

URBAN SHARING IN BERLIN

Country: Germany
Population (city): 3,711,930
Population (metro): 6,004,857

City area: 891.7 km²
Government: 12 Districts



Sharing Economy at a Glance

Berlin has been described as trendy, exuberant, vibrant, and palpable by those who have visited. The same can be said for those organisations within the sharing economy that we interviewed. There was an unmistakable passion and enthusiasm among interview participants, which predominantly represented accommodation and mobility sectors. There are instances of organisations popping up, fading, growing, and sustaining themselves in different constellations of actors and business models. Below are several highlights from our research in Berlin:

- Berlin has a rich history of carsharing since 1988
- Sharing organisations didn't necessarily frame their work as sustainable
- Shared mobility and accommodation sharing are on the political agenda
- Not-for-profit sharing organisations need a 'champion' to oversee vision
- Shared mobility not seen by city as part of the transportation offering
- Industry associations / 3rd party platforms lack unified voice to support sharing

Methodology

In April 2017, over the course of a week, six researchers and five Master's students met with and interviewed approximately twenty organisations. These organisations consisted of sharing initiatives, municipal departments, industry associations, and academic institutions. The mobile research lab approach was used; interviews were recorded and pictures / videos were taken where relevant. Researchers discussed and analysed interviews reflexively. Individual and group reflections were written and discussed, serving as the basis for the general reflections contained within this snapshot. The snapshot only represents reflections from organisations interviewed.

The design of sharing organisations varies in Berlin. Organisations we interviewed operate with for-profit or not-for-profit motivation. Moreover, business models observed include peer-to-peer and business-to-consumer. The diversity of design has implications. For example, interviewees with the municipality indicated that for-profit initiatives would be more likely to access municipal support than not-for-profit initiatives. In contrast, some stakeholders interviewed indicated that not-for-profit and peer-to-peer organisations were more desirable in order to achieve the purported environmental and social potential of sharing. Lastly, while our study focused on Berlin, sharing organisations operated locally, nationally, and internationally, with effects in studying upscaling and diffusion of design.

The City and Accommodation Sharing

Berlin has regulated accommodation sharing. The regulation stipulates that a permit is needed when more than 50% of an accommodation is rented out. In principle, this means that it is acceptable to take advantage of a spare room in an apartment. However, the regulation targets those commercial sharing companies that purchase vacant apartments to be placed on accommodation sharing platforms exclusively. Based on our interviews with city representatives, there is a concern of gentrification, increasing rents, and weakening sense of community as a result of numerous apartments shared commercially. Despite the regulation, there is little enforcement due to lack of resources and the difficulty in monitoring all apartments. As such, there is a sense among interviewees that accommodation sharing needs further refinement in the Berlin context.

Sustainability Impact and Sharing

Academic literature discusses the potential of sharing to promote increased sustainable consumption. In contrast, in Berlin, many of our interviewees did not articulate environmental or social rationale in framing their work. Instead, many expressed critical viewpoints. In particular, some questioned the relative impact of sharing given it is still a marginal consumption behaviour. Furthermore, some indicated that carsharing may more positively impact sustainability, especially compared to accommodation sharing. Nonetheless, there is awareness of the potential rebound or indirect effects that sharing has, both positive and negative, on sustainability outcomes.

Finally, the practice of sharing appeared to be highly ideological, especially among those peer-to-peer and/or not-for-profit organisations and their users. However, there are strong opinions among all stakeholders, including the municipality, which promises continued dialogue and development in the years to come.

The City and Shared Mobility

There is much activity in Berlin around shared mobility. Both free-floating and station-based carsharing models are found in Berlin as well as bike- and cargo-bikesharing models. Among city representatives, there was less interest in understanding and supporting shared mobility. Principally, this is due to the still marginal impact of carsharing and bikesharing in terms of the total urban transportation system (in 2016):

PUBLIC TRANSIT: 3.7 million rides per day
BIKE: 1.7 million rides per day
CARSHARING: 15,000 rides per day

Nonetheless, districts have provided limited parking spaces for station-based cars through agreements with individual providers. However, signage only signifies that the space is reserved for carsharing cars, not any one provider. Conflict has arisen as free-floating cars fill these spaces, leaving station-based carsharing providers scrambling at times to ensure quality provision of service. At the time of our interview, a national law was to be implemented 20 September 2017, which gave districts the right to provide spaces and signage for specific providers.

