

How civic claims become planning problems: civil society, institutions, and urban governance. Three urban initiative cases in Bulgaria.

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1. Introduction

Over the past decades, the relationship between civil society organisations and public institutions has become a central concern in urban studies, planning theory, and policy-oriented research. Civic initiatives, grassroots movements, and non-governmental organisations are increasingly involved in articulating claims about public space, environmental protection, mobility, heritage, and quality of urban life. At the same time, public institutions continue to hold formal authority over spatial planning, regulation, and resource allocation. Both spheres are, in different ways, expected

to represent citizens and act in the public interest. Yet their interaction remains analytically unsettled.

Much of the existing literature approaches this relationship through oppositional or scalar framings: conflict vs. collaboration, confrontation vs. co-production or formal institutions versus informal civic action. While these perspectives have been productive, they tend

This paper examines how civic claims acquire institutional relevance in urban planning beyond the dichotomy of conflict versus collaboration. It proposes an interpretive framework combining civic translation capacity, institutional learning capacity, and a public problems perspective to analyse how urban issues become legible within planning systems. The framework is applied to three civic initiatives in Bulgaria (Stara Zagora, Varna,

and Sofia) through process tracing, document analysis, and media sources. The comparison shows that planning outcomes depend less on the confrontational or cooperative character of civic action than on the interaction between the capacity to translate spatial concerns into institutionally recognisable claims and the ability of institutions to learn from and act upon them. The paper offers a transferable analytical matrix for studying civil society–institution relations in urban governance.

to reduce complex, long-term interactions to normative positions or episodic outcomes. The limitation of such dichotomies is not that they are empirically false, but that they focus analytical attention on the visible form of civic-institution interaction rather than on the processes through which civic claims become institutionally legible, retained, or transformed. Conflict and collaboration often coexist within the same trajectory, while participatory and resistant practices may be mobilised by the same actors at different moments. As a result, these oppositions frequently describe outcomes or interaction styles rather than the mechanisms through which urban public problems acquire institutional consequences. The paper implies that a productive analytical discussion of the urban space-civil society intersection could go beyond the presence or

absence of conflict and beyond the thematic content of civic demands. Urban conflicts frequently emerge not because institutions reject civic values per se, but rather because such values struggle to enter existing planning instrumental frameworks, regulatory categories, or organisational routines. Conversely, collaboration may occur without substantive transformation when civic engagement remains legible solely as temporary participation, consultation, or project-based activation of resources.

Thus, the paper proposes an interpretative matrix that focuses on two interrelated dimensions: the capacity of civic actors to translate lived (and living) spatial concerns into institutionally recognisable claims, and the capacity of institutions to learn from, adapt to, or reorganise around such claims. This interaction generally leads to responsive mechanisms that regulate whether civic issues are dismissed, temporarily accommodated, absorbed without change, or managed as sustainable planning decisions.

To deepen this analysis, the paper draws on the notion of public problems as socially constructed processes rather than pre-given issues. From this perspective, parks, streets, or public spaces may become planning objects due to the way they are being framed, narrated, contested, and stabilised through specific institutional and civic practices.

2. Theoretical rationale

Urban planning scholarship has long challenged the view of planning as a purely technical or administrative activity, emphasising instead its political and interpretive nature (Davidoff, 1965; Forester, 1999). Recent debates have increasingly focused on the conditions under which civic claims become institutionally intelligible and capable of shaping planning outcomes. This concern resonates with broader discussions of legibility and translation in governance, where social demands must be rendered recognisable within administrative, legal, and procedural frameworks in order to acquire political traction.

The relationship between institutions and civil society in urban planning can be understood as a reciprocal process in which legibility and narrative construction are mutually constitutive. Planners and officials translate diverse forms of situated knowledge into categories, maps, and procedures that can be administered and evaluated, while civic actors, experts, and political entrepreneurs frame certain conditions as public problems and marginalise others. Together, these processes shape what institutions can perceive, learn from, and act upon. This section outlines the theoretical foundations of both dimensions.

First, the notion of legibility originates most prominently in James C. Scott's analysis of how modern states simplify complex social realities in order to govern them (1998). While

Scott emphasises the risks of domination and simplification, planning scholars have adapted this insight to examine how civic demands are translated into planning categories, project formats, and policy instruments that enable institutional engagement while simultaneously constraining political imagination (Hajer, 1995; Porter, 2014). Legibility thus operates as a double-edged process: it allows civic issues to enter decision-making arenas while subjecting them to institutional filtering, prioritisation, and depoliticisation.

At the same time, institutions are increasingly conceptualised as heterogeneous and dynamic rather than monolithic. Research on equity planning highlights the capacity of individual planners to adopt normative and redistributive positions within institutional settings (Krumholz, 1982). Communicative planning theory emphasises dialogue, mediation, and reflexivity in navigating conflicts between competing rationalities (Forester, 1999; Healey, 1997), while more recent work examines how planning institutions adapt through experimentation, feedback, and interaction with external actors (Balducci & Mäntysalo, 2013; Salet, 2018).

However, institutional learning remains uneven and contingent. Institutions often struggle to accommodate claims that challenge established regulatory frameworks or power relations (Porter, 2014; Watson, 2014). Civic demands may therefore be selectively recog-

nised, temporarily accommodated, or redirected into procedural formats that limit their transformative potential. Civil society-institution relations are consequently shaped by the interaction between two capacities: the ability of civic actors to translate lived spatial concerns into institutionally legible claims, and the ability of institutions to learn from and re-organise around such claims. This interaction generates outcomes ranging from durable co-production to symbolic participation or persistent conflict.

A complementary strand of scholarship conceptualises urban conflicts and claims not as responses to self-evident problems, but as processes through which public problems are constructed, stabilised, and contested. This perspective draws on John Dewey's understanding of publics as emerging around shared consequences of action rather than pre-existing social groups (Dewey, 1927). Public problems arise when individual experiences are articulated as collective concerns requiring institutional attention.

Subsequent work in sociology and policy studies has examined how problems are framed, narrated, and legitimised through discourse, expertise, and symbolic representation (Gusfield, 1981; Stone, 1989). Policy narratives link causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and proposed solutions into coherent stories capable of mobilising audiences and influencing decision-makers (Hajer, 1995). Problem con-

struction is not only discursive but also performative, involving events, demonstrations, visual materials, and media circulation that sustain public attention over time.

In urban contexts, the construction of public problems is inseparable from space. Parks, streets, and neighbourhoods function as material anchors around which narratives, emotions, and claims coalesce. Research on urban social movements and the "right to the city" shows how spatial claims both enable the formation of publics and expose conflicts over access, representation, and authority (Purcell, 2008; Swyngedouw, 2014). These struggles often unfold through forms of agonistic planning, where conflict is not eliminated but channelled as a productive democratic force (Mouffe, 2005; Watson, 2014).

Yet public problems remain fragile achievements. They may fail to stabilise, fragment into competing frames, or be redirected into depoliticised forms such as pilot projects or temporary interventions. Media attention, institutional uptake, and organisational capacity all shape whether an issue persists as a public problem or remains an episodic civic performance. The trajectory of urban public problems therefore offers important insight into how civil society action interacts with institutional structures over time.

Building on these two strands, this paper explores how the construction of urban public problems interacts with the legibility of civic

Relational matrix for legibility and institutional learning.

Fig. 1

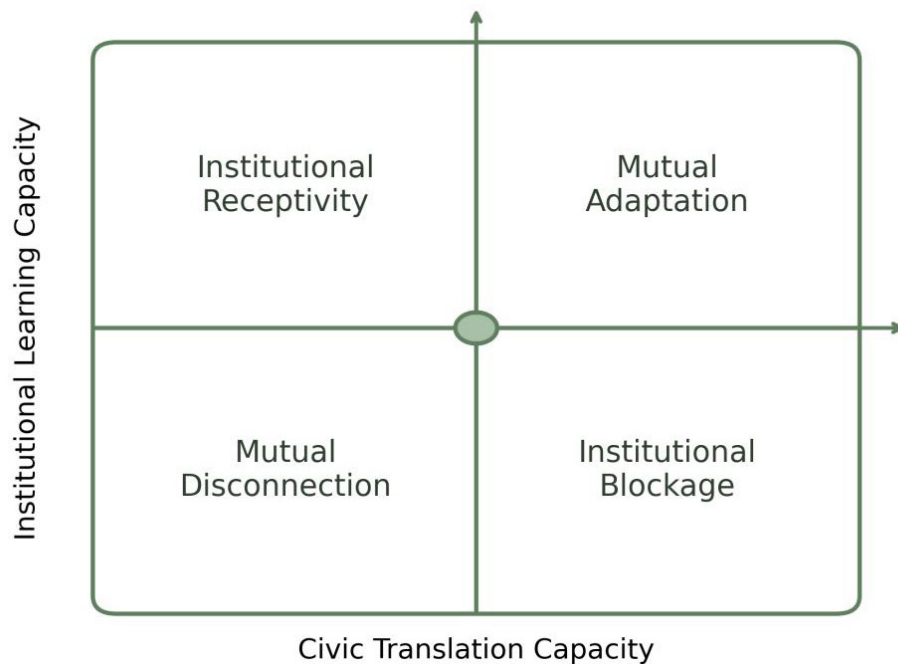
claims and the learning capacities of institutions. By tracing civic initiatives over time, it examines how issues are framed, translated, stabilised, or blocked, and how these processes shape recurring patterns of interaction between civil society and urban institutions.

3. Legibility and institutional learning: a relational matrix

Building on the preceding rationale, this paper proposes a four-quadrant matrix to analyse civil society-institution relations in urban planning. The matrix is structured around two analytically distinct but interdependent dimensions: civic translation capacity and institutional learning capacity. This analytical structure is intended as an interpretive device to identify recurring patterns in how urban public problems are articulated, processed, and stabilised over time, instead of classifying actors or cities normatively. The matrix is to be understood as an interpretive approach rather than a predictive or explanatory theory. Its purpose is not to establish deterministic causal relationships between civic action and planning outcomes, nor to classify cities, institutions, or civic actors into fixed categories. Rather, it sensitises analysis to recurring patterns through which civic claims become institutionally legible and through which institutions respond, adapt, or fail to adapt to those claims. The structure therefore operates as an analytical lens for interpreting trajec-

ries of interaction rather than as a typology or evaluative framework.

Civic translation capacity refers to the ability of civic actors to render lived spatial concerns legible within institutional planning terms and instruments. This includes the production of narratives, documents, visualisations, and organisational forms that align experiential claims with recognisable policy categories, legal frameworks, or administrative competences (Hajer, 1995; Stone, 1989). Translation does not imply ideological alignment with institutional agendas; rather, it denotes the capacity to move between vernacular, affective, and technical registers in ways that allow claims to circulate across arenas. Scholars of social movements and planning have shown that such translation work is crucial for sustaining issues over time and preventing their marginalisation as “emotional,” “local,” or “non-expert” concerns (Gusfield, 1981; Purcell, 2008). Institutional learning capacity denotes the ability of planning institutions to recognise, interpret, and reorganise around emerging civic claims. This includes not only the openness of individual planners to dialogue (Forster, 1999), but also organisational flexibility, regulatory adaptability, and the willingness to experiment with new formats of engagement (Healey, 1997; Balducci & Mäntysalo, 2013). Institutional learning is shaped by political mandates, legal constraints, and resource availability, and is often uneven across depart-



ments and governance levels (Salet, 2018). As several scholars have noted, institutions may selectively learn from civic engagement while maintaining core power structures, resulting in partial or symbolic incorporation of civic demands (Porter, 2014; Watson, 2014).

Plotted together, these dimensions could be presented as to generate four ideal-typical configurations that serve as analytical reference points:

1. **Institutional receptivity.** This configuration is characterised by institutions that display openness to participation, experimentation, and dialogue, while civic claims remain relatively fragmented, episodic, or weakly translated into institutionally legible forms. Institutional actors may create opportunities for engagement, consultation, or collaborative discussion, yet the absence of sustained civic translation limits the

capacity of these interactions to reshape planning agendas. Participation tends to take the form of consultation, activation, or project-based involvement rather than the consolidation of durable public problems. Scholars have described similar dynamics as forms of “participation without politics,” where institutional responsiveness outpaces civic problem articulation (Purcell, 2008; Swyngedouw, 2014).

2. **Mutual adaptation.** This configuration represents the strongest alignment between civic translation and institutional learning. Civic actors succeed in rendering public problems legible through narratives, proposals, organisational forms, and planning-relevant claims, while institutions demonstrate the capacity to interpret, retain, and act upon these inputs. The result may include negotiated planning change, durable forms

of co-production, new governance arrangements, or procedural innovation. Conflict is not necessarily absent, but it becomes productive within an agonistic framework that allows disagreement to contribute to institutional learning rather than generate stalemate (Mouffe, 2005; Watson, 2014).

3. **Mutual disconnection.** This configuration is characterised by weak translation and limited institutional learning. Civic concerns struggle to stabilise as public problems or to enter planning arenas in recognisable forms, while institutions remain reliant on rigid procedures, established routines, or dismissive responses to civic input. The result is often mutual frustration, low trust, and limited interaction between civic and institutional actors. Urban conflicts in this configuration may dissipate, remain localised, or become increasingly polarised without generating durable planning consequences.
4. **Institutional blockage.** In this configuration, civic actors succeed in constructing compelling public problems and institutionally legible claims, yet encounter institutions that are unable or unwilling to reorganise around them. Public problems may achieve visibility, mobilise support, and circulate through administrative channels, while institutional responses remain partial, delayed, or procedural. The result is often prolonged contention, repeated mobilisation, legal disputes, or cycles of engagement that fail

to produce structural change. This dynamic resonates with critiques of participatory processes that absorb civic energy without substantive transformation (Scott, 1998; Porter, 2014).

These configurations are dynamic tendencies, as civic initiatives and institutions may move across quadrants over time as narratives evolve, organisational capacities shift, or political conditions change. The four configurations should be understood as heuristic reference points within a relational field rather than fixed empirical categories. Civic initiatives and institutions may occupy intermediate positions, combine characteristics associated with multiple configurations, or move between them as narratives, organisational capacities, and political conditions evolve.

4. Methodology and case selection

4.1 Analytical strategy: operationalising legibility, learning, and public problems

The empirical analysis applies the proposed relational matrix as a process-oriented interpretive framework whose aim is to trace movements across quadrants over time, as civic claims evolve and institutional responses shift.

For each case, analysis focuses on three inter-related analytical dimensions:

1. Construction of the public problem

Drawing on the public problems literature (Dewey; Gusfield; Stone; Hajer), the analysis

examines how initially localised or experiential concerns are articulated as collective urban problems. Empirical attention is paid to:

- how the issue is named (“park,” “river,” “public space,” “quality of life”);
- which values are foregrounded (ecological, social, cultural, climatic, symbolic);
- how audiences are mobilised (citizens, experts, media, institutions);
- and how the problem’s scope shifts over time (from local to citywide, from cultural to planning-related, etc.).

This dimension captures whether and how a civic issue stabilises as a recognisable public problem, or whether it remains episodic, fragmented, or weakly articulated.

2. Civic translation capacity

Civic translation capacity is operationalised through the forms and instruments used by civic actors to render their claims legible to institutions. Indicators include:

- use of planning-related language, legal categories, or policy references;
- production of documents, proposals, visualisations, or alternative plans;
- creation of organisational formats that interface with institutions (forums, partnerships, working groups);
- shifts from affective or symbolic repertoires toward technical or procedural ones (or vice versa).

Rather than treating translation as a binary success or failure, the analysis traces how

translation work intensifies, changes register, or becomes routinised across different moments in the case trajectory.

3. Institutional learning capacity

Institutional learning capacity is assessed through observable institutional responses rather than stated intentions. These include:

- formal recognition of civic actors (invitations, public statements, joint events);
- procedural adjustments (new consultation formats, pilot projects, planning amendments);
- creation of intermediary arrangements (temporary uses, task forces, experimental governance);
- or, conversely, procedural closure, delay, or selective incorporation of claims.

This dimension allows the analysis to distinguish between symbolic responsiveness and substantive institutional reorganisation.

At each key moment in a case’s trajectory, the interaction between civic translation capacity and institutional learning capacity is assessed, allowing the matrix to be used heuristically to interpret shifts in the relationship between civic translation and institutional learning over time. The public problem lens provides the transversal aspect: it explains why certain claims gain traction, lose momentum, or mutate as they encounter institutional boundaries. It is also important to note that civic actors should not be understood as coherent or unified entities. Civic initiatives often contain

competing priorities, forms of expertise, and strategic orientations. The matrix therefore treats both institutions and civil society as internally differentiated fields whose capacities emerge through interaction rather than as stable attributes of homogeneous actors. To illustrate how the analytical dimensions are

applied, Table 1 presents an indicative operationalisation across the three cases examined in this study. The table serves as a comparative guide linking the analytical concepts to the empirical material, while detailed descriptions of the cases and their trajectories are presented in the following section.

Analytical Dimension	Indicators	Bedeckha	VarnaSpaces	The Collective
Public problem stabilisation	Visibility, narrative coherence, media circulation, scale of mobilisation, persistence over time	High	Medium	High
Civic translation capacity	Planning language, formal proposals, institutional interfaces, technical framing	High	Medium-High	High
Institutional learning capacity	Procedural adaptation, incorporation of claims, new governance arrangements, retention over time	Low-Medium	Medium	Medium-High
Indicative configuration	Interaction of translation and learning capacities	Institutional Blockage	Institutional Receptivity	Mutual Adaptation (partial/selective)

Operationalisation of analytical dimensions and indicative positioning of cases

Tab. 1

Given the paper's focus on legibility and institutional learning as mechanisms shaping civil society-institution relations, the empirical strategy prioritises process tracing and public problem analysis. The study draws on (1) civic organisations' published materials (websites, position statements, timelines, calls, event documentation), (2) institutional documents (municipal announcements, planning notices, official referendum documentation), and (3) media coverage (national and local outlets) as evidence of how issues are framed, translated, and routed through institutional arenas. This approach treats public controversies and civic initiatives as discursive-institutional trajectories: evolving sequences of claim-making, institutional response, and changes in organisational repertoires.

The paper examines three cases followed over several years, selected because of their different local contexts but similar goals and operational fields: different cities and issue domains, but comparable dynamics of problem construction, claim translation, and institutional routing. These cases were selected to capture different modes of civic engagement with planning institutions. Bedechka, VarnaSpaces, and The Collective represent, respectively, conflict-centred mobilisation, deliberative mediation, and culture-led urbanism. While differing in scale, repertoire, and issue domain, all three cases involve attempts to translate civic concerns into institutionally leg-

ible planning objects and therefore provide analytically comparable examples through which to explore the interaction between civic translation capacity, institutional learning capacity, and the construction of urban public problems.

Bedechka Park, Stara Zagora

Stara Zagora is a mid-sized city in central southern Bulgaria, with a population of approximately 150,000 inhabitants. It is situated in the Upper Thracian Plain, one of the country's hottest regions, which makes green infrastructure and urban ecology particularly salient planning issues. The city is known for its strong XX century industrial and energy sector, as well as for its modernist urban layout following post-war reconstruction, combined with significant archaeological and cultural heritage. Bedechka represents a long-running civic mobilisation around the preservation of a major urban green area along the Bedechka river. It is publicly documented through the civic platform "Preserve Bedechka" which archives the movement's actions and interpretations of the case. The case is also strongly institutionalised through the local referendum of 18 June 2017, including official municipal announcements and the official referendum results published by Bulgaria's electoral administration. In addition, the controversy generated formal planning procedures, including municipal notices concerning amendments to detailed planning instruments for the "Be-

dechka" territory. In 2020 was released the documentary movie "The case Bedechka" and had screenings across the European union and in 2025 the mobilisation around the park cause entered broader public and cultural arenas through national-level information releases and European-level recognition (Europa Nostra/European Heritage Awards).

VarnaSpaces, Varna

Varna is Bulgaria's third-largest city, with a population of around 330,000, located on the Black Sea coast in the northeastern part of the country. It functions as a major port city and regional economic hub, with a diversified profile combining tourism, maritime industries, higher education, and cultural life. Varna's urban development is strongly shaped by coastal pressures, seasonal population fluctuations, and competing interests around public space, mobility, and land use. VarnaSpaces is selected as a case of civic engagement oriented toward institution-facing dialogue: organising public discussions and structured encounters with decision-makers, and raising citizen capacity to engage in planning-related debates. Evidence for this role is available through the organisation's public presence and through municipal announcements of the "Forum for Varna" programme, explicitly identifying VarnaSpaces as organiser and framing the forum as an arena for communities, empowerment, and urban environment debates. A flagman

initiative of the organisation, the "Forum for Varna", is a participatory initiative for citizen involvement in urban planning and documents the public arguments voiced in these discussions. The case is also described in a European good-practice documentation report, providing an externally authored account of goals, challenges, and organisational features.

The Collective (Rivers of the City initiative), Sofia

Sofia, the capital and largest city of Bulgaria, has a population of approximately 1.3 million inhabitants and is located in the western part of the country, at the foot of the Vitosha mountain. As the political, administrative, and economic centre, Sofia concentrates national institutions, decision-making power, and a large share of cultural and civic organisations. The city is characterised by rapid urbanisation, infrastructural strain, and pronounced spatial inequalities, making it a key arena for civic initiatives addressing environmental, social, and cultural issues. Although "The Collective" is based in Sofia, they initiate raising awareness events and culture-led festivals along city rivers in many different cities across Bulgaria. The Collective is selected as an example of civic urbanism that operates through cultural-educational programming and tactical interventions to reshape public attention and institutional agendas, especially around rivers and riverbank spaces as ecological, social, and

Indicative trajectories of civic translation and institutional learning across cases

Tab. 2

Case	Public problem emergence	Stabilisation and routing	Current trajectory	Interpretation within the matrix
Bedeckka	Public problem formation: civic mobilisation	Referendum and institutional confrontation	Partial recognition but continued contestation	Increasing translation capacity; uneven institutional learning
VarnaSpaces	Creation of deliberative forums	Periodic engagement with municipal actors	Selective uptake of discussions and proposals	Moderate translation and moderate learning
The Collective	Cultural activation of river issues	Expansion through partnerships and projects	Institutional collaborations and wider visibility	High translation through project formats; selective learning

symbolic urban infrastructures. The organisation describes “Rivers of the City” as a long-term initiative that first started in 2020, aimed at transforming cities’ relationships with their rivers and spreading across multiple Bulgarian cities. The initiative’s public materials include open calls and documented interventions, and the group explicitly frames its work as bridging citizens, experts, and institutions.

Across the three cases, the research seeks to explore how civic actors construct public problems, attempt to translate them into institutionally legible planning objects, and how institutions respond – through learning, partial uptake, procedural closure, or continued contestation.

Below is a table that summarizes the principal shifts and continuities observed across the

three cases. It is designed to illustrate how changing combinations of civic translation and institutional learning capacities shape different civic-institutional trajectories over time.

5. Empirical analysis

The relational matrix is applied in this section to the three cases introduced above. The analysis examines how public problems are constructed, how civic actors translate claims into institutionally legible forms, and how institutions respond through varying degrees of learning, adaptation, or resistance. The analysis aims to explore how different combinations of civic translation and institutional learning capacities generate distinct civic-institutional trajectories.

The three cases analysed in this paper: Be-

dechka Park (Stara Zagora), VarnaSpaces (Varna) and The Collective's river-focused initiatives, illustrate why the relations between civil society and institutions in urban planning cannot be fully explained through the dichotomies of conflict-collaboration or majority-minority interests. Across all cases, civic actors engage institutions through shifting combinations of contestation, dialogue, and partnership. What differentiates trajectories is less the presence of conflict as such than the interaction between two mechanisms: the translation of civic concerns into institutionally legible forms, and the capacity of institutions to learn from, adapt to, or reorganise around those concerns. The public problems lens helps specify how these mechanisms become visible: issues gain traction when they are stabilised as public problems, and they gain institutional consequences when they become legible planning objects that can travel through administrative procedures.

Bedeckha: a stabilised public problem meets uneven institutional learning

Bedeckha exemplifies a case in which the public problem is strongly stabilised: through sustained mobilisation, media visibility, and symbolic framing of the park as a collective urban good tied to wellbeing, environment, and climate adaptation. The referendum moment marks a peak in civic translation capacity: the issue is narrated and routed into formal politi-

cal-institutional channels and rendered legible through the grammar of local democratic procedure. In the matrix's terms, Bedeckha moves toward the quadrant characterised by high civic translation capacity, since the civic initiative repeatedly produces institutional-facing instruments (formal campaigning, procedural engagement, and public legitimacy claims).

Yet the long-term trajectory shows that high civic translation does not guarantee institutional uptake. Institutional responses fluctuate between partial recognition and procedural closure, producing a pattern of protracted contention rather than durable co-production. This indicates comparatively low-to-uneven institutional learning capacity: institutions may acknowledge the issue but at the same time struggle to translate it into stable planning commitments that reconcile competing mandates (property regimes, development pressure, and public interest claims). In terms of the integrated matrix, Bedeckha reveals a key asymmetry: even when a public problem becomes highly visible and morally compelling, its institutional consequences depend on whether institutions can reorganise around it without reducing it to a procedural obstacle or an exceptional case.

Thus, Bedeckha illustrates a trajectory characterised by increasingly strong civic translation capacity combined with uneven institutional learning. The case demonstrates that the successful stabilisation of a public problem

does not automatically generate institutional change. Instead, the trajectory highlights how public visibility and institutional retention may diverge, producing prolonged contention despite sustained civic mobilisation.

VarnaSpaces: deliberative publics as translation devices, with fragile institutionalisation

VarnaSpaces differs from Bedechka in that it is less anchored in one dramatic conflict object and more oriented toward building deliberative capacity around diffuse public space concerns. Here, the formation of publics is itself a method: forums and public discussions function as devices for stabilising urban issues as shared problems, and for producing a civic vocabulary that can interface with institutional actors. This gives VarnaSpaces a distinctive form of civic translation capacity—not primarily through legal confrontation, but through agenda-setting, mediated debate, and the creation of spaces where institutional representatives can appear, listen, and be publicly accountable.

Institutional learning in this case tends to be moderate and episodic: authorities may participate in public events, accept dialogue formats, and occasionally incorporate proposals or priorities, yet outcomes remain fragile and often dependent on political cycles, individual openness, or limited administrative windows. In the relational matrix, this places VarnaSpaces closer to the middle range, where transla-

tion is sufficient to create institutional contact and partial uptake, but not always sufficient to produce durable restructuring of planning routines. The comparative insight is that deliberative publics can generate legibility, but without institutional mechanisms for retention (formalised channels, routinised consultation, accountable follow-up), learning remains reversible and contingent.

Within the relational matrix, VarnaSpaces demonstrates how deliberative formats can function as mechanisms of civic translation. The case occupies an intermediate position in which both translation and learning are present but remain contingent upon organisational continuity and political support. The resulting trajectory is characterised less by confrontation than by the challenge of retaining civic claims beyond individual events and consultation cycles.

The Collective: high legibility through project forms, with the risk of depoliticised uptake

The Collective illustrates a third trajectory: high legibility achieved through culturally inflected, project-based formats that are structurally compatible with contemporary governance logics (open calls, interventions, partnerships, educational programmes). The public problem here is built through narrative expansion: rivers are reframed from background infrastructure into ecological, cultural, and symbolic urban actors. This narrative work creates

broad public resonance and offers institutions a non-confrontational entry point.

In the relational matrix, The Collective often occupies a configuration of high civic translation capacity combined with selective institutional learning. Translation is high because the initiative speaks in genres that institutions and funders can readily process (projects, events, placemaking discourse). Institutional learning may appear high when collaborations emerge, yet the learning may remain limited to project uptake rather than structural change. In other words, civic issues may become legible in ways that invite institutional participation without necessarily challenging underlying planning priorities. This is not a deficit but a specific political-urban modality: public problems can be institutionalised via “projectification,” producing visibility and incremental change while muting conflict over governance and resource distribution.

The Collective illustrates a trajectory in which civic translation is achieved through culturally and institutionally compatible project forms. The case suggests that high levels of legibility can facilitate collaboration and visibility while producing only selective forms of institutional learning. It therefore highlights the distinction between project uptake and deeper organisational or planning transformation.

6. Discussion: patterns across cases and the intersection of legibility and public problem-making

Taken together, the cases suggest a comparative pattern that sharpens the paper’s contribution: urban public problems do not travel into planning outcomes simply by becoming visible or morally compelling; they travel when they are coupled with legible routing mechanisms and met with institutional learning that can retain and operationalise them. Put differently, the construction of a public problem is necessary but insufficient; it must be translated into administrative pathways, and institutions must possess the capacity to learn in ways that exceed symbolic responsiveness. This yields a more general analytical statement relevant to debates on civil society-institution relations: the “beyond dichotomies” move is not simply to acknowledge that collaboration and conflict coexist, but to demonstrate that these modes are secondary outcomes of deeper processes of translation, routing, and learning. Where civic translation capacity is high but institutional learning is low (as in much of the Bedechka trajectory), contention persists and may even intensify, because publics remain mobilised while institutional pathways remain blocked. Where civic translation is moderate and institutional learning is moderate (as in VarnaSpaces), engagement produces episodic achievements but remains vulnerable to reversal. Where translation is high through institu-

tion-compatible formats (as in *The Collective*), collaboration becomes possible but can channel civic energy into project cycles rather than structural planning change.

Taken together, the three cases suggest that civic-institution relations are better understood as evolving configurations shaped by the interaction between civic translation capacity, institutional learning capacity, and the construction of public problems than through conventional distinctions between conflict and collaboration. The cases demonstrate that conflict, participation, and cooperation do not represent stable or mutually exclusive conditions but can coexist, alternate, or acquire different meanings over the course of a civic trajectory. What appears as confrontation in one phase may contribute to the stabilisation of a public problem and increase its institutional visibility, while collaborative arrangements may facilitate communication and project implementation without necessarily producing deeper organisational learning or governance change.

Viewed through this perspective, the significance of civic action lies not only in whether claims gain access to institutional arenas, but also in whether they are retained, translated, and incorporated into planning processes over time. The analysis therefore suggests that participation cannot be assessed solely through the presence of dialogue, consensus, or institutional openness, just as conflict

cannot be treated automatically as evidence of failure. Rather, the trajectories examined here indicate that the relationship between civic actors and institutions depends on how public problems are framed, how effectively they are translated into institutionally intelligible forms, and how capable institutions are of learning from and adapting to those claims. The comparative perspective developed in this study also highlights the importance of looking beyond visible moments of contestation or collaboration toward the less visible processes through which civic concerns acquire durability. Across the three cases, the most consequential dynamics often emerge not at the moment when a claim enters public debate, but later, when it is either retained within institutional routines, reformulated through planning instruments, or gradually displaced from decision-making processes. In this sense, the trajectories of urban public problems provide insight into the conditions under which civic claims persist, transform, or disappear over time.

Rather than classifying cases into fixed categories, the relational matrix proposed in this paper offers a way of interpreting variation in civic-institution relations across different urban contexts. Its analytical value lies in drawing attention to the interaction between translation, learning, and public problem construction, making it possible to examine why similar urban concerns may generate different

trajectories and outcomes. More broadly, this perspective suggests that the long-term evolution of civic-institution relations depends not only on the visibility of public claims but also on the capacities of both civic and institutional actors to sustain processes of translation, engagement, and adaptation over time.

7. Conclusion

This paper set out to move beyond dominant dichotomies in the analysis of civil society-institution relations in urban planning by focusing on the mechanisms through which civic claims acquire or eventually fail to acquire institutional consequences. Drawing on a comparative analysis of three civic trajectories, it proposed an interpretive framework (relational matrix) centred on the interaction between civic translation capacity and institutional learning capacity, complemented by a public problems perspective attentive to how urban issues are constructed, stabilised, and routed through governance arenas.

The cases demonstrate that neither conflict nor collaboration is inherently decisive. Instead, what shapes urban outcomes is whether civic claims are rendered legible as planning objects and whether institutions are able to retain and operationalise those claims beyond episodic engagement. Strong public problem construction can coexist with weak institutional learning, producing prolonged contention; conversely, institutional openness can

coexist with weak civic translation, resulting in symbolic participation. Collaboration, when achieved through institution-compatible formats, may facilitate access while limiting structural transformation. These dynamics suggest that the quality of civil society-institution relations cannot be assessed solely by their tone or formal design, but by their capacity to stabilise civic concerns within durable planning arrangements.

While the relational matrix is not intended as a normative assessment tool, it can help identify where institutional bottlenecks or translation gaps emerge in civic-institution interactions. More broadly put, the analysis suggests that debates on participation and co-production should shift attention from participation events to participation trajectories: the long-term pathways through which civic issues are translated, institutionalised, or marginalised. Understanding these pathways is important for addressing contemporary urban challenges, where inclusion, representation, and sustainability increasingly depend on the capacity of institutions and civil society to engage in ongoing, context-sensitive processes of mutual adjustment rather than episodic encounters.

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