

Co-Creating Transformative Capacity: The Tandem-Based Urban Lab in Würzburg as a Model for Just Transitions in Mid-Sized Cities

Nicola Oswald ⁽¹⁾ - Levi Rhomberg ⁽¹⁾

⁽¹⁾ University Of Würzburg, Sustainability Lab Wuelab, Würzburg, Germany

Keywords: urban transformation, co-creation, experimentation, mid-sized city

Abstract Experimental project designs have become a cornerstone of contemporary approaches to just urban sustainability transformation. However, the majority of such initiatives remain concentrated in well-resourced metropolitan areas. The project Transformationslabor Stadt und Universität Würzburg, funded by the initiative “Transformationslabor Hochschule” (Stifterverband) and embedded within the WueLAB Sustainability Lab at the University of Würzburg, presents a novel approach tailored to the specific needs and capacities of a mid-sized city. It builds on the idea that sustainable urban transformations require not only innovative solutions but also lasting collaboration infrastructures and shared cultures of knowledge production.

At the heart of the Würzburg model is a tandem-based structure: four interdisciplinary teams—each with one representative from the city administration and one from the University of Würzburg—collaborate for one year on urban transformation topics. In professionally facilitated workshops, they develop a shared vocabulary, mutual understanding of institutional logics, and a co-creative space for scientifically grounded planning proposals. The project aims to create an environment for the most equitable transformation possible, acknowledging that such processes tend to produce both winners and losers (Duncan et al., 2018).

This talk shares insight into a research project examining the Würzburg model and its potential for driving urban sustainability transformations. It contrasts this with the transformation experiment ‘Würzburger Zukunftsrat’, which investigates the participatory format of the ‘Bürgerrat’. The roles of central institutions, stakeholders and the four tandem teams in connection to building transformative capacity at the science-policy interface are essential for the research project. Drawing on current insights from sustainability and transformation research—including notions of co-production (Mauser et al., 2013), transdisciplinary knowledge integration (Lang et al., 2012), and trust-based experimentation (Wolfram, 2016)—qualitative methods are used focussing on the core dimensions: (1) how structured tandems can overcome systemic barriers, (2) which challenges exist for transformative sustainability projects, (3) how mid-sized cities can adapt urban lab models, and (4) which competencies are essential to foster inclusive experimentation networks.

Early outcomes from experimental projects at the WueLAB show that relational infrastructures, such as tandem partnerships & facilitated dialogue formats, are not auxiliary but central to transformative urban governance. They open up new pathways for collaborative learning, legitimation, and sustained innovation. By bridging disciplinary, institutional, and cultural divides, the “Transformationslabor” offers a replicable model for peripheral or mid-sized cities striving for just sustainable urban

futures.