

## ARTICLE

# Bridging theory and practice: A practical toolbox for implementing co-creation in urban design

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## Abstract

In contemporary urban design, co-creation has become increasingly relevant as an approach to address complex social, spatial, and governance-related challenges. This study develops an empirically informed framework for structuring co-creation processes in urban design, based on theme-centered interaction (TCI). Drawing on qualitative case study material, this study translates key relational, procedural, and contextual dynamics of co-creation into a structured set of guiding principles that address individual perspectives, group dynamics, task-oriented challenges, and broader contextual conditions. The framework offers analytically grounded guidance to support reflective, process-oriented co-creation in urban design. In addition, the study introduces steward ownership as a novel interpretative governance perspective that helps contextualize and stabilize co-creative outcomes beyond the design phase. Steward ownership is presented as a conceptual governance perspective, rather than an empirical finding, that aligns with values of shared responsibility, long-term orientation, and collective stewardship. By linking empirical insights with TCI-based process structuring and governance considerations, this study contributes to ongoing debates on how co-creation in urban design can be more systematically organized and institutionally sustained in practice.

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## 1. Introduction

Urban design plays a key role in shaping the urban habitat, influencing the daily experiences of countless individuals over generations. It operates at the intersection of spatial form, social relations, and institutional decision-making. As such, it not only shapes the physical environment but also structures the distribution of power, responsibility, and agency within cities. Understanding how urban design processes can be organized to account for long-term societal and environmental impacts, therefore, requires closer attention to how decisions are made and by whom.

In the contemporary urban landscape, the repercussions of short-term thinking and trends are increasingly evident, with cities bearing the brunt of unsustainable practices. Buildings, which consume 40% of global natural resources and contribute to 30% of global waste production, stand as emblematic examples of this phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> In response, the Iroquois philosophy of the “Seventh Generation” offers a compelling framework for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> Rooted in the belief of ensuring responsibility to future

generations, this philosophy underscores the imperative of sustainable development. It calls for a restoration of balance among the various elements of life on earth, advocating for environmental stewardship and equitable decision-making. Aligning with principles of fairness and equity, the Seventh Generation philosophy emphasizes the interconnectedness of the economy, the environment, and human well-being—a vision essential for navigating the complexities of contemporary urban challenges.

Urbanization is a megatrend<sup>1</sup> characterized by the rapid growth of urban populations and the expansion of cities.<sup>3</sup> As more people move to urban areas in search of better opportunities and improved quality of life, cities are facing unprecedented challenges. Urbanization, as it stands, presents both opportunities and challenges that demand innovative solutions. As populations gravitate toward urban centers at an unprecedented rate, the strains on infrastructure, resources, and social cohesion become increasingly evident: “The global future is an urban future. Commentators frequently cite the rather meaningless but incontrovertible fact that for the first time in history, the majority of the world’s population now lives in cities.”<sup>4</sup>(pp261–262) Urbanization is estimated to increase from 56% in 2021 to 68% by 2050, which translates into an increase of 2.2 billion urban residents.<sup>5</sup> Rather than treating urbanization as a phenomenon in itself, this study understands it as a contextual condition that intensifies the need for more inclusive, transparent, and collaborative urban design processes.<sup>4,6,7</sup> The focus, therefore, shifts from demographic growth to the governance and design mechanisms through which urban development is negotiated. Though such forecasts are subject to an extremely high degree of uncertainty, and urbanization itself can influence migration patterns, the pressure on the city increases, and the importance of critically questioning how (new) urban developments can be thought and applied becomes evident. “At the same time, there seems to be agreement that the urban future is a centrally important problem.”<sup>4</sup>(p262)

The documentary film *The Human Scale*<sup>8</sup> poignantly examines how modern cities repel human interaction, questioning the construction behind the way we live our lives. The protagonist of the documentation, Danish architect and professor Jan Gehl, has studied human behavior in cities for 40 years. Professor Jan Gehl argues

that cities can be designed in ways that take human needs for inclusion and intimacy into account.<sup>8</sup> Hence, he describes city planning as an incomplete toolbox. What could be a complete tool? As a starting point, we observe people, more than buildings. We focus on the human being in cities to create mutually beneficial relationships between people’s quality of life and their built environment. In the 1960s, Jane Jacobs<sup>9,2</sup> argued that assumptions of architects and urban planners about what makes a city worthwhile were detrimental to the human scale. “Whenever and wherever societies have flourished and prospered rather than stagnated and decayed, creative and workable cities have been at the core of the phenomenon.”<sup>10</sup>(p243) Looking for a new tool is therefore not only valuable for academia but also contributes to managerial knowledge relevant to citizens, investors, municipalities, and policymakers for further urban development. Consequently, the aim is to enable a holistic understanding based on previous research, to deduce implications for both academia and practice, to provide insights, and to identify drivers and barriers. Despite a growing body of literature on participation, collaborative planning, and co-production, existing approaches often remain either procedurally focused or normatively framed. Many studies describe participation formats without sufficiently addressing relational dynamics, power asymmetries, or the long-term governance implications of collaborative design.<sup>11–13</sup> As a result, there remains a lack of integrative frameworks that translate collaborative theory into actionable guidance for urban design practice. Previous research has shown that the growing adoption of co-creation in urban design is driven by a combination of normative, strategic, and pragmatic motivations, including the search for legitimacy, innovation, and more resilient urban solutions.<sup>11,14</sup> However, these drivers do not in themselves provide guidance on how co-creation processes can be systematically structured and institutionally sustained in practice.

In light of these complexities, the integration of co-creation principles in contemporary urban design practices has emerged as a pivotal approach in fostering inclusive, sustainable, and vibrant communities.<sup>15–17</sup> Co-creation emphasizes collaborative efforts among diverse stakeholders, including residents, local authorities, urban planners, and developers, to collectively shape the built

<sup>1</sup> The term megatrend was popularized by John Naisbitt in the early 1980s. Naisbitt’s work contributed to discussions about the major forces driving societal change and conveys the idea that these are overarching, pervasive, and have a profound and lasting impact on various aspects of human life.

<sup>2</sup> Jane Jacobs was an urban writer and activist whose work critically challenged post-war modernist planning paradigms. Through close observation of everyday urban life, she emphasized the importance of community, diversity, and the human scale in urban environments. Her work remains influential in contemporary debates on participatory and human-centered urban design.

environment. This participatory approach acknowledges the invaluable insights, experiences, and expertise that each stakeholder brings to the table, ultimately leading to more innovative and contextually relevant urban solutions. Exploring the relationship between urbanization and co-creation offers insights into how cities can harness their residents' collective intelligence and creativity to address complex urban challenges and build more inclusive, sustainable, and resilient communities.

The growing interest in co-creation approaches underscores the importance of developing structured guidance and methodologies to facilitate effective collaboration among diverse stakeholders.<sup>18</sup> In response to this gap, this study developed a guideline—a toolbox—based on the psychoanalytical approach of theme-centered interaction (TCI).<sup>19</sup> By integrating principles from TCI, which emphasizes individual perspectives, group dynamics, and task-oriented challenges, this guideline provides a systematic framework for implementing co-creation in urban design projects. This approach enables stakeholders to navigate the complexities of co-creation processes and fosters a conducive environment for meaningful collaboration and innovation. By applying the guideline, urban planners and designers can harness the collective wisdom and creativity of diverse stakeholders to address complex urban challenges and create inclusive and sustainable urban environments.

This study, therefore, asks: How can co-creation processes in urban design be systematically structured to account for individual perspectives, group dynamics, task-oriented challenges, and broader contextual conditions? To address this question, the study pursues three objectives: (i) to translate TCI into an operational framework for urban design co-creation; (ii) to derive empirically informed procedural guidance for practice; and (iii) to explore how governance structures, such as steward ownership, can support the long-term stabilization of co-creative outcomes.

By examining the theoretical underpinnings of co-creation and its practical implications, the research seeks to provide actionable insights for urban designers, policymakers, and community leaders striving to adopt more inclusive and participatory approaches to city planning and development. Furthermore, the study recognizes the importance of integrating co-creation principles with historical perspectives and emerging concepts like steward ownership. Historical perspectives shed light on the evolution of urban design practices, highlighting past successes, challenges, and lessons learned. Understanding historical context enables contemporary practitioners to build on existing knowledge and adapt

traditional approaches to meet the evolving needs of diverse communities. Moreover, emerging concepts such as steward ownership offer innovative frameworks for reimagining ownership structures and decision-making processes within urban development projects. Steward ownership emphasizes long-term sustainability, social responsibility, and collective ownership, aligning closely with the ethos of co-creation.

In exploring the intersections between co-creation, historical perspectives, and emerging concepts such as steward ownership, this study aims to provide a comprehensive framework for transformative urban design practices that prioritize equity, collaboration, and community empowerment.

## 2. Historical perspective on urban design: Power, participation, and agency

“Cities are a product of time.”<sup>20</sup>(p4) The history of urban design is a story of constant negotiation between individual human aspirations and the blueprints of planning paradigms. “A blueprint does not predict the cracks that will develop in the future; it describes an ideal state that can only be approximated.”<sup>21</sup>(p11) The evolution of urban design theories and practices reflects the changing social, economic, and environmental contexts in which cities have developed. Within the historical framework, environmental changes are depicted as inherently conditioned by the ways people live together.<sup>22</sup> The intricate balance between the power of people and the power of plans defines the character of cities, which raises the question: are the most successful cities a harmonious integration of both forces?

From ancient civilizations to modern metropolises, city planning has been guided by various intentions, whether metaphysical, democratic, representational, military, or engineering-oriented.<sup>22</sup> Regardless of the underlying motive, city planning has always been perceived as a collective duty.

In tracing the origins of urban design, it becomes evident that the earliest settlements emerged as responses to the fundamental needs of human existence. The ancient Chinese cities, for instance, reflected a divine order harmonized with the natural environment, where the flow of energy and the balance of elements guided urban growth.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, the Greek city-state of Athens embodied the democratic ideals of its inhabitants, with its agora serving as a bustling hub of public discourse and civic engagement.<sup>24</sup> As civilizations flourished and empires rose and fell, the art of city planning took on new dimensions, reflecting the values and ambitions of ruling powers.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a notable shift toward ego-driven,

top-down approaches in urban development emerged. Influential figures like Le Corbusier, Robert Moses, and Ernst May (and even Donald Trump), among others, played pivotal roles in shaping modernist architectural theory and practice. Their ideologies and methodologies left a profound impact on urban landscapes for decades to come.<sup>25</sup> Urban design theories and practices evolved in response to changing societal values, technological advancements, and environmental concerns. Movements like the New Urbanism emerged as critiques of modernist planning paradigms, advocating for more walkable, mixed-use neighborhoods and sustainable transportation solutions.<sup>26,27</sup>

In the foreword to his work *Rebel Cities*, the neo-Marxist David Harvey<sup>28</sup> discusses Henri Lefebvre's<sup>29</sup> vision of the "right to the city": "The traditional city has been destroyed by rampant capitalist development, it has fallen victim to the endless need to invest over-accumulated capital, so that we are on to move an endlessly rampant urban growth that does not take into account the social, ecological or political consequences".<sup>28</sup>(pp15–16) He goes on to say that, following Lefebvre<sup>29</sup>, our political task is "a completely different kind of city to design or restore. However, this is not possible without the formation of a strong anti-capitalist movement".<sup>28</sup>(p16)

The executive power should lead city governance. Otherwise, unchecked markets will prioritize short-term economic efficiency and profit maximization over long-term sustainability. However, society lacks direct access to power, even though the needs and ideas of the public—as the end users of real estate—should be considered in the state's planning process, acting as society's elected representative. Power is involved, but it has to be consciously designed and used. "To claim the right to the city [...] is to claim some kind of shaping power over the processes of urbanization, over the ways in which our cities are made and remade, and to do so in a fundamental and radical way".<sup>28</sup>(p5)

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, city planning remains predominantly a top-down process, characterized by opaque decision-making processes driven by administrative bodies and market forces. However, there is a growing demand from citizens to reclaim their right to the city.<sup>28–31</sup> Citizens seek transparency, opportunities for feedback, and inclusion in decision-making processes. Community participation has become an indispensable tool in city planning, with the potential to yield mutually beneficial outcomes for all stakeholders involved.<sup>32,33</sup> The narrative of urban development has become increasingly complex with the emergence of new actors and technological

transformations shaping urban governance and design processes. Yet, despite these shifts, the enduring dynamics between people and plans continue to structure how cities evolve.

Successful cities can be understood as those that balance organic growth driven by human agency with structured frameworks provided by urban planning. The most vibrant urban environments integrate the power of people with the strategic vision of planners, allowing spontaneity to unfold within the boundaries of thoughtful design.<sup>34,35</sup> While participation has long been central to planning theory, co-creation represents a qualitative shift in the depth of stakeholder involvement. Participation often remains consultative, whereas co-creation implies shared authorship, responsibility, and decision-making authority.<sup>11,36,37</sup> This distinction is critical for urban design, where spatial outcomes materialize collective agreements and conflicts over time.

Contemporary concepts like co-creation draw inspiration from historical approaches to urban design while addressing the limitations and challenges of past practices. Moving beyond mere participation, co-creation emerges as the next evolutionary step in city planning, emphasizing collaborative processes and inclusive strategies to address contemporary urban challenges.<sup>15</sup> While participation lays the foundation for co-creation and initiates involvement, co-creation emphasizes genuine collaboration and collective decision-making among stakeholders.<sup>36</sup> The difference lies in the depth of engagement and in stakeholder empowerment to actively contribute to the design process.<sup>11</sup> Co-creation embraces principles of participatory planning and community engagement, recognizing the value of diverse perspectives in shaping inclusive and resilient cities. By involving stakeholders in the design process, co-creation fosters a sense of ownership and belonging among residents, leading to more socially and culturally vibrant urban environments.

In summary, historical perspectives on urban design provide valuable insights into the evolution of planning theories and practices. By learning from past approaches, contemporary concepts such as co-creation offer innovative solutions to the complex challenges cities face in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Through interdisciplinary collaboration and a commitment to shared values, urban designers can continue to shape vibrant, inclusive, and sustainable urban environments for future generations. As we navigate the complexities of modern urbanism, understanding the dynamic interplay between people and plans remains paramount in shaping cities that resonate with the human spirit.

### 3. Theoretical framework: Co-creation and theme-centered interaction

In the realm of co-creation in urban design, various theoretical frameworks provide valuable insights into the dynamics of collaborative processes and stakeholder engagement. One such framework is the TCI model, which offers a holistic approach to understanding group dynamics, communication patterns, and the facilitation of collaborative endeavors.

The TCI model, developed by Ruth Cohn<sup>19</sup>, emphasizes the importance of individual perspectives, group cohesion, and thematic exploration in collaborative settings. At its core, the TCI model posits that effective collaboration hinges on the interplay between individual autonomy and collective goals, with themes serving as focal points for exploration and dialogue. In the context of urban design, the TCI model provides a framework for analyzing the relational and psychosocial dynamics of co-creation processes.<sup>38</sup> By acknowledging the diverse perspectives of stakeholders, the model encourages inclusive decision-making and the integration of multiple voices into the design process. Moreover, the emphasis on thematic exploration enables urban designers to identify common goals, values, and aspirations that can inform the development of cohesive, contextually relevant design solutions.

The TCI model is based on four key factors: “I,” “We,” “It,” and “Globe.”<sup>39</sup> Each factor represents a distinct aspect of the interaction process and contributes to shaping the outcomes: The “I” factor represents individual perspectives, values, and experiences. In the urban design context, it emphasizes the importance of personal growth, empowerment, and the psychological dimensions of stakeholder participation. The “We” factor focuses on collaboration, communication, and relationships among stakeholders. This factor underscores the need for effective group dynamics, shared goals, and collective decision-making, all of which are central to successful co-creation processes. The “It” factor refers to the tangible outcomes of the co-creation process, including physical design elements, infrastructure, and functional aspects. It encompasses the spatial configuration, aesthetics, and the practical realization of design objectives. The “Globe” factor acknowledges the broader socio-cultural, economic, and environmental contexts within which the co-creation process occurs. This factor considers the impact of external forces, such as policy frameworks, socio-economic conditions, and environmental sustainability, on the design process and outcomes.

By maintaining a dynamic balance among these

four factors, the TCI model fosters a comprehensive, holistic approach to co-creation in urban design. Cohn<sup>19</sup> emphasizes that this balance is crucial to ensure inclusive participation and to address the multifaceted nature of urban challenges.<sup>40</sup> This makes TCI particularly relevant for urban design co-creation, where emotional attachments to place, latent conflicts between stakeholder groups, and asymmetrical power relations frequently shape collaborative processes. By explicitly integrating relational, task-oriented, and contextual dimensions, TCI enables a more differentiated understanding of how co-creative urban design processes unfold over time.

By drawing on theoretical frameworks such as the TCI model, urban designers can gain a deeper understanding of the underlying dynamics of co-creation processes. By exploring group interactions, communication strategies, and leadership dynamics, practitioners can leverage theoretical insights to foster collaborative environments that empower stakeholders, promote creativity, and drive innovation in urban design initiatives.

The TCI model emerges as a potent toolkit for crafting guidelines for co-creation in urban design, thanks to its structured yet flexible approach. TCI's emphasis on identifying central themes fosters meaningful dialogue among diverse stakeholders, ensuring inclusive participation and valued contributions. By integrating experiential learning principles, TCI equips participants with the skills needed to navigate complex urban challenges effectively. Its adaptability to various urban contexts makes TCI an invaluable framework for empowering stakeholders to collaboratively shape vibrant, sustainable cities that are responsive to community needs.

### 4. Methodology

This research builds upon a prior empirical case study<sup>38</sup>, where co-creation processes in urban design were extensively examined using a mixed-methods approach (Table 1). The present study did not conduct new primary empirical analysis but reinterpreted existing case material through the analytical lens of TCI.

The study followed an exploratory approach, using qualitative methods to uncover in-depth insights and quantitative methods to validate findings and assess patterns across participants. The mixed-methods approach allowed for a comprehensive exploration of co-creation processes by triangulating data from multiple sources.<sup>41,42</sup> Observation provided rich contextual information and captured nuanced aspects of participants' behavior and collaboration dynamics.<sup>43,44</sup> Surveys yielded quantitative data on participants' demographics, preferences, and feedback<sup>45,46</sup>, while interviews offered qualitative insights

Table 1. Overview of data sources and use in analysis from the previous case study<sup>38</sup>

Data Source	Types of Empirical Materials	Total Amount	Use in Data Analyses	Conducted By
Archival data & documents	Press articles/Google finds	909 documents	Gaining context knowledge	All participants
	Websites, social media posts		Gaining an overview of the co-creation process	
	Information, sketches and pitches of creators		Analyzing communication patterns	
	Organizational and strategic documents/road map/briefings/eMails/presentations /contracts by facilitator		Gaining insight into the strategy, discussions, debates, and development of the co-creation process	
	Notes on decision-making process (Jurors)			
	Blueprints and floor plans, material choicess			
	Speeches/presentations of inspirators			
Interviews	Inspirators/facilitators/jurors/creators of COI	32 interviews	Understanding of the drivers/ barriers, constellation and collaboration culture of COI	Researcher (KJO)
Observation	COI	40 h of observations	Understanding different team dynamics, analyse communication and strategy	Researcher (KJO)
	Summit	8 h	Gaining insight into the competition strategy	
	Internal meetings with facilitator	3	Understanding the challenges involved	
	Photos	232		
	Handwritten notes/drawings	50 pages		
	Films	4		
Survey data	Survey 1 (in advance)	3,004 participants	Gaining insights into general thoughts, interests and ideas of Hamburg citizens about this project	Digital tool (participation format)
	Survey 2 (live during COI)	603 participants	Gaining insights into concrete mobility, work and leisure aspects of Hamburg citizens	

into stakeholders' perspectives, motivations, and aspirations.<sup>47</sup> By combining these methods, the study achieved a more holistic understanding of the complexities involved in collaborative urban design initiatives.

In the previous case study<sup>38</sup>, observational data were collected through site visits to co-creation sessions, during which the researcher observed participant interactions, group dynamics, and decision-making processes. A total of 48 h of observation resulted in 50 handwritten pages of notes. Surveys were distributed to participants before and after co-creation sessions to assess their attitudes, perceptions, and satisfaction levels. A total of 32 semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including designers, community members, and project managers, to gather in-depth insights into

their experiences, motivations, and challenges related to co-creation. Access to the Microsoft Teams group facilitated data collection and analysis by serving as a central hub for communication among participants. A total of 909 documents from various sources, including press articles and official reports, were systematically examined, providing insights into project context, stakeholder roles, and outcomes.

In this current study, these insights were integrated with the TCI model<sup>19</sup>, presenting practical guidelines for effective co-creation in urban design. Through an iterative process of data review, analysis, and synthesis, the research culminated in the development of a comprehensive guideline for implementing co-creation in urban design. Empirical material was coded thematically and iteratively

mapped onto the four TCI dimensions. Recurring patterns across observations, interviews, and documents informed the formulation of the 10-step guideline, ensuring that each step is grounded in empirical insights rather than normative assumptions.

By combining theoretical frameworks, real-world experiences, and insights from the previous study, this study aims to advance understanding of inclusive and sustainable urban development practices and offer actionable recommendations for future city-building endeavors.

Qualitative data from interviews and observations were transcribed, coded, and thematically analyzed to identify recurring patterns, themes, and emerging insights. Quantitative survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics in Microsoft Excel (Microsoft, United States) to identify patterns and trends in the dataset. Themes and findings from qualitative and quantitative analyses were cross-referenced and compared to validate or enrich each other, ensuring the reliability and robustness of the study's conclusions.<sup>41</sup>

## 5. Results

This section synthesizes empirically observed patterns into a structured 10-step framework. The results are based on qualitative analysis of interviews, surveys, observations, and document material data from a previous study.<sup>38</sup> While the findings are presented in a structured format, they emerged inductively from recurring patterns identified across the empirical data.

Empirical data provided insights into recurring challenges and opportunities in collaborative urban design initiatives. Key findings emphasized the importance of clear communication channels, collaborative decision-making, and equity prioritization. These insights were integrated with the TCI model, presenting practical guidelines for effective co-creation in urban design.

Data analysis revealed recurring patterns related to stakeholder roles, communication dynamics, task clarity, and contextual constraints. These patterns informed the development of the following 10 steps, which synthesized the main empirical findings into a structured guideline.

### 5.1. The 10 steps of co-creation in urban design

Implementing co-creation in urban design projects requires a nuanced understanding of stakeholder dynamics, participatory methodologies, and collaborative design processes. This section presents practical strategies and principles to foster meaningful engagement and inclusive

decision-making in urban design initiatives. This guideline aims to bridge theory to practice, offering tangible steps for urban designers and stakeholders engaged in collaborative efforts. By distilling the complexities of co-creation, this guideline provides a structured yet adaptable framework that aligns with the nuanced dynamics of urban development and serves as a dynamic tool for navigating the challenges and opportunities inherent in co-creation processes within urban design.

The guideline for co-creation in urban design comprises 10 interlinked steps, each addressing specific aspects essential for a comprehensive and effective collaborative process.

#### 5.1.1. Step 1: Identification of stakeholders and objectives

The first step focuses on defining the diverse collaborators and outlining the primary goals of the urban design project. This initial step provides clarity, minimizes ambiguity, and establishes a clear direction for co-creation efforts, thereby reducing potential conflicts. Across the empirical material, unclear stakeholder identification and divergent expectations were recurring sources of conflict in the observed co-creation processes, underscoring the need for this step. In the underlying case study, stakeholder identification was operationalized through the explicit differentiation of participant roles (creators, inspirators, jurors, facilitators), which helped structure expectations and clarify objectives early in the process.<sup>38</sup>

#### 5.1.2. Step 2: Individual factor (I)

Moving forward, the second step explores the individual perspectives, values, and motivations of stakeholders. Recognizing and respecting the diversity of these perspectives fosters a collaborative environment that values individual contributions while concurrently creating a shared vision. Interview data revealed that individual motivations, values, and prior experiences strongly influenced participation dynamics, requiring explicit recognition and shaping both engagement intensity and conflict sensitivity during the co-creation process.

#### 5.1.3. Step 3: Task factor (It)

The subsequent step defines the central themes, tasks, and challenges of the co-creation project. This ensures clarity in project goals, reduces the risk of misalignment among stakeholders, and enhances the overall effectiveness of the co-creation process. Across the empirical material, ambiguity regarding project tasks and objectives repeatedly led to misunderstandings, highlighting the importance of clearly defining the co-creation task.



#### **5.1.4. Step 4: Group factor (We)**

This step examines the dynamics among stakeholders, focusing on addressing power imbalances and communication barriers, and fostering inclusivity. This step mitigates potential conflicts, ensuring a collaborative atmosphere where all stakeholders feel heard and included in the decision-making process. Participant observation revealed recurring power asymmetries between institutional actors and community representatives, which shaped group dynamics and informed this step. Empirical observations from the case study revealed that without active facilitation, dominant actors tended to monopolize decision-making, underlining the need for explicit attention to power asymmetries within group dynamics.<sup>38</sup>

#### **5.1.5. Step 5: Context factor (Globe)**

The fifth step evaluates how the co-created design fits within the broader context of the community, culture, and environment. By considering ethical considerations and long-term impacts, this step ensures that co-created solutions are contextually relevant, socially responsible, and sustainable. Document analysis and interviews indicated that regulatory, cultural, and spatial contexts significantly constrained design options, underscoring the relevance of contextual awareness, thereby repeatedly shifting attention away from individual or group-level aspirations.

#### **5.1.6. Step 6: Integration and balance**

This step focuses on ensuring a dynamic balance among the four factors (individual, task, group, and context). This step identifies and addresses areas where a single factor might dominate or be neglected, ensuring a harmonious, balanced collaboration. Empirical findings showed that overemphasizing individual, group, or task-related concerns often destabilized the process, underscoring the need for continuous balancing. This need for dynamic balancing was empirically evident in the case study, where overemphasis on individual interests or task-related outputs repeatedly challenged collaborative coherence.<sup>38</sup>

#### **5.1.7. Step 7: Collaboration and communication**

The seventh step analyzes how stakeholders collaborate and communicate throughout the co-creation process. By addressing conflicts or misunderstandings hindering effective collaboration, this step fosters an open and transparent communication environment. Communication breakdowns were repeatedly observed during co-creation sessions, particularly during decision-making, informing the emphasis on transparent communication. Participants repeatedly highlighted transparent communication and shared priority setting as critical enablers of collaboration.<sup>38</sup>

#### **5.1.8. Step 8: Personal growth and engagement**

The eighth step evaluates how stakeholders' personal growth and engagement are fostered during the co-creation process. This ensures that the co-creation process aligns with individual motivations, enhancing overall engagement and commitment. Interview responses suggested that sustained engagement was closely linked to participants' perception of personal relevance and learning throughout the process.

#### **5.1.9. Step 9: Outcome evaluation**

The ninth step assesses the quality and relevance of the co-created design outcomes. By providing a systematic approach to evaluating outcomes, this step facilitates continuous improvement and learning from the co-creation process. Empirical evidence showed that the absence of systematic evaluation limited learning across project phases, underscoring the importance of this step.

#### **5.1.10. Step 10: Lessons learned and future improvement**

Finally, the last step encourages a culture of reflection. By reflecting on the strengths and weaknesses of the co-creation process, this step proposes recommendations to improve future initiatives and foster a culture of learning and adaptation. Reflective practices were identified as critical moments for knowledge transfer and process improvement across the analysed cases.

By following this structured guideline, urban designers and stakeholders can navigate the complexities of co-creation, fostering an environment where diverse perspectives converge to shape inclusive, innovative, and sustainable urban design.

At the local scale, the framework can guide neighborhood-based development processes; at the regional scale, it can inform collaborative governance across municipalities; and at the national scale, it offers a reference for policy-driven urban development programmes seeking to institutionalize co-creation.<sup>12,48</sup>

Each step serves a distinct purpose, collectively contributing to a holistic and effective approach to co-creation in urban design. However, each urban design case study is unique, and the guidelines may need to be adapted to fit the specific context, stakeholders, and challenges of each case.

### **5.2. The co-creation circle**

The co-creation circle (Figure 1) does not represent an additional empirical finding but synthesizes the results presented above into a process-oriented heuristic. It



is a conceptual representation that complements the co-creation guideline. The co-creation circle provides a novel framework for understanding the overarching process of collaborative design, while the co-creation steps offer a more detailed breakdown of specific activities and considerations involved in each stage. Together, they provide a complementary perspective on the co-creation process in urban design. By visualizing the co-creation process in a circular format, the co-creation circle offers a novel way to illustrate the interconnectedness of key stages and components in collaborative urban design efforts. While the 10-step framework provides structured guidance for implementation, the co-creation circle serves as a complementary heuristic. It emphasizes iteration, feedback loops, and nonlinearity, reflecting the dynamic, often nonsequential character of co-creation processes in urban design. It is essential to view the circle alongside the 10 steps to co-creation in urban design to fully appreciate its significance, as it may not present novel insights on its own.

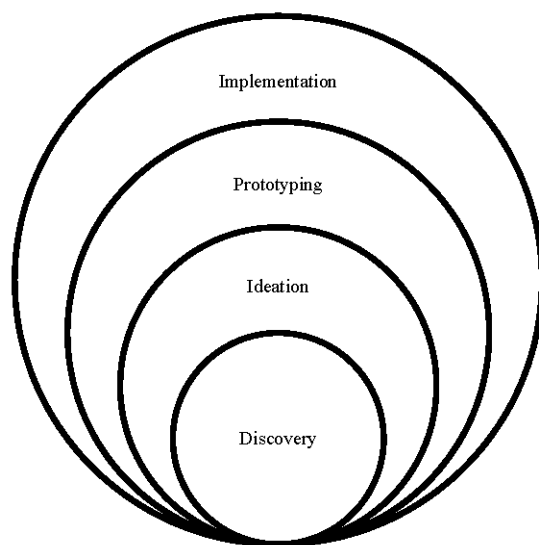


Figure 1. Co-creation circle

In the initial stage of discovery, urban design initiatives embark on a journey of exploration and understanding. Here, stakeholders delve deep into the intricate tapestry of community needs, aspirations, and challenges that define the urban landscape. Through meticulous research, data collection, and engaging dialogues, stakeholders unearth invaluable insights into the multifaceted dynamics of the urban environment. This pivotal phase aligns seamlessly with Step 1 of the co-creation process, which focuses on identifying stakeholders and clarifying their objectives, needs, and aspirations. Just as a map guides travelers through uncharted terrain, discovery lays the groundwork

for meaningful collaboration and informed decision-making, paving the way for inclusive and sustainable urban design solutions.

Ideation lays the foundation for creative exploration and innovation, enabling stakeholders to generate a wide range of ideas and potential solutions to urban design challenges. It fosters creativity, encourages out-of-the-box thinking, and provides the raw material from which impactful design concepts emerge. In the vibrant ideation stage, participants embark on a collective journey of imagination and creativity, generating a tapestry of ideas, concepts, and potential solutions to address the challenges and opportunities identified in the urban design landscape. This phase is a celebration of creativity, an arena for brainstorming, and a playground for experimentation, all aimed at birthing innovative approaches to the complex problems of urban design. As individual perspectives, task requirements, and group dynamics do, ideation harmoniously aligns with the co-creation process. Aligned with the rhythm of Step 2 (Individual factor), Step 3 (Task factor), Step 4 (Group factor), and Step 5 (Context factor), ideation mirrors the spirit of collaborative idea generation, fostering an environment where the collective brilliance of diverse stakeholders converges to shape the urban fabric in ingenious and unprecedented ways.

During prototyping, stakeholders transition from conceptualization to practical exploration, bringing ideas to life through tangible representations or models. Prototyping serves as a pivotal phase where design concepts are transformed into visual or functional prototypes, allowing for hands-on testing, refinement, and iteration. Through prototyping, stakeholders gain valuable insights into the feasibility, functionality, and user experience of their designs, enabling them to address potential challenges and optimize solutions before full-scale implementation. This stage allows stakeholders to visualize and experience proposed solutions in tangible form, facilitating more informed decision-making and design refinement. It encourages collaboration and co-creation as stakeholders work together to fine-tune prototypes, incorporating diverse perspectives to ensure integration and balance (Step 6) while fostering effective communication and collaboration (Step 7). Prototyping encourages a culture of experimentation, innovation, and continuous improvement, driving the evolution of urban design solutions that are responsive, inclusive, and impactful.

The implementation stage of the co-creation process focuses on translating finalized designs and plans into actionable projects and initiatives that resonate with the urban environment. This critical phase involves

coordinating resources, mobilizing support, and navigating regulatory processes to bring co-created solutions to fruition. Implementation is intricately linked with Step 8 (Personal growth and engagement) as stakeholders embark on a journey of personal and collective growth while actively engaging in the realization of co-created solutions. Moreover, the subsequent evaluation and reflection on outcomes align with Steps 9 and 10 (Outcome evaluation and lessons learned and future improvement), as stakeholders assess the impact of implemented projects, draw insights from successes and challenges, and identify opportunities for refinement and enhancement. Through implementation, stakeholders contribute to the sustainable evolution of urban spaces while fostering a culture of continuous learning and improvement.

The co-creation circle presents these four stages as interconnected and iterative, emphasizing the collaborative nature of the design process and the importance of ongoing dialogue, experimentation, and adaptation. It serves as a structured framework for engaging stakeholders and navigating the complexities of co-creation in urban design initiatives.

### 5.3. Practice-oriented recommendations

**Table 2** summarizes the recommendations derived from the empirical analysis in the form of a 10-step co-creation toolbox. The toolbox is structured around the stages of discovery, ideation, prototyping, and implementation, while also incorporating the four dimensions of TCI (I, We, It, and Globe). For each step, practical do's and don'ts

**Table 2. Co-creation toolbox for urban design: Practical do's and don'ts across process stages**

Steps	Stage	Do's (Impact)	Don'ts (Impact)
Identification of stakeholders and objectives	Discovery	Inclusive stakeholder identification ensures diverse representation, fostering richer perspectives and minimizing the risk of overlooking crucial voices	Excluding marginalized voices diminishes the richness of co-created solutions, leading to designs that may not fully address the community's needs
Individual factor (I)		Actively engaging stakeholders in open dialogue ensures a shared understanding of individual perspectives, fostering collaboration and a shared vision	Neglecting to acknowledge individual differences and diverse perspectives may hinder a truly collaborative environment
Task factor (It)	Ideation	Clarity in defining project themes minimizes ambiguity, aligns stakeholders toward common goals, and reduces the likelihood of divergent interpretations	Ambiguity in project themes can lead to misalignment among stakeholders, causing confusion and potential conflicts throughout the co-creation process
Group factor (We)		Recognizing and addressing power imbalances fosters an inclusive environment where all stakeholders feel empowered to contribute, minimizing conflicts	Neglecting power imbalances or communication barriers can lead to unequal participation and misunderstandings, hindering effective collaboration
Context factor (Globe)		Evaluating designs in the context of the community and environment ensures solutions are relevant, socially responsible, and sustainable in the long term	Ignoring contextual considerations may result in designs that lack cultural sensitivity, are unsustainable, or do not resonate with the community
Integration and balance	Prototyping	Regularly balancing these factors ensures that the co-creation process remains dynamic and adaptive, fostering a harmonious collaboration	Failing to adapt to evolving circumstances can result in inflexible processes, hindering the co-creation's ability to address changing needs
Collaboration and communication		Transparent communication fosters trust among stakeholders, reduces misunderstandings and conflicts, and facilitates more effective collaboration	Communication breakdowns can lead to misunderstandings, conflicts, and a breakdown in trust among stakeholders, impeding the co-creation process
Personal growth and engagement	Implementation	Fostering personal growth and engagement ensures stakeholders are invested in the process, thereby increasing commitment and enthusiasm	Neglecting stakeholder engagement and motivation can result in disinterest, reduced commitment, and a lack of enthusiasm for the co-creation process
Outcome evaluation/ lessons learned and future improvement		Regular evaluations and learning from outcomes facilitate continuous improvement, ensuring that future co-creation initiatives build on successes and address shortcomings.	Neglecting continuous evaluation and learning opportunities can result in missed chances for improvement, hindering the development of more effective co-creation initiatives

are outlined to help urban designers facilitate inclusive and effective co-creation processes.

## 6. Discussion

This section discusses the empirical findings in relation to existing literature on co-creation, governance, and urban design. It interprets the results beyond the specific case context and explores their implications for theory, practice, and long-term urban governance.

### 6.1. Steward ownership as a governance framework for co-creation

Steward ownership is not presented here as an empirical finding of the case study, but is introduced as a governance perspective that may complement and institutionalize co-creative outcomes beyond the design phase. Beyond the scope of this study, steward ownership is also increasingly discussed in ESG<sup>3</sup>-oriented governance debates, particularly in the real estate sector, where questions of long-term responsibility, transparency, and social value creation gain relevance. While these developments are not empirically examined here, they indicate broader institutional contexts in which stewardship-based governance models may become increasingly significant.

Steward ownership can be understood as part of a broader normative shift in governance thinking, in which moral agency and collective stewardship gain relevance alongside economic rationality. In this sense, the concept resonates with long-standing philosophical debates on responsibility, autonomy, and the social embeddedness of economic action.

Classical philosophical positions already articulated concerns that remain central to contemporary governance debates. Immanuel Kant's<sup>49</sup> emphasis on moral autonomy and responsibility foregrounds the ethical obligation to respect the dignity and agency of others, extending beyond purely instrumental or profit-oriented action.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, Adam Smith's<sup>50</sup> political economy, often reduced to market efficiency, was embedded in a broader moral philosophy that acknowledged social responsibility and the normative conditions under which economic activity contributes to collective well-being.<sup>50</sup>

Rather than elaborating these philosophical traditions in detail, this study draws on steward ownership as a contemporary governance expression of such normative concerns. Against this background, the present study shifts the analytical focus from why co-creation is increasingly

<sup>3</sup> ESG refers to environmental, social, and governance criteria increasingly used to assess long-term responsibility and sustainability, particularly in real estate and urban development contexts.

pursued in urban design to how co-creative processes can be operationalized and stabilized beyond the design phase, with particular attention to procedural structuring and governance conditions. Steward ownership translates ethical responsibility and long-term stewardship into institutional design by decoupling control rights from short-term profit extraction and embedding collective responsibility within legal and organizational structures.<sup>51</sup> As such, it provides a governance logic that is particularly compatible with co-creative urban design processes, where shared authorship, responsibility, and long-term commitment are critical yet often insufficiently institutionalized.

### 6.2. Connecting the 10 steps to steward ownership

While the 10 steps of co-creation provide a practical framework for facilitating inclusive urban design processes, steward ownership offers a legal and governance structure that institutionalizes these principles. By embedding collective decision-making and long-term accountability into an organization's DNA, steward ownership ensures that co-creation outcomes are achieved and sustained over time. This section explores how steward ownership operationalizes the theoretical insights from the 10 steps, translating them into ongoing practice.

Table 3 does not introduce new empirical findings but analytically connects the empirically derived 10-step framework with the governance principles of steward ownership.

### 6.3. Limitations and future research

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings of this study. These limitations are directly linked to the empirical design and scope of the research. As the empirical material is based on a single in-depth case study<sup>38</sup>, the findings are analytically rather than statistically generalizable.

The framework presented in this article is derived from specific empirical contexts and theoretical interpretations. Its transferability to different cultural, institutional, and regulatory settings, therefore, requires further comparative research and empirical testing. In particular, the geographic focus on the German context may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research could extend this perspective through international case studies to examine how co-creation frameworks and governance models operate under different regulatory and cultural conditions.

While this study establishes a conceptual link between co-creation and steward ownership, longitudinal research is needed to assess their long-term effects on urban

**Table 3. Linking the co-creation toolbox to steward ownership governance principles**

Steps	Stage	Steward ownership
Identification of stakeholders and objectives	Discovery	Steward ownership ensures diverse and continuous stakeholder involvement through legal frameworks supporting co-governance
Individual factor (I)	Ideation	The model recognizes individual motivations by allowing community members to have real influence in decision-making
Task factor (It)		Steward ownership provides a legal framework for managing the tasks and outputs over the long term, ensuring continuity
Group factor (We)		By democratizing ownership, steward ownership redistributes power, addressing imbalances, and fostering equity
Context factor (Globe)		Steward ownership mandates long-term sustainability, aligning with the need to consider broader social and environmental contexts
Integration and balance	Prototyping	Its structure inherently balances economic goals with social value, ensuring no one perspective dominates the process
Collaboration and communication		Steward ownership requires transparent governance, enhancing open communication, and reducing the risk of conflict
Personal growth and engagement	Implementation	The model encourages personal investment by providing stakeholders with a meaningful, long-term role in governance
Outcome evaluation/ lessons learned and future improvement		Steward ownership's legal frameworks require continuous assessment to ensure social and environmental commitments. Its emphasis on long-term stewardship means that learning and adaptation are integral to the governance process

development processes and outcomes. Future studies should investigate whether steward ownership contributes to sustained community engagement, continuity of responsibility, and adaptive decision-making over time. Examining how different stakeholder groups—such as public authorities, community organizations, and private developers—perceive and engage with steward ownership could further deepen understanding of collaborative governance dynamics.

In addition, practical barriers to implementing steward ownership in urban design remain underexplored. These include legal constraints, financial feasibility, and institutional resistance. Future research could examine how public policy, regulatory innovation, and municipal support might enable or constrain the adoption of steward ownership models in practice.

Finally, while the proposed 10-step toolbox offers a structured guideline for co-creation in urban design, further empirical validation is required. Future research could test its applicability through additional case studies or pilot projects across different spatial scales. Combining qualitative and quantitative approaches may help assess its effectiveness in addressing power asymmetries, enhancing stakeholder engagement, and improving the quality and durability of co-created urban outcomes.

Future studies could also examine both qualitative and

quantitative outcomes of applying the proposed guideline. In particular, research could assess whether co-creation processes—especially when informed by governance models such as steward ownership—lead to systematic and, where appropriate, measurable improvements in stakeholder engagement, design quality, and long-term project sustainability.

Evaluating these outcomes could offer evidence-based insights that help strengthen the business case for collaborative urban governance, supporting more robust decision-making among public authorities and practitioners.

## 7. Conclusion

This study explored how co-creation processes in urban design can be systematically structured to account for individual perspectives, group dynamics, task-oriented challenges, and broader contextual conditions. Drawing on empirical case study material, the study examined how co-creation can be translated into actionable guidance for urban design practice.

Urban environments can be understood as complex socio-spatial constellations shaped by historical trajectories, cultural practices, and collective negotiations. Each city, neighborhood, and street embodies specific configurations of meaning, power, and identity that evolve. Recognizing this situated and relational character of urban space is

central to contemporary urban design, as it highlights why standardized solutions often fail to capture local needs and aspirations. From this perspective, diversity is not merely a descriptive feature of cities but a productive condition that enables creativity, learning, and collective problem-solving. Co-creation responds to this condition by offering design processes that engage with urban complexity rather than abstracting from it, allowing multiple voices, experiences, and forms of knowledge to inform spatial outcomes.

Against this background, the present study responds to the identified gap by developing a structured, empirically grounded approach that translates co-creation theory into actionable guidance for urban design practice. By operationalizing TCI, the study developed a procedural framework grounded in empirical insights from a qualitative case study. In addition, the article offers a perspective by discussing steward ownership as a potential institutional complement that may support the long-term stabilization of co-creative outcomes beyond the design phase.

Through an interdisciplinary lens, the research has uncovered valuable insights into the importance of stakeholder engagement, participatory decision-making, and collaborative design processes in fostering thriving urban communities. The study has identified practical strategies and theoretical frameworks for implementing co-creation in urban design projects, emphasizing the centrality of stakeholder involvement and the integration of diverse perspectives. Co-creation emerges as a powerful tool for reimagining urban spaces as dynamic ecosystems of collaboration and creativity. This toolkit serves as a dynamic resource for urban designers, planners, policymakers, and community members alike, providing a structured yet adaptable framework for co-creating vibrant, sustainable, and resilient urban environments. By democratizing the design process and empowering communities to actively shape their built environment, co-creation fosters a sense of ownership, belonging, and pride among residents, ultimately leading to more resilient and livable cities.

In conclusion, this study positions co-creation as a central approach within contemporary urban design for engaging with the social and institutional complexity of urban environments. Rather than treating cities solely as physical artefacts, urban space is understood as a socio-spatial outcome shaped by ongoing negotiation between actors, values, and contexts. By grounding co-creation theory in a procedural, empirically derived toolbox, this study offers a practical framework for navigating such complexity in design practice. Co-creation is thus understood not as a singular method, but as an evolving

practice that links participatory processes with long-term governance considerations, offering a basis for more inclusive, context-sensitive, and resilient urban development.

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