

DANUBE

FUTURE

WORKS²

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KEYNOTE ESSAY

CRISTOF MAYER

DAS HAUS DER STATISTIK –
CO-PRODUCTIVE CITY-MAKINGINTRODUCTION

The redevelopment of Haus der Statistik in Berlin offers a detailed example of what is known as public-civic partnership (PCP), a governance model in which public authorities and civil society groups jointly manage public resources. Unlike privatization, which transfers assets into private, profit-oriented hands, this model is designed to keep long-term control of a resource with the community while still involving formal public institutions. The following account, drawn from a presentation by practitioner Christof Mayer, traces the site's history from institutional vacancy to a cooperatively governed neighborhood-in-the-making, and illustrates the tensions and negotiations that such partnerships tend to involve.

THE SITE AND ITS HISTORY

Haus der Statistik is located immediately adjacent to Alexanderplatz, one of the busiest commercial centers in Berlin, which receives several hundred thousand visitors daily. The building itself was constructed between 1968 and 1970 to house the central statistical administration of the German Democratic Republic, from which it takes its name. Following German reunification, ownership passed to the German federal state, and the building continued to serve as a federal government office until it was vacated in 2008.

For roughly the next decade, the building stood empty while a sale of the property was pursued. This period coincided with a broader trend: between the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and 2014, more than 20 million square meters of publicly owned property in the city were sold and privatized. Haus der Statistik was slated for a similar fate, intended to be sold and demolished to make way for a new development in keeping with a master plan dating to the 1990s. By 2020, the complex represented 45,000 square meters of unused space, a striking condition at a time when gentrification had become a pressing concern in Berlin.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE INITIATIVE

The situation began to shift in the autumn of 2015, when a large poster appeared on the building announcing that its spaces would be dedicated to art, culture, and social causes. Although the poster had the appearance of an official notice, it was in fact created by a group of artists. The intervention relied on a subtle play on words: rather than stating the building was

“gefördert” (funded), it read “gefordert” (demanded) – two German words that look similar but carry different meanings.

The gesture proved effective. On the same day, the local district mayor publicly endorsed the demand on social media, and the position was later formalized through a resolution of the district council. This unexpected success led to the formal establishment of the Haus der Statistik initiative, a coalition of groups and individuals advocating for an alternative model of urban development for the site.

The initiative then organized a series of open meetings inviting Berlin residents to contribute ideas and articulate their needs for the site’s future, an effort intended to build broad public legitimacy. With this support in hand, the initiative entered into negotiations with government bodies while simultaneously running a public campaign and preparing questionnaires for candidates ahead of the 2016 Berlin state elections, asking them to state their positions on the building’s preservation.

These efforts culminated in a political commitment: the project was written into the 2016 coalition agreement and subsequently carried forward by every governing coalition that followed, despite several changes in the composition of Berlin’s government between 2016 and the present. Throughout these political shifts, the Social Democratic Party remained the one constant coalition partner, a fact Mayer highlights as notable given how significant political turnover can otherwise disrupt long-term urban projects.

FROM VISION TO FEASIBILITY STUDIES

Vacant buildings, in Mayer’s framing, can function simultaneously as a resource and as a blank canvas onto which various visions can be projected. An early conceptual sketch served this purpose for the initiative, offering a simple, shared vision without prematurely fixing specific details.

This vision was subsequently tested through a series of studies. An initial study examined how four key programmatic uses could be distributed across the existing building structure, aiming to provide a foundation for the initiative to acquire the site outright. A later study demonstrated that comparable floor area to a competing development proposal could be achieved while retaining most of the existing buildings – an argument made in direct competition with plans that would have involved demolition. These findings were further adapted once the state of Berlin introduced its own plans for the site, which called for a new city hall, administrative space, and social housing. The initiative worked to reconcile these various requirements into a shared concept for a mixed-use neighborhood.

MUNICIPALIZATION AND THE FORMATION OF KOOP5

These planning efforts supported a broader process of municipalization, through which the property was protected from Berlin’s competitive real estate market and made available for social use. This outcome was achieved when the German federal state transferred its share of the property to the state of Berlin in exchange for other assets – a mechanism Mayer describes as a fairly standard procedure in such transfers. The acquisition and municipalization of the property in 2017 paved the way for the formation of a new cooperation structure known as Koop5.

This arrangement was unusual for Berlin at the time because it placed a civil society partner on equal footing with public institutions in a development project of this scale. The partnership brought together the cooperative ZUsammenKUNFT Berlin, representing civil society; the district administra-

tion and the Berlin Senate department responsible for urban development, representing political and administrative interests; and two municipal companies - the housing company WBM and the state's real estate management body - representing economic interests. In effect, the arrangement placed political authority, economic capacity, and a small civic cooperative alongside one another as formal partners.

Notably, the informal initiative had no legal standing on its own, so the creation of a cooperative as a distinct legal entity was a necessary step to allow civil society to participate as a formal partner within Koop5.

The foundational agreement of Koop5 established that all existing high-rise structures would be retained while the low-rise buildings would be demolished, consistent with earlier studies. Under this agreement, 80 percent of the retained floor area was designated for Berlin's public administration, with the remaining 20 percent allocated to the initiative's own concept. New construction, planned separately, was to include 300 affordable apartments built by the state housing company, a new district town hall, and 15,000 square meters of space for the initiative. This division of space was determined through a political decision by the Senator of Finance and established a fixed distribution ratio to be applied even if the total square footage of the project were to change in the future.

STRUCTURING THE COOPERATION

The cooperation among these varied partners is governed by formal agreements addressing both practical and relational aspects of the partnership—not only how space is allocated, but how the parties work together. These agreements are supported by corresponding financing plans, and each phase of the project is governed by its own cooperation agreement, with the terms for subsequent phases negotiated only once a given phase concludes. At the time of the presentation, the project remained in its third phase, which had extended longer than originally anticipated due to the practical difficulties of meeting its goals within the initially planned timeframe.

Mayer connects this approach to the principles of the Leipzig Charter, arguing that collaboration among diverse partners - each contributing distinct expertise and perspectives - is essential to producing a better city, and that the scale of contemporary urban challenges exceeds what political and administrative bodies can address on their own.

THE PIONEER PHASE

Establishing a physical, on-site presence was described as essential to the next stage of the project. Beyond providing a venue for various participatory formats, it also increased the initiative's visibility and approachability, which in turn improved communication with the wider public.

A cooperative and participatory design competition followed, ultimately won by the architectural team of Teleinternetcafé together with landscape architects Treibhaus. Their winning design avoided a single large open space in favor of a series of distinct "urban rooms," each with its own character, intended to foster encounters among the diverse groups who would live, work, and visit the site. The design also placed particular emphasis on the ground floor as the primary point of contact between the development and the surrounding city at street level.

Building on this design, the cooperative persuaded the other partners in Koop5 to allow temporary use of the ground floors while the upper stories of the existing buildings were cleared and renovated. Over what became

known as the pioneer phase, running from summer 2019 to spring 2022, roughly 6,500 square meters of ground-floor space were activated to help relieve pressure on available space in the city. Because the building had stood empty for a decade and had in the meantime been stripped of materials and infrastructure, substantial investment was required in basic systems such as electricity, water, and fire protection in order to obtain the necessary permits for occupancy.

This phase began with a “Making Futures” summer school that drew more than 100 participants from around the world. Early activity on site included a container kitchen, work to clear an overgrown courtyard, temporary encampments for participants staying on site, and preparations for constructing a rammed-earth oven. Following the summer school, the site was operated by a rotating group of so-called “pioneers” – users running exhibitions, events, workshops, and a recurring market for local products. Beyond generating programming, the pioneer phase served as a means of testing what organizational systems would be needed to sustain such a mixed-use neighborhood over the longer term. To this end, a pioneer committee was established to develop a suitable mix of uses and a transparent process for allocating space, bringing together space users and committee members in an ongoing feedback process, supported by participatory formats offering varying levels of engagement.

TRANSITION AND CONTINUITY

In 2022, the pioneers were required to vacate the ground floor spaces as renovation work began in earnest. Rather than ending the pioneer program, organizers relocated many of its activities to outdoor areas, reducing the available space from roughly 6,000 to about 2,100 square meters, which meant some occupants had to leave. Mayer describes the effort to preserve continuity as important, arguing that discontinuing the initiative's activities entirely at this stage would have squandered the knowledge, relationships, and alliances built up over the preceding years. Adaptations during this period included converting outdoor space into an indoor-style meeting area and equipping a container with a full kitchen, allowing certain activities to continue for two to three additional years.

Over time, the physical reorganization of the site was accompanied by a reorganization of its programming. Whereas the project began with a fairly literal division of spaces – separate containers for art, culture, and social issues, as depicted in the original poster and early diagrams – the pioneer phase led to a more integrated mixing of these uses into shared clusters, an outcome regarded as more interesting and functional than maintaining separate single-purpose buildings.

Mayer characterizes these outcomes as instances of “everyday micro-utopias”: urban meeting places where the production, construction, and discussion of potential change can be experienced directly, and where forms of urban transformation can be practiced in real time.

CONCLUSION

The Haus der Statistik project is presented as a layered process combining phases driven from the bottom up—originating with an artist-led intervention and grassroots organizing – with phases requiring top-down institutional support to sustain momentum. According to Mayer, the initial impulse for the project came from outside formal institutions, but sustained progress depended on the subsequent involvement of political and administrative processes; without this top-down engagement, the project

would likely have stalled. The overall trajectory illustrates both the practical difficulties and the potential of public-civic partnerships as a model for urban redevelopment that seeks to balance political authority, economic considerations, and civil society participation within a single governance structure.