation. It also helps improve satisfaction and quality of life: It creates self-efficacy experiences that increase subjective well-being of participants, an important factor for identifying with and committing to a place (Jaeger-Erben and Matthies, 2014; Hunecke, 2020).

In our conclusion, the implementation of co-creative planning processes requires the will to do so. On the part of urban planning, it requires the will to open up work-processes, share and devolve decision-making power, activating creativity potentials of a "community of action" (Eckhardt et al., 2021). On the part of local actors, they must be open to reflecting their own interests in the context of other interests, as well as considering legal regulations and ordinances. Planners need to make local actors aware why plans cannot be implemented immediately, so they persevere with patience. For the different competencies and perspectives to be brought together in a solution-oriented manner, all involved need an open attitude and the willingness to engage with other perspectives (Fam, Smith and Cordell, 2016).

As an essential element of a solution-oriented, co-creative planning process, an experimental space should be integrated into planning, which provides temporary use changes of existing space (e.g. changed traffic routing). It enables tests of potential solution pathways before large investments are made. Further, it counters several problems of current planning processes:

- creates evidence: Experimental spaces allow to test several solution paths for a certain time and to observe which consequences they have.

There is often a lack of data on actual needs: How is a public space perceived and used? Where does unused parking space exist? This leads to discussions that are based on personal perceptions of reality, without tangible evidence. The consequences of developments can only be roughly predicted (Fürst, 2018).

- reduces fears: With experimental spaces, solutions can be sourced instead of being held up in polarizing fictitious discourses. This improves stakeholder expertise, helps visualize possible problems, reduces reservations, and keeps debates productive.

How a change feels in space is cognitively difficult to grasp. Imagination tends to be diffuse, which can fuel fears and concerns. These then not infrequently dominate discussions and prevent a solution-oriented discourse.

- animates development: Experimental spaces make urban development come alive through rapid trials of first ideas with temporary and mobile measures.

Long planning and implementation horizons are tiring for local actors. While expert reports are reviewed, citizens may have the impression that there is a pause in the planning process although it is ongoing.

- Evolves participation: Experimental spaces enable people to participate that are not likely to be reached by classic formats.

The classic discussion-based participation processes usually reach only a certain engaged and informed audience. For instance, persons with lower social status or with migrant background are left out.

This case study of Kopstadtplatz in Essen showcases a lively design of participatory processes, which enables new interactions between stakeholder groups. Ownership of the processes, shared responsibilities, an open exchange of experiences, incremental and flexible progress involving different interest groups, are decisive for long-term success and locally authentic solutions for urban and quarter development.

There is an urgent need to systematically point out diverse options for planning and acting, in the sense of this democratic participatory innovation, and to test them in different settings. The aim should be to enable adaptive creative potentials based on local diversity and community spirit; not to create new legal provisions. The more these procedures are tested, the more those responsible for the process in city administrations and politics gain security enabling such procedures.

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