



Challenges in Co-Producing Publicly Accessible Spaces

The example of Bücherplatz in Aachen

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Publicly accessible urban spaces are more often than not co-produced and maintained via ad hoc partnerships between public administrations and private owners and tenants. The authors describe the complex negotiations that lead to this intricate situation in German cities, and point at some directions to clarify the respective roles of private and public players in the production of urban public space.

Plazas, parks and promenades play important roles in the identity of a city. But who is responsible for them? The German discourse on urban spaces often sounds as if publicly accessible open spaces are always “public” – i.e. owned and regulated by the municipality. On the contrary, by definition, spaces in private hands cannot be public. The conception of the role that stakeholders play in the creation of urban spaces also corresponds to this dual thinking: municipal actors dominate “public spaces”, whereas market forces control “private spaces”. However, our research¹ found something contradictory to this common-sense discourse: many urban spaces are both public and private. That is, publicly usable space not only subject to municipal planning and control, but also created and maintained by public and private stakeholders.

The STARS study began by identifying over 100 possible case studies in Aachen, Hannover and Leipzig, of which 29 were chosen for further analysis. In addition to studying the function, context and design characteristics of each space, all actors involved in its design and regulation were interviewed. For each space a “responsibility profile” (see Figures 3, 4 and 5 below) was created to summarize and visualize answers to the following questions: Who is the land owner (rights)? Who planned and built the space, and who maintains and manages it (production)? And who is allowed to regulate its use and users (regulation)? In addition to these case studies, we interviewed 40 representatives from the planning and parks departments of 20 large German cities and conducted 17 interviews with private stakeholders in order to understand their perception of shared responsibilities and to find out what consequences result from ‘co-producing’ urban spaces, especially for municipal planning. The STARS project thus opened the way to a more polyvalent understanding of semi-public urban spaces. It revealed the complexity of public–private interdependences, the variety of interests involved, and the challenges that result from the co-production of spaces, not only during the building phase but over the years of their existence (see also Berding *et al.* 2010).

¹ STARS – Urban Spaces Between Public and Private Activities. Plazas, Parks, and Promenades in Fields of Tension. The main goal of this four-year study, financed by the German Research Foundation and conducted at RWTH Aachen University, was to improve the understanding of the role and relevance of non-municipal stakeholders in creating urban spaces.

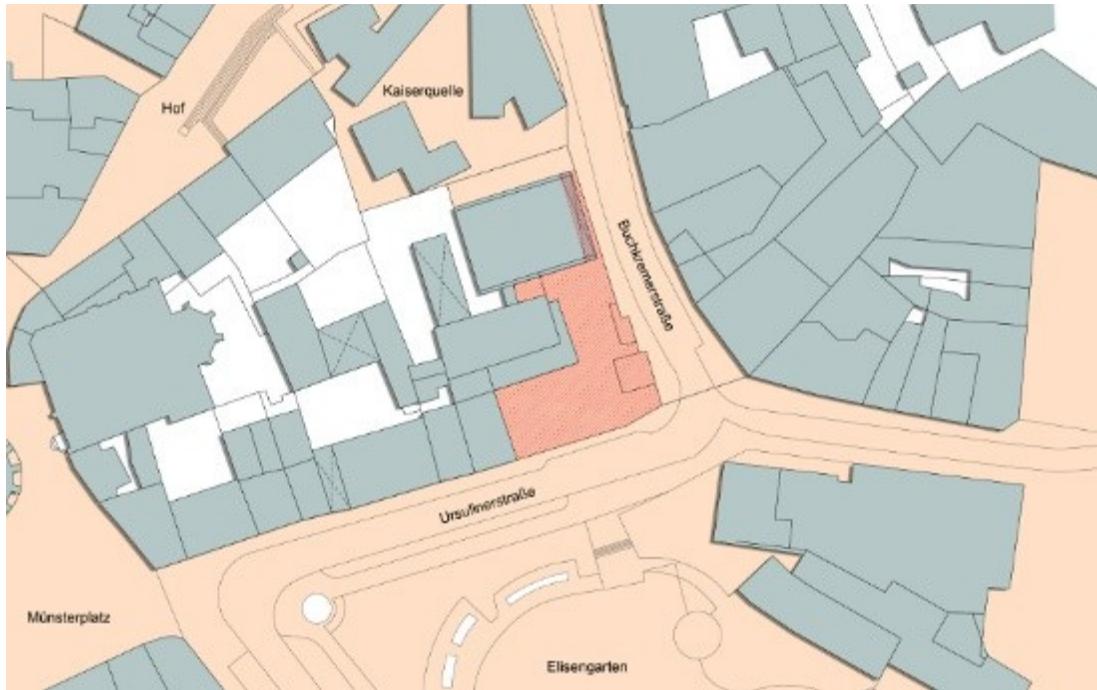


Figure 1: Bird's-eye view of Bücherplatz

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bookstore, which has rented the ground floor of the building for many years, gave the square its name Bücherplatz (in English, “Book Square” or “Book Plaza”).

Figure 2: Location of Bücherplatz in Aachen city centre



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Bücherplatz in Aachen: a complex public–private agreement

Bücherplatz, in the city of Aachen, provides a good example to illustrate the major findings of the study (Figure 1). It is a small square in the city centre, close to the historic cathedral, the town hall, and the major shopping streets (Figure 2). On two sides, the square is framed by streets with limited vehicular traffic, while the other two edges are dominated by the Haus der Kohle, an eight-storey office building with a rectangular base hosting stores and a café on the ground floor. Thanks to its location, Bücherplatz is a highly frequented part of Aachen’s network of open spaces. It provides numerous places for stopping and resting, either on public benches or on chairs provided by the café.

The square was built in 1961 as part of the development of the multi-level Haus der Kohle. Even back then, control and rights of access were important issues negotiated between the municipality and the private developer. When granting the building permit, the City of Aachen obtained a right of way in the land register in order to guarantee public accessibility.

It is important to note certain details about the responsibilities and rights shared by the owner and the city: First, since the square belongs to a real estate company, it is clearly privately owned. The

main tenant, the bookstore, sublets a small portion of its floor space to a café, and a bank pays a monthly rent for a cash machine installed in the middle of the store. The outdoor space is divided into two sections: on one side, the City of Aachen holds a public easement, which secures the public right of way; the other side is in the hands of the tenants and the store owners. This agreement is further complicated, as the portion of the space that is occupied by the café terrace in the summer must be quickly vacated for access by fire appliances in case of emergency. These complicated arrangements with different layers of influence can be visualized in Figures 3, 4 and 5.

Figure 3: Ownership and rights of way in Bücherplatz

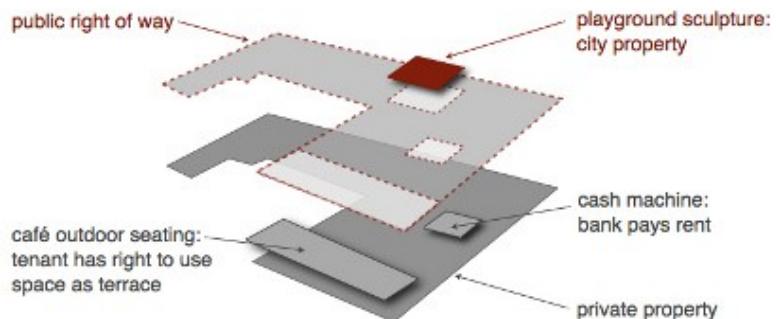


Figure 4: Production and maintenance in Bücherplatz

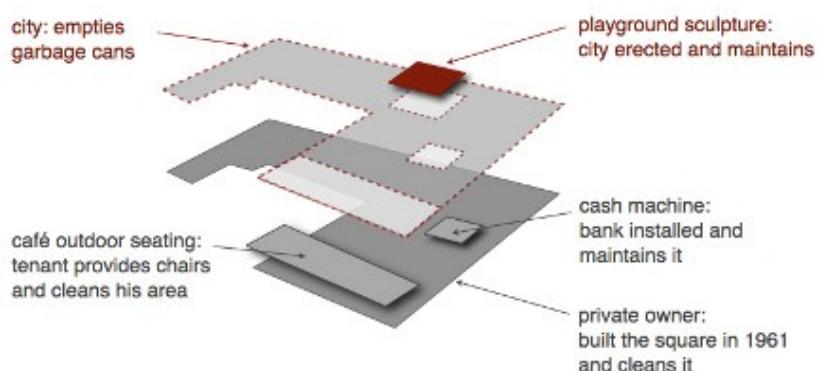
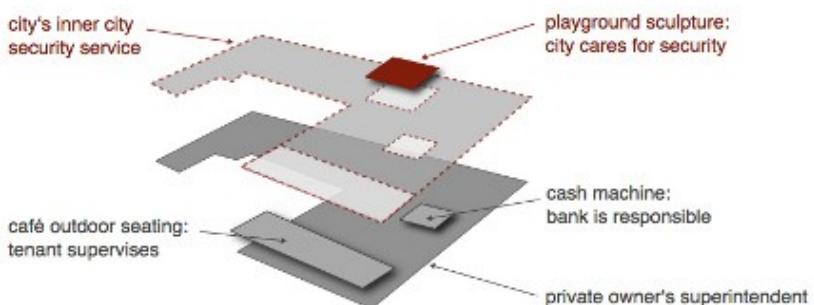


Figure 5: Security and supervision in Bücherplatz



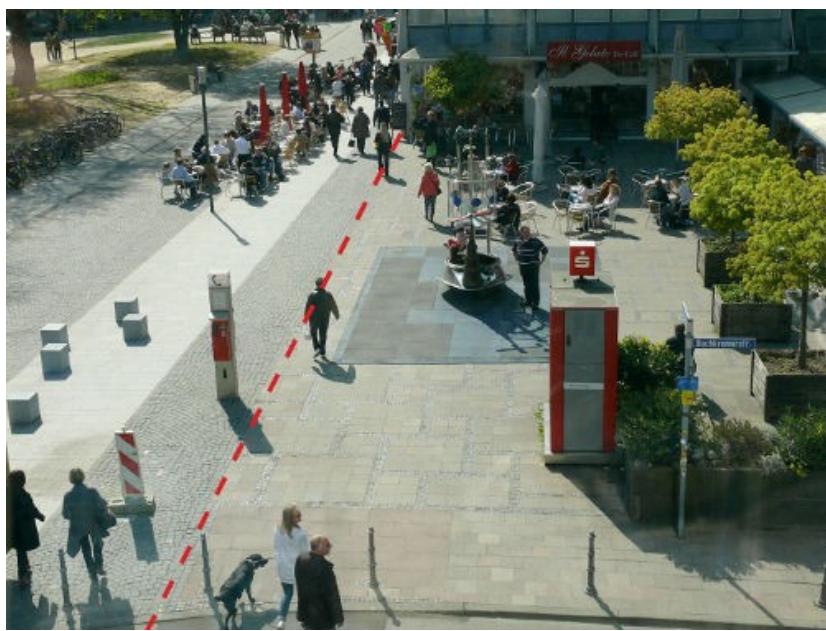
Figures 3, 4 & 5 © U. Berding, A. Havemann & J. Pegels

In general, security on the square is provided by municipal security personnel, the tenants of the stores, and the building manager of the Haus der Kohle. Similarly complex and partially overlapping are the maintenance and cleaning responsibilities: the stores and the café are obliged to clean the areas in front of their premises. The bookstore, as the main tenant, cleans the square and cares for the flowerpots and flowerbeds. The sanitation department of the City of Aachen, however, empties the garbage cans, and the municipal infrastructure department is responsible for maintaining the playground sculpture. These agreements are often not understood even by the tenants themselves, which became apparent when we interviewed the municipal cleaning staff responsible for the space. They did not know precisely what their duties were.

The limits to renewal

When building the square in the 1960s, and later erecting a playground sculpture, the city and the private owner cooperated well. But, in 1990, the original owner sold the building and the public square to a real-estate company, and decades of successful cooperation with the City of Aachen came to an end. The first conflict arose when the city council developed an inner-city concept in 2002, which suggested improvements for the Elisengarten – a historic park – and its surroundings. When the competition for the area was announced, the participants were asked to include Bücherplatz in their design concepts. The city saw the competition entries as recommendations rather than obligations, but they were also eager to make positive changes to the square. The suggested design stood in sharp contrast to the run-down appearance of Bücherplatz. Municipal actors elaborated all these ideas without including the owner – which later turned out to be a mistake. In preliminary conversations, the real-estate company showed little interest in investing to upgrade the space, and even pointed to technical difficulties with the car park beneath the square. The company agreed to a redesign, but only if the city would bear the costs. As far as they were concerned, the stores and the café on the square were rented out for years, with or without an upgraded appearance. The city could not find ways to implement the new design without the participation of the owner. The relationship between them became tense and the project fell through. The result can clearly be seen today: the new design halts at the property line of Bücherplatz (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Property line of Bücherplatz



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Lessons from Bücherplatz: better guidelines for publicly accessible spaces

The example of Bücherplatz teaches us that private stakeholders are important partners in building and maintaining urban spaces, in ways that are challenging to city planning authorities. When building permits are needed – as seen in the initial phase of the public–private cooperation in the case of Bücherplatz – the municipality can rely on its planning sovereignty. But later on, its influence on private property diminishes. In the case of the Haus der Kohle and adjacent Bücherplatz, the initial owner had a personal attachment to Aachen and felt a sense of responsibility in improving the character and appearance of the city – a crucial issue when working to the benefit of the city and the site. When the owner changed, the relationship with the city also changed. Suddenly, municipal power stopped at the property line. Even though the city included Bücherplatz in its overall planning concept, their authority remained limited. The easement secured public accessibility, the agreements about cleaning and liability worked well, but upgrading and redesigning was never discussed, and accordingly unexpected disagreements arose.

The need for municipal and non-municipal actors to cooperate in planning and producing urban spaces cannot be ignored; they are part of urban reality now. As municipal budgets shrink, the contribution of private actors to urban spaces becomes more important than ever. The lesson of Bücherplatz and other case studies is that successful co-productions of publicly accessible spaces require all stakeholders involved to be brought together to discuss their interests and negotiate their responsibilities in building, maintaining, and upgrading a space. If stakeholders are interested in creating accessible, attractive and usable urban spaces, enduring partnerships can become the basis for key outcomes in urban space development. In Germany, however, co-production is little acknowledged yet. So far, public–private relations are negotiated and shaped on a case-by-case basis – with mixed results. It is now time to optimize these processes. The findings of the STARS project, as well as experiences from other countries (see also: Dimmer *et al.* 2010; Pegels 2010; Pegels 2011) can contribute to this debate by raising the following questions:

- Which urban spaces can benefit from co-production, and what role do they play in the network of open spaces of a city?
- Which actors have what interests in urban spaces, and how can they contribute to the development and upkeep of a space?
- What has to be taken into account when different actors share responsibilities in a space, and how can a lasting balance be maintained?

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