Engaging Users in Creating the Next Library Space
Innovative and Experimental Design

1. Introduction

The international round table with the title "Engaging users in creating the next library space" at the German Library Congress BiblioCon focused on the collaborative approach of the EU project Baltic Urban Knowledge Hubs (BALTIC UKH).[1] Building on the Wissen Bauen 2025 spatial development project at the State and University Library in Hamburg (summer 2020 to fall 2022), BALTIC UKH is an Interreg Baltic Sea Region initiative co-funded by the European Union, running from August 2023 to July 2025. The project seeks to involve users in the co-creative innovation of spatial and service concepts for future library spaces, envisioned as interconnected urban hubs for knowledge. Currently, the findings are being compiled into a research-based toolbox on user engagement for library professionals.

The four BALTIC UKH partner institutions – the State and University Library Hamburg (SUB), the National Library of Latvia (LNB), the Royal Danish Library (KB), and Oslo Metropolitan University (OsloMet) – served as panelists during the event. Representatives from these institutions made up four of the six panelists. Following opening remarks by the organizers, the OsloMet partner provided an overview of the toolbox's conceptual framework. This was followed by presentations on pilot projects from the other three partners: SUB, LNB, and KB, with insights shared from KB's branches in Aarhus/ Herning and Copenhagen. To foster knowledge exchange in library spatial and service developments, the round table included two additional perspectives beyond BALTIC UKH: the DH Lab, a collaboration between the Faculty for the Humanities at the University of Hamburg and SUB, and the Extended Library of the University of Fine Arts in Hamburg. Round table participants were presented with discussion questions at the beginning and end of the panel presentations to facilitate dialogue and elicit their experiences with co-creative processes.

This paper seeks to provide new insights into co-creative engagement approaches in diverse library projects by analyzing the reflections from the panel discussion and the contributions of the roundtable participants. It also explores the roles and skills of library professionals and users involved in these initiatives. These insights will inform the development of BALTIC UKH's research-based toolbox and enhance its practical relevance. Additionally, this paper and the forthcoming toolbox address the previous finding by Andresen et al. that highlights the rarity of systematic user engagement across libraries, archives, and museums (LAM sector), emphasizing the need to gather more experiences and develop effective strategies for productive user engagement.[2]

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1   This paper refers to the Hands-on Lab "Engaging users in creating the next library space – best ideas in innovative and experimental library space design" on 6 June 2024 at BiblioCon 2024 in Hamburg, Germany.

2   Andresen, Herbjørn; Huvila, Isto; Stokstad, Sigrid: Perceptions and Implications of User Participation and Engagement in Libraries, Archives and Museums, in: Audunson, Ragnar; Andresen, Herbjørn; Fagerlid, Cicilie et. al. (ed.): Libraries, Archives and Museums as Democratic Spaces in a Digital Age, Berlin; Boston 2020, p. 185–206. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110636628-009, last accessed: 17.07.2024.

The paper follows a structured approach: First, it presents the conceptual framework on co-creation. Second, it outlines the interactive round table methodology. Third, it provides detailed summaries of the projects presented during the round table. Fourth, it presents the findings and analysis from the panel discussion and the contributions of the round table participants. Finally, the discussion reflects on the conceptual aspects of these projects and initiatives.

2. Co-Creation and User Engagement: A Conceptual Framework

Co-creation involves collaborative processes where libraries work with their users and other groups to develop and refine services, programs, and spatial designs, benefiting both current and future users. Characterized by high levels of power-sharing and engagement, co-creation often involves users initiating projects. It emphasizes collaborative input on planning, design, and delivery through active contributions.[3]

While co-creation generally includes engagement in conceptualization, design, production, and evaluation,[4] for our purposes, it is defined as the initial phase of a multi-stage process, which includes co-design, co-production, and co-evaluation:

- Co-creation: Users engage in initial planning and conceptualization, developing strategies and ideas.[5]
- Co-design: Focuses on design, where library users, especially the future end-users, participate in ideation, prototyping, and testing.[6]
- Co-production: Involves implementing and delivering services or projects, with ongoing refinement based on collaborative user input.[7]
- Co-evaluation: Users collaboratively assess and evaluate services or projects, providing feedback for future improvements.

This framework extends Bransen and Honingh's conceptual division by splitting co-creation into two phases: co-creation and co-design, and adding co-production and co-evaluation. Co-evaluation, not specified in the literature, is included based on BALTIC UKH projects, which involve collaborators in the evaluations of the services and spaces. Importantly, the four proposed phases broadly address the general lifespan of a project: initiation, development, implementation, and evaluation.

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3   Brandsen, Taco; Honingh, Marlies: Definitions of Co-Production and Co-Creation, in: Brandsen, Taco; Steen, Trui; Verschuere, Bram (ed.): Co-Production and Co-Creation. Engaging Citizens in Public Services, New York 2018, p. 9–17. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315204956-2, last accessed: 12.08.2024; Huvila, Isto; Johnston, Jamie; Roued-Cunliffe, Henriette: LAMs and the Participatory Turn, in: Hvenegaard Rasmussen, Casper; Rydbeck, Kerstin; Larsen, Håkon (ed.): Libraries, Archives, and Museums in Transition, London 2022, p. 158–172. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003188834-15, last accessed: 17.07.2024.

4   Brandsen; Honingh: Definitions, 2018.

5   Ibid.

6   Hider, Philip; Garner, Jane; Godfrey, Ann et al.: Designing for Communities with Communities. A Public Library Codesign Project, in: Journal of the Australian Library and Information Association 73 (2), 2024, p. 148–176. https://doi.org/10.1080/24750158.2024.2332973, last accessed: 12.08.2024.

7   Brandsen; Honingh: Definitions, 2018.

2.1 Terminology

"Community" broadly refers to library users and relevant groups, including potential users, whereas "users" or "collaborators" refer to the individuals or groups directly involved in co-creative processes and for whom the services or spaces are being developed. In some cases, they are students – individuals or groups – and in other cases, they are local associations whose members are library users or potential/future library users (e.g. local history associations, student associations).

2.2 Panel Session and Methodological Integration: Informing the Development of the Toolbox

The panel discussion and the contributions of the round table participants served as a key element in the methodology for creating and refining the toolbox, ensuring the toolbox evolves in a way that is informed by real-world experiences and best practices. Although the toolbox is primarily being developed based on projects within academic libraries, the broader aim is to ensure its relevance and adaptability across a wide range of library types and potentially extend its utility to other public service and information sectors. This made the input from the diverse range of library professionals attending the round table particularly valuable.

During the round table, participants were divided into groups of 3-6 people per table, where they responded to three questions aimed at understanding their professional environments, roles, and experiences: 1. Do you work in a public or academic library? 2. Are you involved in co-creative or co-design processes with community organizations? 3. What roles do you play, and what skills do you use? These questions aimed to elicit insights on participants' professional context and previous experience with co-creative processes, as well as the skills they employ in this work.

The responses, which were recorded by round table participants as keywords, bullet points, and short sentences on large sheets of paper, were then analysed to identify common themes, trends, and general insights. These inputs – along with insights from the panel presentations and panel discussion takeaways – provide valuable data for refining the toolbox, ensuring that it meets the diverse needs of the library community and remains adaptable to various contexts.

3. Panel Session Projects and Initiatives: Innovating Library Services and Spaces

The following are short overviews of the six BiblioCon international round table panel presentations.

3.1 Creating a Space for Active Memory Culture at the State and University Library Hamburg

The SUB in Hamburg has transformed a reading room into a dynamic space for active memory culture, inspired by its namesake Carl von Ossietzky. The new "Forum" will be a multifunctional area for research and discourse, facilitating both direct and indirect communication, such as presentations, exhibitions, workshops, and discussions. The goal is to create a versatile environment for collaborative learning, socializing, and spontaneous debates, serving as a prototype for "Urban Knowledge Hubs". User engagement began with early input from professionals, library users, and high school students through partnerships with the three associated organizations: the Academy of Sciences and Human-

ities in Hamburg, the State Agency for Civic Education, and the Association for Hamburg History. Six workshops, including one digital session, 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.

3.2 Transforming the Latvian National Library: Creating a Dynamic Youth Space for the Future

LNB's recently updated building is set to enhance its youth space, the -15+ room, and improve its services to high school and college students. Despite its potential, the room is underutilized outside of special events. The Young Architects' Club ATELPA has collaborated on a modification concept, incorporating feedback from focus group interviews and creative workshops with students and staff. Planned improvements include flexible furniture arrangements, sound-absorbing solutions, and the installation of 3D printers to boost creativity. A contact point will be set up to inform users about events and opportunities. Efforts are also underway to increase the room's visibility within the library, addressing challenges in reaching young people through traditional channels like social media.

3.3 Cracking the Case in Copenhagen: Designing Library Services to Empower Student Success

The Faculty Library of Social Sciences at the University of Copenhagen, in partnership with the Learning Center, aims to enhance student support by developing services to increase digital competencies and reduce library anxiety. Two key initiatives were introduced: an interactive fiction game using Twine software[8] to teach Boolean searching through a narrative, and modular "library short-talks" for personalized information literacy training. The interactive game, *Murder in the Library*, engages students in a narrative that requires Boolean search strategies to solve a mystery, promoting skill-building in a fun, immersive way. The "library short-talks" provide tailored, concise modules to address students' specific needs and foster a personal connection to library services. These initiatives highlight the importance of libraries adapting their services in order to meet diverse student needs and expectations.

3.4 Sharing Cake and Transforming Herning's Library for Business and Community

Aarhus University's library in Herning has relocated to a central, smaller space to integrate with the Business Factory, supporting local innovation. The new library plan aims to create a flexible public space benefiting local businesses and the community. Student feedback was collected through various methods, including a "Cakes for Ideas" activity, where students shared ideas while enjoying cake. Insights from these activities emphasize the importance of focusing on individual student needs and community care. Two key projects are underway: a flexible physical data lab, and a library for prototypes and materials. The data lab, staffed in collaboration with course managers, will be available for multiple uses, with completion targeted for February 2025.

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8   Twine is an open-source tool for storytelling based on Boolean searches. For more information see https://twinery.org/, last accessed: 10.11.2024.

3.5 Crossdisciplinary Digital Humanities @the Philosophers' Tower

In 2024, the University of Hamburg launched the DH Lab for Digital Humanities in the renovated "Philosophers' Tower". This physical lab complements the virtual "Crossdisciplinary Lab Digital Humanities" and serves as a workshop area within the Humanities Library. Despite initial resistance and challenges in adapting existing furnishings, the lab features variable seating, a portable high desk, and displays with current materials and QR codes linking to digital DH resources. The planning process highlighted the need for early stakeholder involvement to prevent conflicts. While the lab's design was pragmatic, it lacked unique features to attract users beyond scheduled events. Success relies on the library's adaptability and collaborative efforts with users to establish the lab as a distinctive and functional space.

3.6 Transforming Tradition: The Extended Library as a Hub for Artistic and Social Innovation

The University of Fine Arts in Hamburg's Extended Library, inaugurated in October 2023, redefines the library as a space for artistic and social innovation. Spanning 150 sq m, this space supports transdisciplinary learning and knowledge production through performances, workshops, and seminars. It aims to integrate artistic research with contemporary formats, fostering active engagement and extended literacy. The Extended Library focuses on creating flexible environments for various activities, connecting different publics, and exploring the social functions of libraries. Key initiatives include applying artistic methods to knowledge production, creating frameworks for social encounters, and promoting collaborative thinking and practice.

4. Findings and Analysis

In response to the first round table question regarding the types of libraries where participants are employed, most indicated they were from public libraries, with smaller representations from academic and national libraries. For the second question, approximately a quarter of participants indicated prior experience with co-creative or co-design collaborations.

To gather insights on the skills and competencies participants use or anticipate using in their co-creative work, they discussed the third question with others at their tables and noted responses as keywords, bullet points, and short sentences on large sheets of paper at each table. These responses were then analysed and grouped, with the results presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Skills and Competencies Related to Co-Creative/Design Processes and Collaborations in Library Contexts

Guiding Ethos	• Empowerment • Openness/Inclusiveness – libraries for all • Empowered • Curiosity as a principle • Inquiring • Diversity: Different backgrounds
Organizational and Management Skills	• Organizational skills • Project Management skills • Resource management • Time management • Organizational arrangements • Organization at eye level

Personal and Interpersonal Skills	• Diplomatic skills • Active listening • Empathy • Communication skills • Openness • Social skills – methodical • Different understandings of terms and expectations
Facilitation and Moderation	• Moderator/Facilitator • Participation methods • Moderation • Facilitator • Transfer of knowledge or skills
Creative and Conceptual Skills	• Imagination/Creativity • Design background • Conceptualization • Creative • Creativity • Abstraction capacity
Promotion and Communication	• Communication • Promotion

Following the BiblioCon round table, the OsloMet Baltic UKH partner conducted a broad analysis of the panel session projects based on the skills and competencies identified in Table 1 and the co-creation and user engagement conceptual framework categories of co-creation, co-design, co-production and co-evaluation. The analysis of the panel projects and initiatives is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Analysis of Panel Projects and Initiatives

Copenhagen	Focus area: Library services Users: General student body, with a particular focus on struggling students Engagement: Co-productive, co-evaluation – users will be involved in service delivery by providing the input needed to tailor the services to their needs, and will actively contribute their input to the ongoing refinement of the services. Skills: • Library: Organizational and management skills; creative and conceptual skills • Users: Personal and interpersonal skills (communication of needs, provision of feedback)
Herning	Focus area: Library space and services Users: Students/library users Engagement: Co-creative, co-evaluation – users were involved in the initial planning and conceptualization, and will actively contribute their input to the ongoing refinement of the space and development of services. Skills: • Library: Organizational and management skills; facilitation and moderation; personal and interpersonal skills; promotion and communication • Users: Creative and conceptual skills/development of the space; personal and interpersonal skills (communication of needs, provision of feedback)
Hamburg	Focus area: Library space Users: Students/library users, local associations/users, and potential users Engagement: Co-creative, co-design, co-productive, co-evaluation – users were involved in the initial planning and conceptualization, as well as the design and layout of the space. They will appropriate and modify the use of the space, and will actively contribute their input to the ongoing refinement of the space.

	Skills: • Library: Organizational and management skills; facilitation and moderation; personal and interpersonal skills; promotion and communication • Users: Creative and conceptual skills; personal and interpersonal skills (communication of needs, provision of feedback)
Riga	Focus area: Library space Users: Students, student association/potential users Engagement: Co-creative, co-design, co-productive, co-evaluation – users were involved in the initial planning and conceptualization, as well as the design and layout of the space. They will appropriate and modify the use of the space, and will actively contribute their input to the ongoing refinement of the space. Skills: • Library: Organizational and management skills; facilitation and moderation; personal and interpersonal skills; promotion and communication • Users: Creative and conceptual skills; personal and interpersonal skills (communication of needs, provision of feedback)
DH Lab	Focus area: Library space Users: DH community, students, researchers Engagement: Co-productive, co-evaluation – library users will appropriate and modify the use of the space, and will actively contribute their input to the ongoing refinement of the space. Skills: • Library: Organizational and management skills; facilitation and moderation; personal and interpersonal skills; promotion and communication • Users: Creative and conceptual skills/use of the space; personal and interpersonal skills (communication of needs, provision of feedback)
Extended Library	Focus area: Library space Users: Students from the University of Fine Arts, performance artists, creative community Engagement: Co-productive, co-evaluation – library users will appropriate and modify the use of the space, and will actively contribute their input to the ongoing refinement of the space. Skills: • Library: Organizational and management skills; facilitation and moderation; personal and interpersonal skills; promotion and communication • Users: Creative and conceptual skills/use of the space; personal and interpersonal skills (communication of needs, provision of feedback)

5. Discussion

This section examines the diversity of approaches to co-creative user engagement across the projects discussed, highlighting differences in user involvement, levels of power-sharing, and the roles and skills contributed by both librarians and users. These findings provide insight into how libraries balance their decision-making authority with meaningful user input in shaping library spaces and services.

Overall, the majority of the projects presented at the BiblioCon international round table were centered on library spaces, with one focusing on services and one on both. Students and library users are the main groups involved in the projects, as they are the central target groups. Effectively, the six projects all aim to reach out to new user groups and enhance services for current users.

5.1 Co-creative Approaches to User Engagement

While all the projects can be seen as co-creative, there is much variation in how and when the project coordinators engage users. Project coordinators in Hamburg and Riga are engaging users throughout the entire project, from conceptualization to design, production, and evaluation. The project at Herning is similar, however, the design phase was handed over to architects, based on user input gathered in the initiation and conceptualization stages. Interestingly, the project at Copenhagen, the DH Lab, and the Extended Library are all library-initiated and developed projects that utilize co-creative user engagement in the last two phases of the projects: production and evaluation. Users will appropriate and provide input for implementing the services and spaces and be involved in the ongoing evaluation and refinement of the spaces and services. These findings have significant implications for user participation and power-sharing. Co-creation is typically characterized by high levels of power-sharing and engagement.[9] The projects discussed at the panel session are all initiated and led by libraries, giving them the ultimate decision-making authority. However within the established parameters, users influence the creation, planning, implementation, and evaluation of services and spaces to varying degrees. This level of power-sharing corresponds to consultation and placation, and potentially some elements of partnership, as outlined in Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation.[10] Consultation involves meetings and public inquiries with individuals or groups, while placation occurs when individuals or groups advise or plan, but power-holders retain the right to judge the feasibility or legitimacy of the advice. These two levels are evident in the projects: users play significant roles in shaping them while the libraries have the ultimate decision-making power. Partnership could be achieved if planning and decision-making responsibilities are shared through joint committees or similar mechanisms. Accordingly, consultation and placation are considered moderate forms of participation, whereas partnership would be considered to be the starting point for higher-level participation in which actual power sharing – the ability to make decisions – begins.

The level of power-sharing and participation will necessarily vary depending on the aims and goals of the project and the individuals and groups involved. As stated by Nina Simon in her work on museums and participation – which has been widely utilized in the library sector – the level of power-sharing should be tailored to the project and those involved.[11] The Copenhagen project mainly uses consultation as the student group is dispersed and known to be struggling, thereby making more significant levels of power-sharing challenging and possibly counterproductive. In contrast, the projects at Hamburg and Riga both employ placation and possibly edge into partnership as the individuals and groups they are working with are well-defined and established.

9   Huvila; Johnston; Roued-Cunliffe: LAMs, 2022.
10   Arnstein, Sherry R.: A Ladder of Citizen Participation, in: Journal of the American Institute of Planners 35 (4), 1969, p. 216–224. https://doi.org/10.1080/01944366908977225, last accessed: 17.07.2024.
11   Simon, Nina: The Participatory Museum, Santa Cruz 2010.

5.2 Bring your Creativity: Roles and Skills Utilized in Co-Creative Collaborations

Previous research has shown that librarians assume a variety of roles that require diverse skills and competencies within their professional roles as librarians.[12] Within the co-creative projects, this also appears to be the case. The primary skills libraries contribute to the co-creative collaborations are organizational and management skills, facilitation and moderation, personal and interpersonal skills, as well as promotion and communication. The users they engage with primarily contribute creative and conceptual skills as well as personal and interpersonal skills. The heavy reliance on personal and interpersonal skills by both librarians and the users they engage with is likely a result of the high levels of engagement that characterize co-creative collaborations. This may be less in other types of user engagement and participatory activities, such as crowdsourcing where the library staff and users may not always be in direct contact. Importantly, the skill contributions identified in the projects reflect the power-sharing dynamics discussed above – that the projects discussed at the panel session are all initiated and led by libraries, giving them the ultimate decision-making authority, and user engagement is primarily carried out through consultation and placation, and possibly partnership to some degree. Users are mainly tasked with identifying their needs and interests for library spaces and services, as well as providing the creative inputs needed for the innovation of services and spaces to meet those needs and interests.

These preliminary findings align closely with previous research in Norway and Sweden on LAM professionals' roles and attitudes toward user participation. This research indicates that LAM professionals view their roles in participatory endeavors as relating to the imparting, sharing, and dissemination of knowledge and information, thus serving as intermediary agents or facilitators. They generally perceive user participation as a form of power-sharing, outsourcing, and engaging experts, often seeing it as involving low to moderate power-sharing with users.[13] Similar findings indicated LAM professionals in the Scandinavian countries (Norway, Sweden, and Denmark) favored retaining curatorial responsibility within institutions while supporting user engagement as contributors of additional information and involving them in dialogue.[14] Importantly, these findings raise questions about who holds expertise in participatory, co-creative endeavors: librarians or users, a point for further investigation.[15]

12 Johnston, Jamie; Pálsdóttir, Ágústa; Mierzecka, Anna et al.: Public Librarians' Perception of their Professional Role and the Library's Role in Supporting the Public Sphere: a Multi-Country Comparison, in: Journal of Documentation 78 (5), 2022, p. 1109–1130. https://doi.org/10.1108/JD-09-2021-0178, last accessed: 19.07.2024; Khosrowjerdi, Mahmood; Johnston, Jamie; Rydbeck, Kerstin et al.: Professional Identity of Public Librarians, Archivists and Museum Professionals in Five European Countries, in: Journal of Documentation 80 (6), 2024, p. 1570–1596. https://doi.org/10.1108/JD-03-2024-0060, last accessed: 17.07.2024.

13 Johnston, Jamie; Huvila, Isto; Jochumsen, Henrik et al.: LAM Professionals' Roles and Attitudes to User Participation in Norway and Sweden, in: Library & Information Science Research 45 (3), 2023, 101249. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lisr.2023.101249, last accessed: 17.07.2024.

14 Andresen; Huvila; Stokstad: Perceptions, 2020.

15 Westberg Gabriel, Lýsa; Jensen, Thessa: Who is the Expert in Participatory Culture?, in: Roued-Cunliffe, Henriette; Copeland, Andrea (ed.): Participatory Heritage, London 2017, p. 87–96.

6. Conclusion

The co-creative projects discussed at the round table event demonstrate varying phases and degrees of user engagement and power-sharing, influenced by project goals and communities. While libraries retain decision-making authority, user contributions shape services and spaces through consultation and placation, with some projects nearing partnership. This reflects moderate participation, aligning with research showing that library professionals view user participation as a source of additional information, creativity, and ideas, balancing their roles as intermediaries and facilitators. These elements will be incorporated into the toolbox to help librarians and service providers reflect on user engagement phases, power-sharing degrees, and contributed skills.

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