



Annotating key concepts of integrated spatial planning

Co-creation in urban planning

Authors: Nadia Charalambous, Mariam Shulqamy, Frixos Petrou,
Rafaela Christodoulou

Mainstream/Conventional Definition

Co-creation in urban planning refers to a collaborative governance approach in which citizens, public institutions, and researchers collectively define urban problems and co-develop solutions. Rather than serving as a symbolic form of participation, co-creation increasingly emphasizes **innovation and shared decision-making as core principles of legitimacy** (Lund 2023). This is particularly evident in Urban Living Labs—such as CLEVER Cities and Sharing Cities – which operationalize **layered frameworks that align co-creative practices with strategic policy and planning mechanisms** (von Wirth et al. 2019). As Puerari and de Koning (2018) note, the effectiveness of such models often depends on the **quality of informal engagement** and the facilitative roles that enable **local knowledge to shape sustainable urban outcomes**.

Contested Meanings / Debates in the Literature

The concept of **co-creation in urban planning** has evolved into a widely discussed yet contested approach, subject to varied interpretations and critical examination. While it is often highlighted as a tool for democratic transformation that fosters inclusive urban governance, several scholars caution against its uncritical adoption. Lund (2023) argues that **co-creation risks transformed into a governance strategy** focused more on innovation outcomes than on meaningful participation, undermining concerns around fairness and political legitimacy. Likewise, Puerari and de Koning (2018) observe that **co-creation within Urban Living Labs (ULLs) can be shaped more by institutional priorities than by the needs of local communities**, casting doubt on the extent of actual power-sharing in such initiatives.

Debates also centre on the **spatial disparities in how co-creation is practiced**. In the Global North, **co-creation is frequently operationalized through structured, policy-backed initiatives** such as EU-funded ULLs (e.g., CLEVER Cities or Sharing Cities), whereas in the Global South it often **emerges from bottom-up initiatives** or in response to limited state capacity and infrastructural limitations. This contrast underscores the challenges of culturally and politically adapting co-creation models across contexts, and the potential for **“design imperialism”** – the imposition of Global North frameworks without sufficient localization to context-specific conditions. Cornwall and Gaventa (2001) stress that authentic co-creation must engage local power structures and embed itself within specific socio-political realities. Ultimately, **the legitimacy of co-creation depends not only on participatory techniques but on their contextual responsiveness and capacity to disrupt existing hierarchies**.

Finally, there is a growing debate about **ethics, participation, and alternative futures of data use**. While participatory GIS and citizen-generated data are often celebrated as inclusive, critical scholars argue that these practices can reproduce existing power asymmetries unless governed collaboratively and reflexively. Concepts like “data gardening” (De Albuquerque) propose more emancipatory data practices rooted in co-production, ethics, and local autonomy. Similarly, calls for a “post-digital” turn – articulated by Xu, Duarte, and others – argue that data should be used not only to manage cities but also to imagine more democratic and just urban futures. This perspective reframes data-driven planning as a site of political struggle over whose knowledge, values, and imaginaries shape the urban realm.

Applications in Practice

- **Urban Living Labs (ULLs)**
Used across European cities (e.g., in the *CLEVER Cities*, *Sharing Cities*, and *SUNEX* projects) to test sustainability solutions through citizen co-design, implementation, and monitoring.
- **Participatory Masterplans**
Local governments co-develop neighbourhood or city-level plans with residents and civil society groups, integrating lived experience into formal planning processes.
- **Nature-Based Solutions & Green Infrastructure**
Citizens and planners co-create interventions such as urban gardens, green corridors, or stormwater systems that reflect local ecological knowledge.
- **Digital Platforms for Urban Engagement**
Tools like participatory mapping apps and collaborative dashboards facilitate continuous citizen input in real-time planning (e.g., in Amsterdam and Milan).
- **Community-Led Urbanism (Global South)**
Informal settlements or marginalized urban communities co-create housing, services, and infrastructure in partnership with NGOs or academic institutions—common in Latin America, India, and Sub-Saharan Africa.
- **Design Charrettes & Citizen Assemblies**
Time-bound workshops and deliberative forums where planners, citizens, and stakeholders co-develop visions, strategies, or design interventions.

Selected References & Key Readings

Lund, Dorte H. (2023). *Co-Creation in Urban Governance: From Inclusion to Innovation*.
→ Critically examines how co-creation reframes legitimacy in planning—shifting from participatory ideals to innovation-led governance models.

Puerari, Emma, and J. D. de Koning (2018). *Co-Creation Dynamics in Urban Living Labs*.
→ Analyzes the socio-organizational conditions and facilitator roles that shape co-creation outcomes in experimental planning contexts.

von Wirth, Timo, et al. (2019). *Governing Urban Sustainability Transitions: From Experimentation to Transformative Pathways*.
→ Provides a framework for embedding Urban Living Labs and co-creation practices into long-term governance and urban transformation.

Ermacora, Tomas, and Lucy Bullivant (2021). *Recoded City: Co-Creating Urban Futures*.
→ Showcases global case studies of participatory urbanism, emphasizing design-led co-creation in marginalized and grassroots settings.

Cornwall, Andrea, and John Gaventa (2001). *From Users and Choosers to Makers and Shapers*.
→ A foundational critique of participation discourse—argues for deeper power-sharing and contextual awareness in co-creation and planning.

Closely Related Concepts

Participatory Planning

A broad approach to urban governance that seeks to involve citizens and stakeholders in the planning process. It typically includes consultations, public hearings, and community workshops. Unlike co-creation, it may not always ensure shared decision-making power or continuous engagement throughout all stages of a project.

Co-Design

A collaborative design process where planners, architects, or designers work directly with end users or community members to create solutions—often spatial or service-based. In urban planning, co-design is commonly used in the development of public spaces, parks, and infrastructure, emphasizing user experience and context-specific needs.

Co-Production

A governance and service delivery model in which public services are jointly produced by professionals and citizens. It emphasizes implementation and shared responsibility more than initial ideation. In urban contexts, it can include maintenance of public facilities, delivery of local services, or collaborative housing management.

Urban Living Labs (ULLs)

Real-world experimental environments that bring together governments, researchers, businesses, and citizens to test innovative urban solutions. ULLs are often policy-backed and structured, serving as platforms for piloting co-created interventions in areas like mobility, energy, or green infrastructure.

Deliberative Governance

A form of democratic engagement that emphasizes reasoned discussion and collective decision-making. It typically involves forums such as citizen assemblies or participatory budgeting, where diverse voices are heard and consensus is built. Deliberative governance supports co-creation by providing the procedural legitimacy for inclusive processes.

Social Innovation

Refers to novel, often grassroots, solutions to social problems that are more effective, efficient, or sustainable than existing approaches. Social innovation is frequently community-driven and context-specific, with co-creation acting as a core participatory mechanism that ensures responsiveness and scalability.