

## Urban Knowledge Hubs – Transformative Societal Spaces for Hybrid Libraries in the Baltic Sea Region

### Pilot Evaluation Report

#### State and University Library Hamburg (*Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg Carl von Ossietzky Landesbetrieb*)

#### Background for the Hamburg pilot

The EU-project and collaboration was inspired by insights from a previous project on spatial development and user engagement to imagine the library of the future ([Wissen Bauen 2025](#)), which highlighted the lack of blueprints or best practice examples for co-creation. This led to a deeper exploration of co-creation, actively involving end users as early as possible in the process. The State and University Library in Hamburg transformed a reading room into a dynamic space, a forum, for active memory culture and historical-political knowledge transfer. An important factor is the specific role of our library as both, university and state library. The focus of the redesign process on memory culture and historical political knowledge transfer stems from this position between academia and public as well as the library's and space's namesake [Carl von Ossietzky](#). The new Carl von Ossietzky Forum is a multifunctional space, facilitating both direct and indirect communication, such as presentations, exhibitions, workshops, and discussions. The goal was to create a versatile environment for collaborative learning, serving as a prototype for Urban Knowledge Hubs (UKHs). The concept of an UKH as an ideal for the library of the future was developed against the backdrop of digital transformations and cultural diversification. Urban Knowledge Hubs not only operate at a local level, but also connect to global information and knowledge networks. Such places, which provide access to comprehensible and reliable information for all citizens, are essential for today's knowledge societies: in personal, local, regional and international contexts. This report tackles the evaluation of the pilot in Hamburg, the co-creative process as well as collaboration in general.

To address the aforementioned challenges posed by missing blueprints in innovative space and service design, the project partners developed the 4C Toolbox for User Engagement and Participation, a research-based resource for the participatory design of hybrid and flexible informational spaces that empower citizens and promote informed decision-making. The toolbox is organized into five clear and actionable phases: Aims and goals, engagement, contribution, accountabilities, and evaluation. We have successfully completed the first four phases and are currently in the evaluation phase of the project.

## Aims and Goals

The activities in Hamburg started with the selection of three associated associations (AOs) relevant to the purpose of the new space, as part of the first phase assessing aims and goals, aimed at fostering networks across government, academia, and civil society at the intersection of memory culture and historical political knowledge transfer: The Academy of Sciences and Humanities in Hamburg, the State Agency for Civic Education, and the Association for Hamburg History. The goal was to establish a mutually beneficial collaboration with the AOs by collaboratively developing a library space that meets their needs and might help with reaching new target groups. Our key aspirations focused on expanding the library's outreach as well as engaging new groups, emphasizing its role in serving the broader community, including non-academics, as the library is perceived as being solely a university library with students being their only audience and overlooking its role as a state library also catering to the general public. The library's central location can help mitigate this perception if the provision of new multifunctional spaces and services for an array of events and target groups is secured. The new Carl von Ossietzky Forum as a space for gatherings, interaction and knowledge exchange is closing exactly this current gap. Creating a versatile and multifunctional space was very successful. However, as we are still in the process of establishing the space in the community, the integration of new user groups is still in the process.

## Evaluation

The success of the project will be evaluated using a variety of metrics, including networking opportunities, collaboration, the number of events hosted, the diversity of target groups, and overall interest from the university community in utilizing the space (evaluation phase). The functionality and flexibility of the space itself, particularly its ability to accommodate various event types through adaptable furniture and layouts, will also be key indicators of success. The evaluation process was collaborative and integrated throughout the project, with a multi-method approach planned for the final phase that is still ongoing. The evaluation framework includes observations and participant feedback (through an interactive feedback wall), and potentially user surveys as well as interviews to discuss users' experiences with the space. This comprehensive approach ensures all perspectives are considered. In general, a key success factor of the project is its interdisciplinary approach, which brought together diverse perspectives and skills. Each AO had different target groups and goals, but the project effectively aligned these through collaboration.

## Engagement and Collaboration

During the collaborative redesign process involving library staff, members from our AOs and end users, we included co-creation, co-design, co-production, and co-evaluation engagement methods. While the collaboration with our AOs was primarily co-creative, focusing on defining the project's direction, identifying end users, and determining how best to involve them, end users were mainly involved in the co-design process, sharing their expectations and ideas through brainstorming sessions, floor plan drawings, and prototyping. Six workshops allowed participants to share their expectations and ideas through brainstorming, floor plan drawings, and prototyping. A modified Design Thinking approach was tested with high school students. Additionally, an interactive feedback wall was installed in a popular area of the library to gather further user feedback. Additionally, an interactive panel wall was installed to gather ongoing student and other library users' feedback. In the ongoing co-productive phase, users

of the space are encouraged to appropriate the space, shaping and adapting it based on their evolving needs and interests, thereby playing an active role in the realization and delivery of the project. However, the extent to which this is achievable may be reduced or hindered by the somewhat limited access to the space, since opening hours and availability are currently limited. The project is moving toward co-evaluation, where AOs will be involved in assessing the space concerning events, while end users will provide feedback on their experiences. A survey will be distributed to project collaborators to get feedback on what else they would need or change, to inform ongoing developments. We have a workshop planned for the AOs and are in the process of setting up a survey to engage users in the co-evaluation phase through their feedback.

Throughout the initial phases of engagement, including co-creation and co-design, the library provided administrative support, financial backing, infrastructure, and technology that was assessed using the Collaboration Skills and Resources Checklist from the toolbox. At this stage, the State and University Library held the “ownership” of the space being the legal owner and patron of the project with all the relating responsibilities. As the project moved into the co-productive phase and further into the co-evaluative phase, the involvement of AOs has gradually increased. This marked a shift in the ‘ownership’ of the space, allowing members of the AOs and other users to appropriate it more fully. Ultimately, the ideal is for the space to function independently; as the library steps back, the AOs will take on a more active role.

The library contributed in two key areas; again, following the information collected through the Collaboration Skills and Resources Checklist. The first was designing and managing spaces; the second was regarding participatory projects. The library offered expertise related to participatory projects, particularly relevant for the AOs that were interested in understanding participatory processes but had no previous experience in the matter. The AOs contributed valuable knowledge about user groups, including the best outreach formats and strategies. End users provided insights into how they and their peers would use the space, serving as the experts on its practical needs. The level of commitment and energy required varied based on how deeply the AOs could engage. Their time and effort dedicated to the project were in addition to their regular workloads. Fortunately, although they initially had limited time, their involvement increased over time. While the project achieved significant co-design input, greater involvement from the AOs during this phase would have been ideal, though some participation occurred during the International Feedback Workshop, which was considered beneficial. Hence one lesson learned has been the importance of assessing how much time all participants can dedicate on top of their existing responsibilities and scheduling activities in advance to prevent them from being treated as side projects. This may require foresight, as the structure of the project was planned out in 2023—well before the project's commencement. A key takeaway is that effective engagement requires preplanning, communication between all relevant actors, time and dedicated effort.

## Reflections

In hindsight, longer-term involvement in the project would have been beneficial. The project's duration was relatively short which posed a big challenge for the iterative design of the project. Additional time would have made it possible to collaborate with all target groups in more diverse ways and at different phases of the project. End users also invested time by participating in workshops, but they had only one opportunity to contribute, which limited their ability to offer flexibility or explore multiple options. The structure of the project was essentially a "now or never" situation.

The overall approach emphasized a flat organizational structure among collaborators, as addressed in the Engagement Typology. End users were responsible for attending sessions, expressing their needs, and understanding the building and budget limitations. Participant selection involved AOs, with youth groups, professionals from the library, archive and museum area, as well as campus organizations invited to workshops through effective outreach. Users propose ideas that were seriously considered, and collaboration thrived when interests aligned. The participatory framework added considerable value by fostering transparent and inclusive engagement. Beyond the outcomes, the process itself was meaningful, teaching democratic principles and creating a space where small-scale democratic processes could be practiced. The project promoted open discussions, negotiation, and compromise, ensuring the space could continue supporting these collaborative efforts in the future. In retrospect, however, it might have been more successful to mix groups rather than separate them by the target audience, as this could have helped address conflicts of interest more effectively. Similarly, mixing staff with other target groups could have provided deeper insights into user needs. Additionally, exploring role-playing activities, where students could take on the role of the library director and vice versa, might have encouraged a more profound understanding of differing viewpoints.

User input was, of course, crucial for space design, with workshops facilitating feedback and implementation of ideas. Decisions about user input and ideas were made in consultation with the AOs and all relevant departments of the library. While feedback was actively solicited, final decisions often couldn't fully include user input due to time or other constraints (for example heritage protection laws, staff shortage etc.). One contentious issue has been the space's open hours as they are different from the general opening hours of the library. The general idea was to create an open and accessible space. However, due to the remote location within the library and limited resources, general opening hours from 9am until midnight like the main building are not possible at the moment which poses a challenge to our conceptual framework aspiring to creating an open and accessible space.

Overall, simultaneously working with and revising the tools was a demanding aspect of the project. In the end, it resulted in a multifunctional, and innovative space as well as practicable tools that can be repurposed by other institutions taking on similar challenges.

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