

Fairville Labs

BERLIN

Facing inequalities and democratic challenges through Co-production in Cities (Fairville) is a Urban Co-Production Research Project Horizon Europe.

Fairville uses knowledge co-production as strategies to address urban inequalities and democratic issues affecting seven urban areas in Europe, and two other mirror cases in Africa.



- ◆ Risk Inequalities
- ▲ Environmental Inequalities
- Planning and Housing Inequalities

Fairville experiments co-production with civil society actors, universities and local authorities to facilitate multi-engagement towards embracing entrenched urban and environmental inequalities with affected residents or community groups. Through coproduction of knowledge and actions-oriented programmes, it contributes to rethinking urban democracy.

Do you want to help? There are many ways to contribute to the project: would you like to participate in the co-production in our project tasks or go on the field in our Fairville Labs?

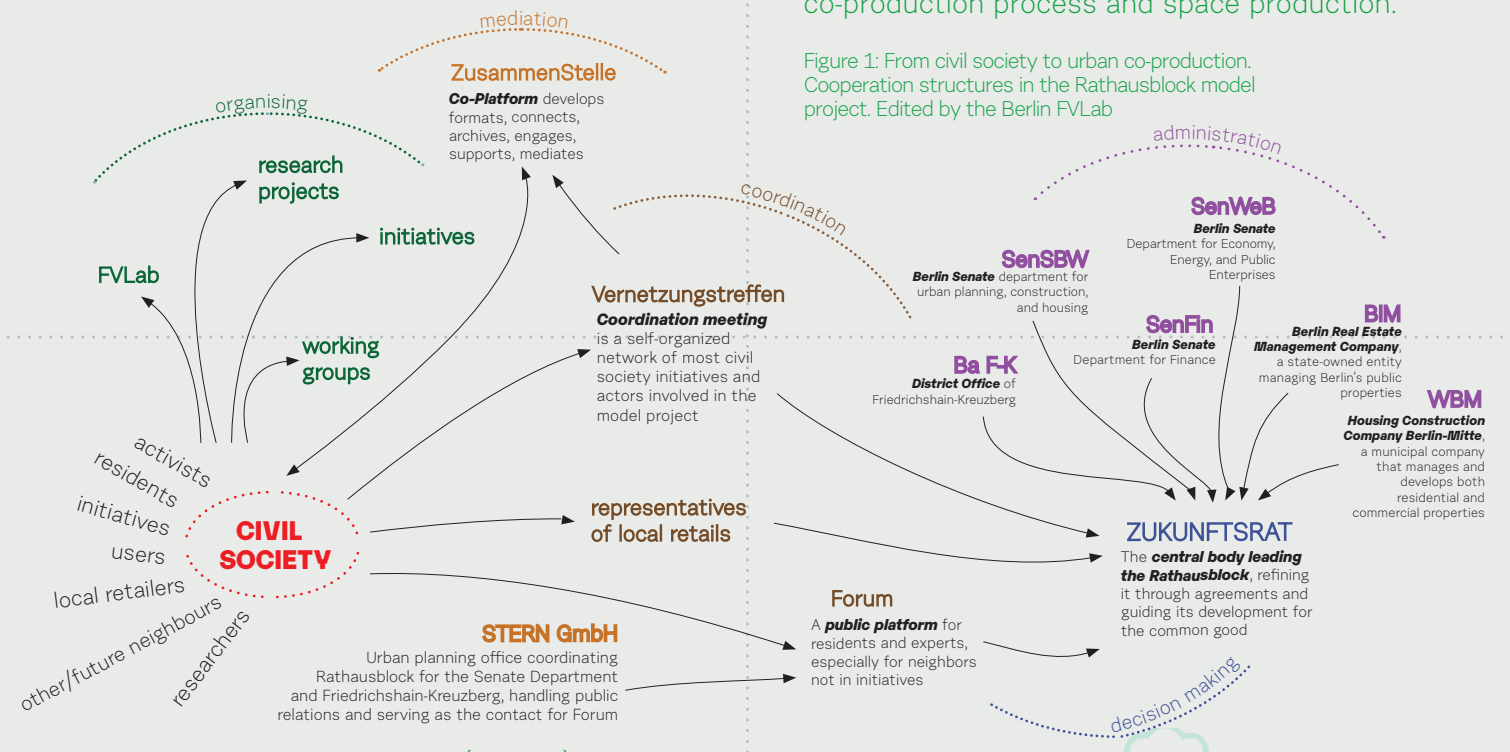
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CONTEXT

The Fairville Lab (FVLab) is observing and exploring the Rathausblock, a mixed-use area of 4,7 hectares located in the middle of **Berlin-Kreuzberg**. It is a key urban regeneration area that draws in a lot of attention from activists, politicians, administration, real estate developers and investors, with very different agendas on what to do with the site. Movements against privatisation started in 2014, succeeding in avoiding the sale of the area to private investors and obtaining the transfer of ownership from the federal government to the city of Berlin, under the condition of developing a participatory process.



ACTORS INVOLVED

The FVLab Berlin as such started in 2022 based on previous collaborations with Rathausblock and extensive exploratory research since 2020. Anna Steigemann (Universität Regensburg/ TU Berlin, Lab coordinator) and her team of researchers (Mari Paz Agundez, Lorenza Manfredi, Maria Tsakulova) observe and explore in close collaboration with local actors the interactions between real-estate, state- and municipal-level authorities, local neighbourhood NGOs, community-based initiatives and planners with collaborative qualitative methods. The research is designed as participatory action research and in this sense is also actively intervening in the co-production process and space production.

Figure 1: From civil society to urban co-production. Cooperation structures in the Rathausblock model project. Edited by the Berlin FVLab

ACTIONS

The FVLab Berlin critically accompanies and analyses the co-production of space and the development of a model urban project at the Rathausblock. This involves using ethnographic methods and methods between the spatial and the social sciences to understand how local stakeholders bring people together, the aims of these gatherings, the power relations involved, and the outcomes of these participatory planning processes.

We have conducted in-depth interviews and comprehensive mapping of the activities and actors connected to the co-production process. Grounded in qualitative methods, such as semi-structured interviews, participant and non-participant observations, and secondary and grey literature analysis, this investigation highlights in particular the difficulties and potentials of co-production when different power dynamics are involved in the evolution of the project.

In particular, the collaborative research shows the difficulties of involving and giving voice to the most marginalized communities in the participatory process, the complexity of cooperation between actors from civil society and those from institutions, and the struggle on the part of the senate to take initial agreements into account even in the long-term development of the project.

By documenting these dynamics, inviting stakeholders to share their different and personal perspectives and participating in public hearings and local events, the FV team highlighted systemic challenges and learnings in participatory urban planning, applicable to other urban contexts. This enables us to co-create knowledge about the project's power structures and progress. Furthermore, it has helped us unveil the relationship between space and decision-making and identify key elements that build people's participation and engagement within a space. The chosen method of power mapping and research was essential for documenting complex relationships, uncovering hidden imbalances, and identifying spaces that shape social participation dynamics.



Figure 2: Existing retail and workshop activities and listed buildings are to be kept on the site in order to preserve the richness of a complex and mixed-use urban environment (Mari Paz Agundez, July 2023)

OBSERVING CO-PRODUCTION:

Insights from the Rathausblock Model Project

The Rathausblock project is a complex urban development initiative aimed at creating socially just spaces through participatory planning – but those aims are facing the difficulties inherent in a time-consuming process which involves the co-production, renovation and partial construction of an entire urban district in the city centre. By mapping the relationships among stakeholders, we sought to understand how power is distributed and negotiated in this process.



Figure 3: Map of actual and future spaces. Edited by the Berlin FVLab

Our objective was to reveal how these dynamics affect inclusivity, decision-making, and the project's ability to address spatial and social inequalities on the long-term.

The search for strategies and practices that enable the creation and maintenance of a co-productive exchange between the different actors is showing first results within the Rathausblock. In addition to the success of keeping the entire area in public hands and preventing its privatisation, civil society and the administration are experimenting with structures which aim to equal, inclusive and sustainable long-term involvement of all parties. The *Vernetzungstreffen*, the *Forum Rathausblock* and the *Zukunftsrat* are some examples of platforms for exchange on the development of the area. Two mediating actors, *ZusammenStelle* and *Stern*, were created or included as a support structure meant to moderate the communication between the institutional actors and the civil society and coordinate decision-making meetings.



Figure 4: Areal view on the Rathausblock (Erik-Jan Ouwerkerk)



Figure 5: Cooking together in the StadtWERKSTATT as a practice of communing (Jan Kampshoff, baunetz CAMPUS Sommerschule „Bestand der Dinge“, 2023)



Figure 6: The StadtWERKSTATT is a common place, where citizens and the administration work together on projects. The hall is also available for external non-commercial and cultural events (Jan Kampshoff, baunetz CAMPUS Sommerschule „Bestand der Dinge“, 2023)

Despite the efforts, the interviewed actors still highlight that the main challenge in the co-production process has been communication between the different parties involved. The search for a shared practice that is able to include different working logics and goals, and that does not exclude the technicalities typical of administrative work, as well as flexibility and utopian visions from civil society, is still ongoing.

Over a decade of co-production in Berlin, engagement has also gradually declined. Decision-making is now largely dominated by aging, white Germans. Marginalized groups, often poorer and of non-German origin, remain excluded despite efforts like a transparency platform, a glossary, and public events in the Rathausblock's common spaces. Broadening participation to include younger, more diverse voices to meetings like the Rathausblock Forum is urgently needed. Moreover, as the implementation process is starting, the institutions are confronted with logistical construction and site management choices constrained by conventional regulations. This clashes with the demands and reclaims of an experimental co-produced process. The decisive choice, whether to set aside the imaginative efforts for a differently produced city in this area, or to force the existing regulations through a further effort for true co-production from the ideas production to the construction phase will be made in the next stages, determining the future and the success of the project.

Finally, the collaboration is highly based on personal involvement of individual actors – both in the civil society and in the administrative field. The current changes in Berlin's government bring new political directions in the urban production and risk therefore to overshadow previous taken unilateral decision and years of co-produced work. This shows the uncertainty of an experimental project that remains constrained as a unique, non-replicable model. Starting from the Rathausblock experience to develop a broader citywide approach as an established urban strategy would allow the local site-based co-production to be widely recognised and its goals to be secured.