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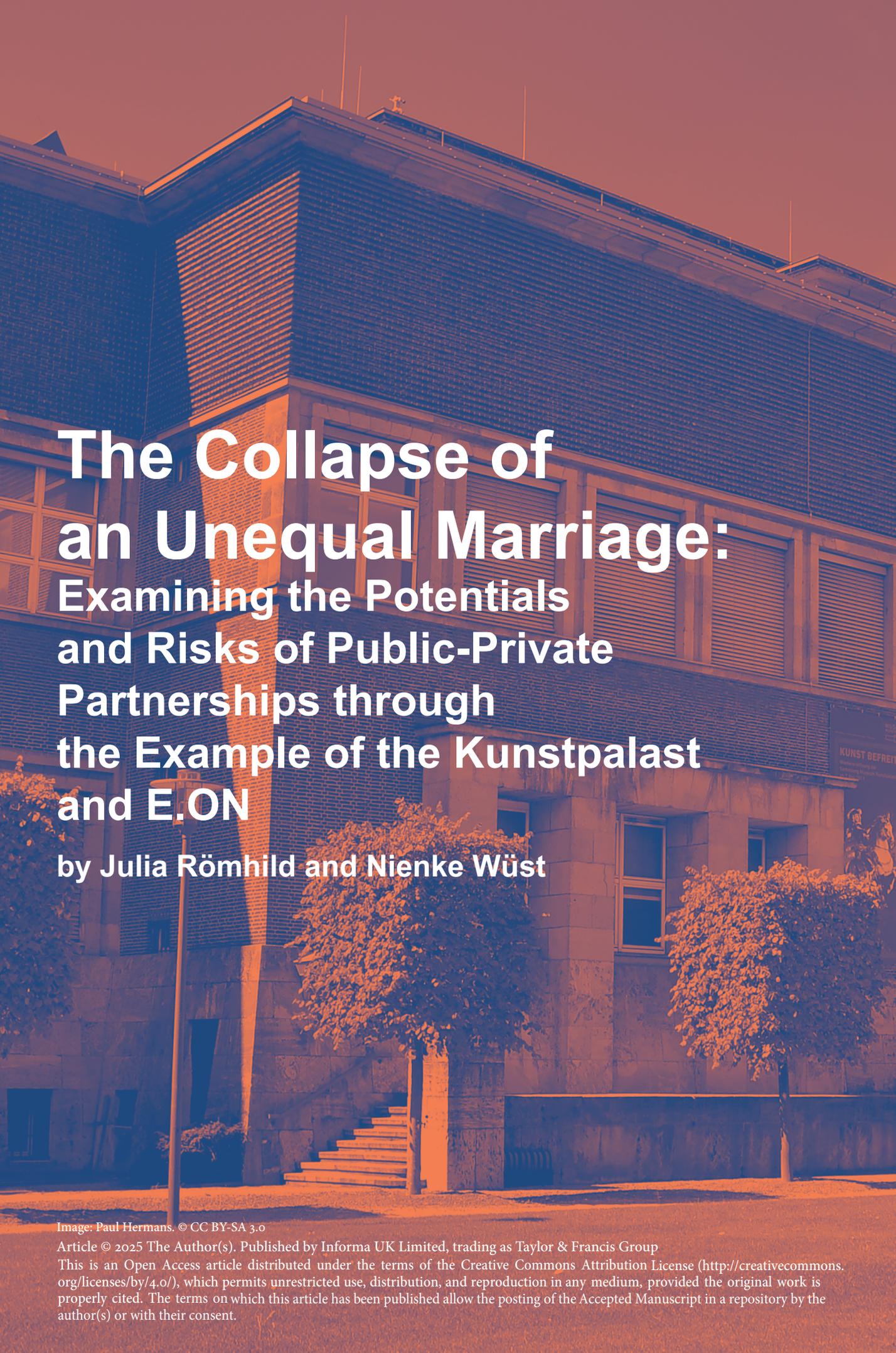
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The Collapse of an Unequal Marriage: Examining the Potentials and Risks of Public-Private Partnerships through the Example of the Kunstpalast and E.ON

by Julia Römhild and Nienke Wüst

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Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) are emerging as a strategic approach to sustain the cultural sector. However, understanding both their potential and risks is crucial. This case study delves into the dissolution of the partnership between the Kunstpalast (Art Palace) museum in Düsseldorf, Germany and the energy company E.ON to draw valuable insights for future cultural PPPs.

The cultural sector in Germany is currently grappling with significant financial challenges. The Covid-19 pandemic and various crises, including wars, e.g. in Ukraine, have led to fiscal austerity measures. Across the European Union, approximately 0.9 per cent of total government expenditure was allocated to cultural services in 2022, amounting to €74.9 billion. This was a modest increase from €70.9 billion in 2021. However, Germany, with a cultural expenditure share of just 0.4 per cent, falls in the lower half of EU countries (Eurostat 2024). In stark contrast, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Malta and

Lithuania recorded the highest shares, all at 2.2 per cent, with Iceland at 2.3 per cent among EFTA countries.

Germany's cultural budget, as outlined in the federal budget draft for 2024, reflects a significant reduction compared to last year's. The projected expenditure for the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media is set at €2.15 billion, approximately €254 million less than in 2023 (Deutscher Bundestag 2023). In addition, private household spending on culture fell drastically during the Covid-19 pandemic and has not been able to reach pre-pandemic levels since then (Statistische Ämter des Bundes und der Länder 2022, p. 38).¹

Further compounding these issues, the fiscal austerity measures expected from the German federal government are likely to result in budget cuts at the state and municipal levels, potentially eroding cultural funding (Zimmerman and Schulz 2020). This trend has already sparked concern among cultural councils in Germany, such as the Kulturrat NRW (an organization supporting cultural initiatives in the North Rhine-Westphalia region), over the possible reduction in municipal cultural budgets (Kulturrat NRW 2022). This is problematic because most cultural spending on museums, collections and exhibitions in Germany is shouldered by municipalities (47.2 per cent) and federal states (28.6 per cent) (Statistische Ämter des Bundes und der Länder 2022, p. 38).

Municipalities have faced and will face significant budget cuts, which are likely to extend to cultural budgets. In Germany, cultural institutions rely heavily on public funding. According to the museum statistics for 2020, 51.1 per cent of the 6,854 German museums are publicly owned and a further 3.8 per cent are partially publicly owned (Statistische Ämter des Bundes und der Länder 2022, p. 38). With decreasing public funds, there is a growing need for these institutions to increase their income and attract more private funding. Additionally, public funding is increasingly being diverted to other critical areas such as healthcare, infrastructure and education, leaving less available for cultural initiatives. Meanwhile, the cost of personal resources, driven by inflation, is escalating, adding further financial strain on cultural institutions.

Amid these challenges, Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) are emerging as a strategic approach to sustain the cultural sector. However, understanding both their potential and risks is crucial. This case study delves into the dissolution of the partnership between the Kunstpalast [Art Palace] museum in Düsseldorf, Germany and the energy company E.ON to draw valuable insights for future cultural PPPs.

Public-Private Partnerships in the cultural sector

In academic literature, there is no single, uniform definition for the term Public-Private Partnership (PPP). Various definitions exist, each emphasising different aspects of such partnerships. A preliminary classification is provided by this definition from the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ):

Public-private Partnerships (PPP) are collaborations between the public sector and private industry in the design, planning, construction, financing, management, operation, and utilisation of public services that were previously solely under state

responsibility. Thus, public-private partnerships present an alternative procurement method for the state compared to traditional self-realisation (Bundesministerium für Wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung) [authors' translation].

This definition clarifies that PPP agreements can apply to all steps of the value chain, although the private partner is not necessarily involved in each of these steps (Budäus 2004, p. 13). PPPs represent a form of 'cooperative public value creation' (Windoffer and Ziekow 2008, p. 35). Public and private partners enter a contractually

agreed-upon partnership to achieve a common goal. However, individual interests also play a significant role in this common goal, as will be further explained below. The involved partners share responsibility, costs, resources, and risks arising from the partnership (Greve and Hodge 2013, p. 2). Two main categories by which PPPs can be classified are, on the one hand, contract-based PPPs, 'where the partnership between the public and private sectors is based only on contractual relationships', and institutionalised PPPs, 'where the cooperation between the public and private sectors

takes place within an independent legal entity' (Kommission der Europäischen Gemeinschaften 2004, p. 9).

The legal entities founded within the framework of an institutionalised PPP are also referred to as Special Purpose Vehicles (SPVs), as they are specifically established to achieve the particular goals of the PPP (Greve and Hodge 2013, p. 15). Both the public and private partners – as well as possible third parties – hold shares in these entities and can exert influence through governing bodies (Windoffer and Ziekow 2008, pp. 23-24). The PPP between the Kunstpalast and E.ON can be most closely associated with the category of institutionalised PPPs, since as a foundation, Stiftung Museum Kunstpalast, was established specifically to implement the goals of the PPP. The specifics of this legal form will be discussed in the following sections. The PPP in this case study differs from conventional PPPs owing to its culturally oriented objectives, whereas conventional PPPs primarily pursue economic goals. Due to these differences not all frameworks from the academic literature can be applied to this case study. Nevertheless, many investigations into potential risks, challenges and success factors are transferable.

In Germany, PPPs primarily involve construction projects in civil engineering and infrastructure, as well as in the IT infrastructure sector (Bundesministerium der Finanzen, Referat für Öffentlichkeitsarbeit 2016, p. 7). The consulting firm PD-Berater der Öffentlichen Hand GmbH maintains statistics on the number of PPP projects across Germany, detailing the areas of responsibility and the investment volumes for these projects (PD-Berater der Öffentlichen Hand GmbH). According to these statistics, most PPP projects have been implemented in the areas of schools, kindergartens and education (39 per cent), followed by leisure, culture, sports and events (21 per cent) and administrative buildings (15 per cent). The remaining projects concern roads (8 per cent), security, healthcare, judicial buildings and others.

In terms of investment volume, the road construction sector receives the most financial resources, at 33 per cent, while the leisure, culture, sports and events sector accounts for 9 per cent of the total investment volume (all figures as of 2015)

(Bundesministerium der Finanzen, Referat für Öffentlichkeitsarbeit 2016, pp. 11-13). In the database, the categories 'Culture & Sports Facilities' are combined into a sub-sector, with the most common projects being sports halls, swimming pools and multi-purpose halls.

These statistics indicate that the organisational form of PPPs in the cultural sector is relatively rare and, when present, is primarily focused on construction projects. When the PPP between the Kunstpalast and E.ON (then VEBA AG) was initiated, it was a pilot project in Germany (Monopol 2016). Unlike in the US, cultural institutions in Germany are primarily publicly funded, with a low proportion of private financial support (Duda 2002, pp. 12-14). Due to the fiscal crisis in Düsseldorf in the early 1990s, the public budget faced significant cuts. Cultural institutions were also affected, necessitating consideration of alternative financing options to prevent closures (Grosse-Brockhoff 2004, p. 174).

As previously mentioned, the overarching goal of a PPP is the realisation of a project in the interest of the public, thus serving the common good. At the same time, a PPP is a partnership wherein all stakeholders also pursue individual interests and expect certain advantages. These are delineated below according to the interest groups involved, based on the specific example of a PPP in the cultural sector: **Elected officials** responsible for cultural policy typically promote a vibrant cultural scene to enhance the area's appeal and potentially influence voter sentiment (Freisburger 2000, pp. 172-173). PPPs offer a strategy to ease public budgets and execute large-scale projects that might not otherwise be feasible (Wilhaus 2008, p. 27). By leveraging private capital, governments can avoid additional debt and overcome budget constraints (Klein 2015, pp. 8-9). Collaborating with private entities also has the potential to improve project efficiency by tapping into their technical and managerial expertise (Reeves 2013, pp. 79-80). This partnership model fosters innovation, not only in project outcomes but also in modernising and professionalising organisational processes (Wilhaus 2008, pp. 62-63; Esteve, Longo and Ysa 2013, pp. 99-100). Private partners in cultural collaborations typically prioritise profit over

purely philanthropic motives, contrasting with selfless sponsorship (Wilhaus 2008, p. 30). Such partnerships often serve broader marketing and communication strategies, encompassing Corporate Social Responsibility or more specifically Corporate Cultural Responsibility (Bzdak 2022). These forms of Corporate Responsibility position companies as societal contributors, enhancing visibility, reputation and consumer trust (Bruhn 2018, pp. 240-242; Borchardt 2009, p. 62). Cultural support can also attract and retain employees, while expanding a company's reach and stakeholder relationships (Lamprecht 2014, p. 18; Bruhn 2018, pp. 242-243). Internally, these activities foster employee motivation and corporate culture (Borchardt 2009, pp. 63-65). In long-term PPPs, companies may also seek improved governmental relations and access to decision-making processes (Duda 2002, p. 31).

PPP projects are complex and individual procedures: they require coordination among numerous stakeholders with divergent interests, often involve a wide range of expertise (such as construction, services, or technologies), and carry significant political implications, as they typically involve public infrastructure or services (Van Gestel, Verhoest and Voets 2013, p. 190). The political dimension of PPPs should not be underestimated: 'PPP are as much political as they are managerial entities' (Greve and Hodge 2013, p. 9). Thus, these projects are frequently subject to scrutiny from governments, the public, and the media, as political decision-makers are held accountable for their success, and the long-term impact of these projects can influence the broader public interest. This can particularly apply to the cultural sector. In Germany, public cultural funding is highly valued, as it is thought to guarantee both artistic freedom and institutional independence. Involving private partners and their commercial interests is often viewed critically, which can significantly affect the overall perception of a PPP project in the cultural sector (Monopol 2016).



Fig. 1. Düsseldorf Museum Kunstpalast by Paul Hermans. © CC BY-SA 3.0

Analysing the Public-Private Partnership of the Kunstpalast and E.ON

Using a case study design

To examine the implications of PPPs in Germany's cultural sector, this study uses a case study design, which is increasingly accepted in qualitative research and organisational studies (Meyer 2001; Thomas 2011; Hyett *et al.* 2014). The flexibility of the case study approach allows it to adapt to specific research questions and contexts (Hyett *et al.* 2014), as well as incorporate theoretical considerations in its design and analysis (Meyer 2001).

The study focuses on the partnership between the Kunstpalast and E.ON within Düsseldorf's local cultural policy. While multiple cases are often recommended to avoid issues with generalisability and bias (Meyer 2001), this single case was chosen for its exemplary nature and relevance to the study's objectives (Esteve, Longo and Ysa 2013). The partnership's two-decade evolution, including its dissolution, offers a comprehensive timeline to examine successes and challenges. The involvement of significant stakeholders allows for a multi-faceted analysis of motivations, strategies and outcomes, making it ideal for in-depth investigation.

The case study includes a literature review of press articles and Emmanuel Mir's master's thesis (2007), which explored the first decade of the PPP. Relevant documents such as project

reports and press releases will be reviewed to gather contextual and quantitative data. Expert interviews will provide additional insights, identifying key aspects and moments of cooperation, and contributing to a deeper understanding of the PPP between the Kunstpalast and E.ON.

The Kunstpalast museum in Düsseldorf (Fig. 1), located on the Ehrenhof site along the Rhine, dates back to a 17th-century collection belonging to Elector Johann Wilhelm and Anna-Maria Luisa de' Medici (Stiftung Museum Kunstpalast 2023, p. 196). The original 1902 museum building was demolished in the mid-1990s due to structural issues; it was replaced by a new structure designed by Oswald Matthias Ungers which opened in 2001 (Stiftung Museum Kunstpalast 2013, pp. 66-68). The museum houses a collection of approximately 130,000 objects spanning artistic genres from the Middle Ages to the present day (Stiftung Museum Kunstpalast 2024).

E.ON, a key player in the German energy sector, traces its roots to two precursor energy companies, Vereinigte Industrieunternehmungen AG (VIAG), established in 1923, and Vereinigte Elektrizitäts- und Bergwerks Aktiengesellschaft (VEBA), established in 1929. The merger in 2000 of VEBA and VIAG formed E.ON (E.ON SE 2024).

Today, E.ON operates across Germany and Europe, focusing on renewable energy, energy networks and customer solutions. With around 72,000 employees, half of them based in Germany, E.ON reported nearly €94 billion in revenue and approximately €6.4 billion in earnings before interest and taxes in 2023 (Statista 2024).

The legal framework: The Stiftung Museum Kunstpalast foundation

In 1986, Düsseldorf initiated an architectural competition to renovate the Kunstpalast, which was in poor condition. However, plans stalled in 1992 due to the city's financial constraints (Duda 2002, p. 49). Hans-Heinrich Grosse-Brockhoff, the Cultural Affairs Officer, sought partners for a Public-Private Partnership to share renovation costs and support the Kunstpalast long-term. He approached VEBA CEO Ulrich Hartmann, leveraging their prior acquaintance from art exchanges between the city and VEBA's corporate collection. Initially hesitant, Hartmann later showed interest because VEBA needed a Düsseldorf site for its new headquarters to avoid relocating to Essen. Grosse-Brockhoff offered VEBA city-owned land in the Ehrenhof area on the condition that it participate in the PPP and contribute to the museum's renovation and operations. Hartmann agreed, leading to an architectural competition won by Oswald Mathias Ungers, who

Organigram of Stiftung Museum Kunstpalast

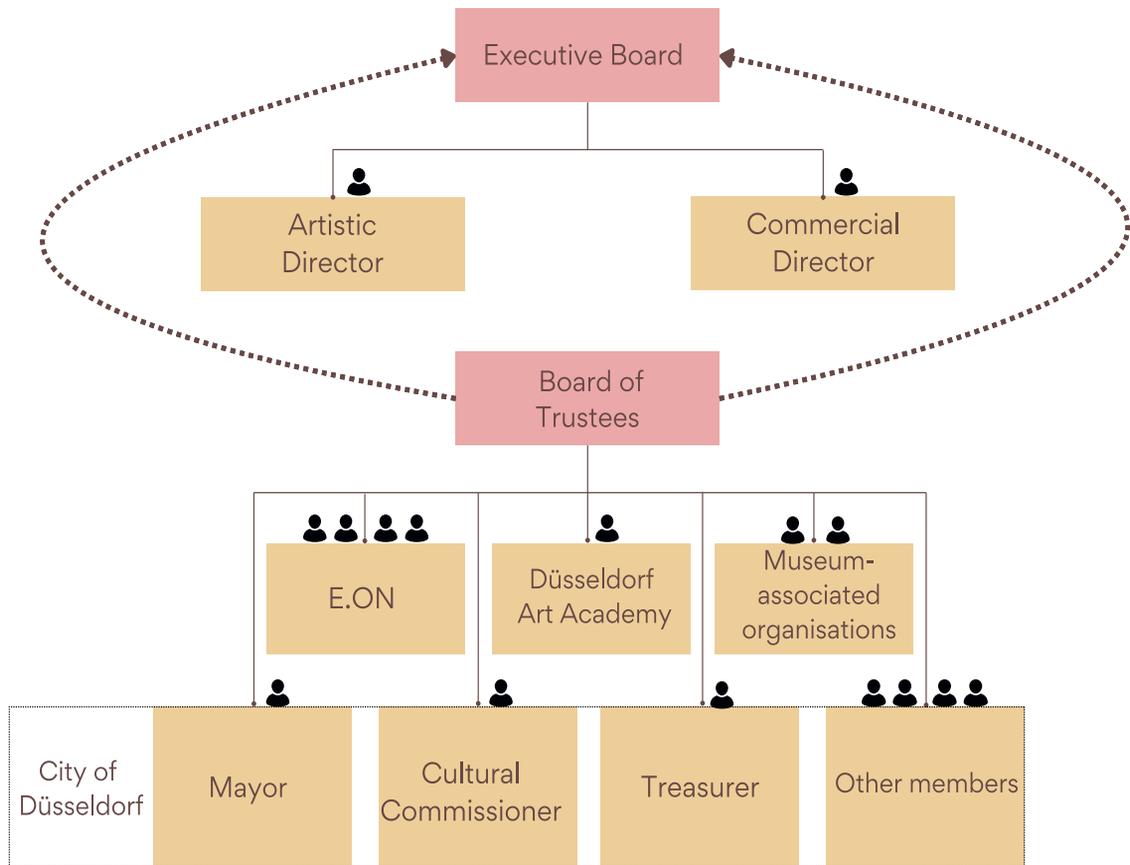


Fig. 2. Foundation Governance. © Julia Römhild and Nienke Wüst

also designed the adjacent E.ON headquarters completed in 2000 (Interview Grosse-Brockhoff).²

The PPP was realised as a legally capable foundation under private law and based in Düsseldorf. Initially established on 15 January 1998 as ‘Kunststiftung Ehrenhof Düsseldorf’, it was renamed ‘Stiftung Museum Kunstpalast’ on 1 February 2000. The main partners were the city of Düsseldorf and VEBA AG (Duda 2002, p. 54), with Metro Group and Evonik Industries AG (formerly Degussa) also participating as donors (Stiftung Museum Kunstpalast 2013, p. 154). The foundation’s overarching purpose is the promotion of art and culture, further specified to include the structural renewal of the Kunstpalast, its operation and the expansion of its art collection (Landeshauptstadt Düsseldorf 2012).

The foundation’s executive board consists of one to three members and is primarily responsible for the artistic and economic management of the

museum (see Fig. 2). Since the foundation’s establishment, the foundation and the museum have been managed by a team consisting of an Artistic Director and a Commercial Director. The foundation’s statutes stipulate that the executive board must inform the board of trustees about the planned annual artistic program of the museum but does not need to obtain their approval for its implementation (Landeshauptstadt Düsseldorf 2012).

The board of trustees of the Stiftung Museum Kunstpalast acts as an advisory and supervisory body to the board. It consists of 14 to 20 members representing various interest groups. The city of Düsseldorf appoints seven members, including the mayor, the treasurer, the cultural affairs officer and four other members. The E.ON group is represented by four members, with at least one member from the board. Additionally, the board of trustees appoints representatives for a five-year term based on proposals from the Friends of the Kunstpalast, the Düsseldorf Art

Academy and the Association for the Promotion of Art Exhibitions (Stiftung Museum Kunstpalast 2012). This composition ensures that no single party can achieve a majority of votes in the supervisory board. The city holds the most votes, partly because it contributes the most financially to the foundation assets and the museum’s ongoing operations (Mir 2007, p. 67).

The initial PPP agreement lasted ten years and was extended multiple times until its end in 2017 (Ruhnau 2016). The foundation’s assets included contributions from various parties. Initially, the city of Düsseldorf provided the property where the museum is located (Ehrenhof) to the foundation, part of which was used by VEBA (later E.ON) for their headquarters. The city and state together contributed 32 million Deutsche Marks (DM) (€16.3m), while VEBA paid DM 29.5 million (€15m) for the property and foundation’s assets (Duda 2002, p. 59–63). Starting in 2000, the city contributed an annual operating subsidy of DM8 million (€4m). E.ON

contributed DM2 million (€1m) annually for museum operations and an additional sum of up to DM3 million (€1.5m) for specific exhibitions. The availability of this additional budget varied annually, contingent on E.ON's interest in

supporting specific exhibition projects (Duda 2002, pp. 59-63). Exhibitions receiving E.ON's additional support were branded 'powered by E.ON' as a marketing initiative. E.ON reduced its subsidy to €750,000 annually in the final

three years of the PPP (Rossmann 2014). In 2018, the city increased its funding to €8.5 million to compensate for the financing gap after E.ON left the partnership in 2017 (Monopol 2017).

Results

Expert interviews

Expert interviews were conducted to explore the dynamics of the Kunstpalast-E.ON Public-Private Partnership. A semi-structured interview guide was developed to delve into motivations, goals, challenges and outcomes across the three phases of the partnership: Construction, Operational and Dissolution. Interviews targeted key stakeholders from E.ON, Kunstpalast and municipal cultural policy, ensuring diverse perspectives. Three interviews were conducted in June 2024, recorded and transcribed to preserve data richness and accuracy (Meyer 2001, p. 339).

Key figures in the Kunstpalast-E.ON PPP included Hans-Heinrich Grosse-Brockhoff, Jean-Hubert Martin, Dorothee von Posadowsky-Wehner, Beat Wismer and Harry Schmitz.³ Grosse-Brockhoff, former Cultural Affairs Director of Düsseldorf, offered insights into municipal cultural policies and their relationship with the PPP. Wismer, as Artistic Director from 2006 to 2017, provided perspectives on artistic direction and partnership challenges. Schmitz, a former E.ON manager and later Commercial Director of the Kunstpalast, contributed information on financial and administrative aspects.

Two interviews conducted by art critic Heinz-Norbert Jocks (2008; 2010), both published in *Kunstforum*, were included in the analysis due to the authors' inability to interview them personally. Jean-Hubert Martin, Artistic Director from 1999 to 2006 at the Kunstpalast, provided insights into the partnership during his tenure, offering additional perspectives.⁴ The analysis also incorporated an interview from 2010 (Jocks 2010) with Dorothee von Posadowsky-Wehner, Head of Arts and Culture at E.ON since 2002, highlighting the company's cultural sponsorship strategy and its impact on the PPP.⁵

Mayring's (2014) Qualitative Content Analysis method was applied for data analysis, employing an inductive category development approach to identify central aspects from the text (Mayring 2014; Mayring 2019). This approach facilitated the discovery of new collaboration aspects not covered in previous studies. Methodological triangulation was used to enhance credibility, combining findings from document analysis, observations and interviews. By cross-verifying data from multiple sources, the study aims to offer a comprehensive and validated account of the PPP's dynamics.

Key events in the Public-Private Partnership

The timetable of key events in the Kunstpalast-E.ON relationship provides a structured overview of milestones, changes and challenges throughout the partnership (Fig. 3). Based on literature and expert interviews, it offers a chronological framework to track the partnership's development. By highlighting pivotal moments, this timetable helps explain the sequence and impact of events as well as identify patterns and correlations.

The Stiftung Museum Kunstpalast foundation was established in 1998. The French art historian Jean-Hubert Martin was appointed Artistic Director of the museum in 1999. Martin had gained particular fame with the exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* [Magicians of the Earth] (1989) at the Centre Georges Pompidou (Jocks 2008). His successful career met the foundation's goal of making the Kunstpalast museum competitive with other major German exhibition institutions, even raising it to an international level. During his tenure as Artistic Director he organised several highly successful special exhibitions in which E.ON participated with additional sponsorship funds. Despite these successes, press reports and his 2008 interview in *Kunstforum* both reveal that his tenure was marked by conflicts with

E.ON's officials. One notable incident involved the planning of an exhibition of Thomas Olbricht's collection. This exhibition, planned jointly with E.ON's officials, was ultimately prevented by one of these officials, Achim Middelschulte, who was opposed to explicit erotic themes in the collection. Several years later, Middelschulte independently initiated an exhibition on Russian art, bypassing the Artistic Director's approval. This exhibition, titled *Bonjour Russland: Französische und Russische Meisterwerke von 1870-1925 aus Moskau und St. Petersburg* [Bonjour Russia: French and Russian Masterpieces from 1870-1925 from Moscow and St. Petersburg], opened at the Kunstpalast in 2008. The theme was of interest to E.ON due to the company's business ties with Russia, particularly with Gazprom (Jocks 2008).

In 2003, Ulrich Hartmann left his position as CEO of E.ON and was succeeded by Wulf Bernotat, altering the partnership dynamics (Interview Grosse-Brockhoff; Jocks 2008). Hartmann had been a key initiator and advocate of the partnership within the company and is generally described by the interviewees as an art aficionado who was also very connected to the Düsseldorf area. All the interviewees admitted that under his successor Bernotat, E.ON's relationship to the partnership became more distanced.

When Beat Wismer was appointed Artistic Director in 2007, it was already foreseeable that E.ON would withdraw. During his tenure, Wismer focused more on working with the in-house collection, but he also realised several blockbuster exhibitions in which E.ON participated. His relationship with the corporate partner, meanwhile, was not without its tensions. He reported two cases in particular. Shortly after Wismer was elected to succeed Martin as Artistic Director, von Posadowsky-Wehner, the Head of Arts and Culture at E.ON, approached him with a proposal to clear some rooms in the museum for

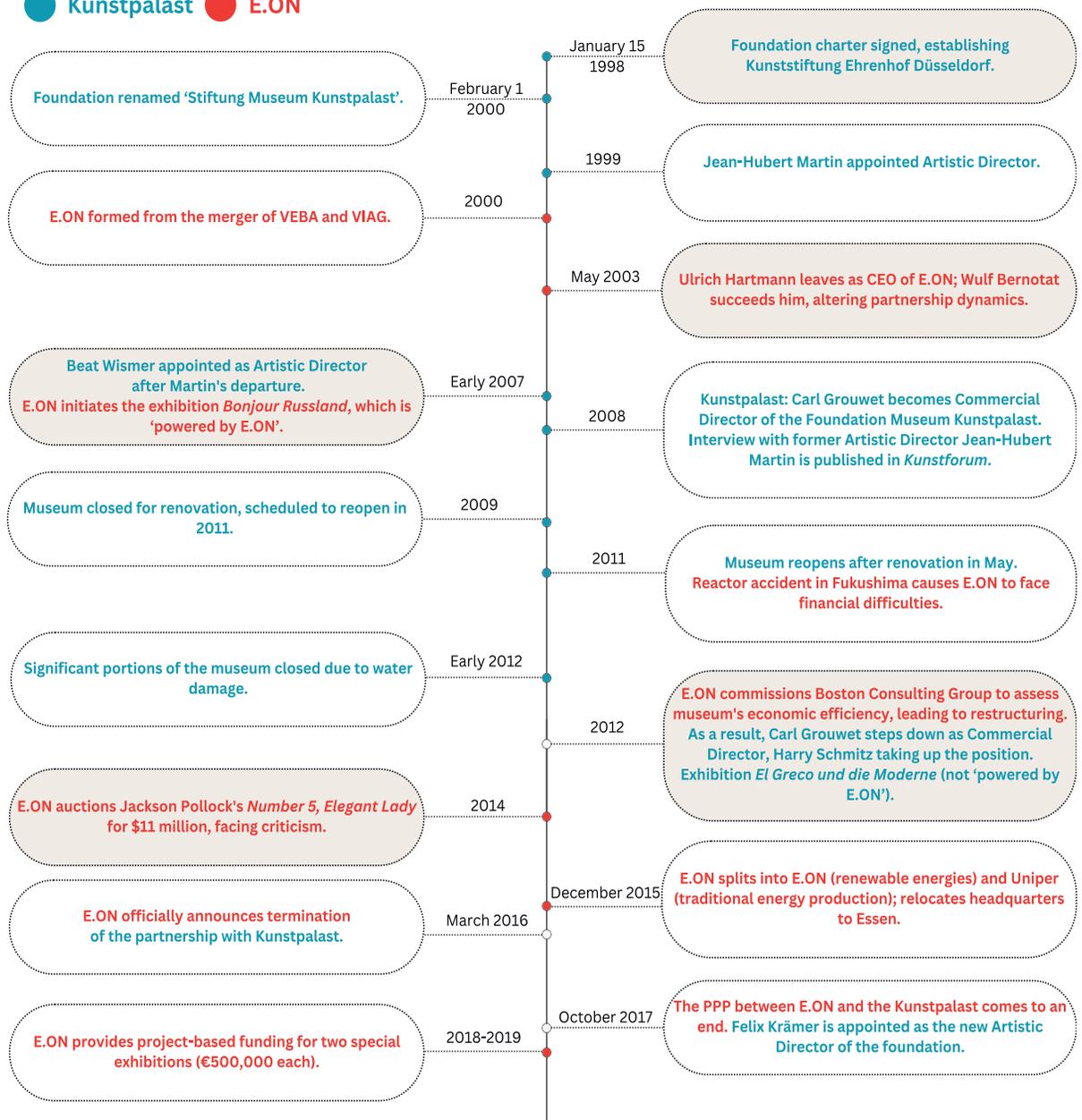


Fig. 3. Timetable of key events. © Julia Römhild and Nienke Wüst

use as a daycare centre for the children of E.ON employees, whose company headquarters were right next to the museum. This proposal strongly irritated Wismer, and he declined, which subsequently strained their collaboration (Interview Wismer).

Grosse-Brockhoff and Schmitz described the incident of the *Bonjour Russland* exhibition as an isolated case, but in the same interview Wismer reported another similar incident in which E.ON influenced the exhibition programme due to corporate interests.

According to Wismer, E.ON official Peter Blau approached him and encouraged him to organise an exhibition on Spanish painting. In the background, as Wismer knew, were E.ON's plans at the time to acquire the Spanish energy supplier Endesa. Wismer began planning a large-scale exhibition on El Greco. The planning was already well advanced when the deal between E.ON and Endesa fell through, and E.ON informed Wismer that they were no longer interested in the exhibition and would not provide additional funds for it. Since his planning was already far advanced,

Wismer ultimately realised the exhibition with the help of other sponsors. It was opened in 2012 at the Kunstpalast under the title *El Greco und die Moderne* [El Greco and the Modern Age] (Ibid.).

In 2012, a small team of the Boston Consulting Group was brought in to advise the Kunstpalast museum on cost-saving measures – prompted by E.ON's then-CEO Johannes Teyssen and supported by Düsseldorf Mayor Dirk Elbers (Onkelbach 2012). In November 2012, Harry Schmitz, a former E.ON manager specialising in controlling

and restructuring, took over the role of Commercial Director. Schmitz's task was to reduce the museum's annual budget from €13.5 million to €10 million (Bosetti 2014). Both the museum and E.ON were facing economic difficulties during this period, partly due to the Fukushima reactor disaster in 2011, which triggered the energy transition in Germany. This led to restructuring processes within the company in 2015, after which the spinoff company Uniper continued its traditional energy generation through fossil fuels, while from then on E.ON specialised in renewable energies. These significant measures resulted in profit losses and job cuts (Rossmann 2016).

In 2014, E.ON auctioned the Jackson Pollock painting *Number 5, Elegant Lady* (Monopol 2014, Christie's 2014) from the company collection, which had essentially been on permanent loan to the Kunstpalast. This decision was met with severe criticism in the press. E.ON justified the sale by citing internal criticism of high cultural spending amidst challenges posed by the energy transition and job cuts, pledging to reinvest the proceeds of the auction in cultural support (Lieb 2014).

As part of these changes within the company, E.ON relocated its headquarters from Düsseldorf to Essen in December 2015. With this relocation, it became apparent that E.ON's focus would shift from Düsseldorf to Essen. Consequently, continued support for the Kunstpalast increasingly came into question.

At the end of March 2016, E.ON officially announced the termination of their partnership with the Kunstpalast, which was then completed in 2017. The company went on to partially fund two special exhibitions in 2018 and 2019 (Rossmann 2016).

Central findings and overall assessment of the Kunstpalast-E.ON PPP

The idea for a PPP between the Kunstpalast museum and E.ON arose out of necessity. The museum faced structural decay and the City of Düsseldorf could not finance a new building on its own due to financial constraints. Grosse-Brockhoff initially found no interest from VEBA's CEO, Ulrich Hartmann, but re-engaged when

VEBA needed a new headquarters site. While VEBA had a tradition of supporting culture, the company's motivations were primarily pragmatic rather than cultural. However, Hartmann's personal interest in art and his amicable relationship with Grosse-Brockhoff ultimately facilitated the decision (Interview Grosse-Brockhoff).

Grosse-Brockhoff admitted in his interview that he had an idealistic vision for the partnership that didn't fully materialise. Nevertheless, the most urgent goals were achieved: the museum was saved from decay and the company secured its desired site. However, concrete goals and expectations for the collaboration were not well formulated, generating uncertainty around E.ON's Corporate Social Responsibility strategy. Von Posadowsky-Wehner mentioned in her 2010 *Kunstforum* interview that E.ON's motivations for cultural sponsorship included enhancing the company's reputation, building relationships and increasing employee motivation, but these were general objectives not specific to the Kunstpalast partnership (Jocks 2010).

The foundation, established as the governance unit of the PPP, is viewed positively by all interviewees for granting the museum some independence, especially in financial and personnel decisions. Schmitz highlighted the foundation's advantage of not being a purely municipal institution. Despite the proportional distribution of votes favoring the City of Düsseldorf, E.ON often appeared as the dominant partner due to its financial influence. Grosse-Brockhoff noted that while the foundation's statutes granted the Artistic Director autonomy, in practice, both Martin and Wismer experienced a different reality, as detailed in the operational phase.

The partnership's dynamics were substantially shaped by interpersonal relationships and the level of trust within these, a crucial factor for effective cooperation (Van Gestel, Verhoest and Voets 2013, pp. 194-195). Positive connections such as the friendship between Ulrich Hartmann and Grosse-Brockhoff facilitated the partnership. However, dysfunctional relationships and personal antipathies also burdened it. Martin's tenure saw interference in the project concerning the Olbricht Collection and the *Bonjour Russland* exhibition. His

2008 interview reveals significant tension with E.ON employees Peter Blau and Achim Middelschulte. Martin noted a distant relationship with Bernotat, who succeeded Hartmann as CEO:

Everything went well until Hartmann retired from the E.ON board and became chairman of the supervisory board. [...] I never had a serious conversation with [Bernotat] and had the impression that he was not interested in the museum. The access was simply more formal, making the relationship with E.ON sometimes more difficult (Jocks 2008).

Wismer was forewarned before his tenure as Artistic Director that it had not yet been contractually determined whether, or for how long, E.ON would remain a partner. He faced conflicts with E.ON, particularly with von Posadowsky-Wehner, after rejecting her proposal for a daycare in the museum. Their personal differences strained their partnership, and E.ON's unreliability during the 2012 El Greco exhibition further damaged trust. Both Artistic Directors expressed that E.ON's overreach violated boundaries, making constructive collaboration difficult. On a positive note, Wismer reported a cooperative relationship with Schmitz, despite Schmitz having a challenging role in the partnership. Both Schmitz and Wismer described the cost-cutting measures as a shock to the museum staff. However, Wismer praised Schmitz's personal engagement with art and his supportive approach: 'This commitment [of Harry Schmitz] was evident' (Interview Wismer).

From his perspective, Schmitz felt that both directors were reluctant to engage with the company. He saw the relationship between the artistic direction and E.ON as more of a sponsorship than a true partnership, believing that the museum viewed E.ON merely as a financial backer, making no genuine effort to foster a collaborative relationship.

The partnership was also marked by a power imbalance. Despite formal autonomy in exhibition programming, the museum's reliance on E.ON's sponsorship funds made it vulnerable. Von Posadowsky-Wehner put it this way:

The question is not what we want or don't want, as this is a house

with independent management and programmatic orientation. The museum prepares an annual program, and we then decide which projects are interesting for E.ON as a sponsorship platform (Jocks 2010).

On several occasions, E.ON influenced the artistic program due to personal preferences or corporate interests, as seen with the Olbricht collection and special exhibitions like *Bonjour Russland* and *El Greco und die Moderne*. On the other hand, Wismer's willingness to entertain Blau's proposal of the El Greco exhibition, aware as he was of E.ON's commercial interest in the project, could also be criticised to a certain extent. Wismer was attracted by the opportunity to curate an exhibition with high-calibre loans from international museums and funded by E.ON (Interview Wismer).

The cost-cutting measures implemented following the Boston Consulting Group's review, which was initiated by E.ON, can also be seen as an exercise of their power. However, the measures were supported by the foundation's board – including the mayor in his role representing the city – desiring more economical museum management. Both Grosse-Brockhoff and Wismer admitted the necessity of implementing some cost-saving measures and acknowledged the previously ample funding:

[The Boston Consulting group found] that we, spoiled by the conditions, including the PPP, had let things get out of hand, resulting in a significantly bloated staff and high costs, especially personnel costs, and our exhibitions, regardless of staff, were extremely expensive. [...] This process, triggered by E.ON, was a healthy one, common in business but unfortunately rare in public service. The foundation benefited from this process (Interview Grosse-Brockhoff).

Wismer also hinted at a conflict over the 2014 auction of the Pollock painting, during which E.ON controlled public statements and prohibited the museum from criticising the decision, exercising clear power. In short, there was a discrepancy between the formal and informal aspects of the partnership. While the foundation's statutes intended to guarantee artistic autonomy, they could be circumvented.

External factors also significantly influenced E.ON's decisions over the duration of the partnership. Changes in leadership, such as the transition from Hartmann to Bernotat, and later to Johannes Teyssen, led to a more distant relationship with the museum. Grosse-Brockhoff reflected:

I underestimated that, both in politics and, as I later learned, in business,

successors are rarely interested in preserving their predecessors' achievements. A bitter realisation I had to make both as a cultural director and later as a cultural state secretary. I did not expect there to be no interest in continuity of action in a corporation like E.ON (Interview Grosse-Brockhoff).

Economic factors, including the 2011 Fukushima disaster, resulting in the energy transition in Germany, caused E.ON to restructure and focus on renewable energies, spinning off its conventional energy branch into Uniper. These changes led to corporate losses and layoffs, making cultural sponsorship expenses harder to justify internally, according to E.ON officials (Monopol 2014).

The relocation of E.ON's headquarters from Düsseldorf to Essen also impacted the partnership, with Wismer arguing that this move was a central reason for E.ON ceasing support. Schmitz, however, saw the relocation as a mere pretext for the company's decision.

These factors – leadership changes, economic shifts and relocation – highlight the complexity and significant impact of external circumstances on E.ON's strategic decisions and cultural sponsorship.

Impacts of the partnership

The PPP between the Kunstpalast and E.ON had a significant economic impact on the museum, providing financial resources for renovations and ongoing expenses. E.ON contributed approximately €60 million over the partnership's duration (Ruhnau 2016). Cost-saving measures implemented from 2012 reduced the museum's annual expenses by €2.5 million, which was seen as an immense success, though these measures also included staff reductions (Interview Schmitz). Harry Schmitz still serves as the Commercial Director of the foundation today, which allows the museum to benefit from his experience. His continued involvement speaks to the success of the cooperation and the effective exchange of know-how between the company and the museum. There is a lasting impact that extends beyond the duration of the PPP. The general economisation of the museum, initiated through the

PPP with E.ON, was warmly welcomed at the time by the officials of the city of Düsseldorf. This was not a short-term measure; the foundation has continued to be managed with a focus on economic sustainability, which has provided the museum with a more secure financial position.

From a standpoint of organisational impact, both Grosse-Brockhoff and Schmitz unanimously highlight that the foundation's structure represents the main benefit that emerged from the PPP and that it continues to exist today, even without E.ON's involvement. The foundation is still managed by a dual leadership consisting of an Artistic Director and a Commercial Director. As a private-law foundation, it allows for a degree of independence compared to purely municipal institutions, particularly in matters such as personnel decisions

or the creation of financial reserves. Nonetheless, the city of Düsseldorf has remained a financial partner and main sponsor even after the PPP ended.

The partnership benefited the Kunstpalast with business management expertise from E.ON, particularly through Schmitz, who remains the Commercial Director. Efforts to engage E.ON employees with the museum had limited success. Employees were offered free admission and exclusive staff-only tours. However, Mir's study (2007) regarding this subject found that the demand for these offers was very limited. Martin expressed disappointment at the lack of interest from E.ON staff. Schmitz confirmed this perception, noting that internal marketing potential was underutilised because the PPP was managed at the executive level and never truly reached the E.ON workforce:

‘The CEO had his hobbyhorse, I don’t want to ridicule it, but I think that was more the perception.’ Another form of knowledge exchange involved Martin serving on the advisory commission for E.ON’s corporate collection during his tenure as the museum’s Artistic Director. However, this commission dissolved following Hartmann’s departure (Mir 2007).

From a reputational standpoint, the partnership initially faced negative press, especially towards E.ON, with concerns about commercial interests intruding into cultural activities. Schmitz stated in his interview:

Brand appearance, social responsibility, this aspect of the partnership, which might have been and should have been important for E.ON, was unfortunately reversed at

the beginning, because E.ON came under fire right away: ‘How can it be that an energy company is involved in culture, they destroy everything’ and so on (Interview Schmitz).

Negative headlines continued during the partnership, particularly regarding incidents involving Martin (Bosetti 2008; Jocks 2008) and the 2014 Pollock painting auction (Lieb 2014; Monopol 2014; Rossmann 2014).

E.ON’s involvement and interference during the partnership, as well as the circumstances surrounding its termination, led to some negative public reactions. However, it must also be acknowledged that the PPP with E.ON was the catalyst for the Kunstpalast’s reconstruction and helped the museum achieve its current status. It laid the foundation for

attracting a distinguished professional such as Jean-Hubert Martin as Artistic Director. During the partnership, numerous blockbuster exhibitions were realised with E.ON’s support, making the institution more appealing to lenders, further sponsors and experts in the field, as well as increasing visitor numbers.

In terms of external communication, the potential may not have been fully realised. Due to some of the critical events outlined here, an impression may have arisen that the partners were working against, rather than with, each other. The public image of such a partnership should demonstrate that the partners engage on an equal footing and take mutual pride in collaborating with one another.

Discussion

The present case study is highly individual, and not all findings are generalisable. The partnership arose from very specific needs of the participants and somewhat of an emergency situation. Additionally, Schmitz noted in his interview that the same partnership, particularly with the sheer financial volume that E.ON contributed, would likely not come about in the same way today. Nonetheless, it is precisely this dimension and the nearly 20-year duration of the partnership that offer a promising approach for deriving opportunities, risks and recommendations for future similar partnerships.

Opportunities of Public-Private Partnerships in the cultural sector

PPPs can offer cultural institutions numerous benefits, starting with long-term financial stability and reduced dependency on public funds (Borchardt 2009, pp. 15-17; Freisburger 2000, pp. 139-142). By collaborating with a private partner, additional financial resources can be generated, making the institution more attractive to other sponsors, as confirmed by Grosse-Brockhoff. For the participating company, cooperation with a nonprofit foundation can also have financial benefits, as many foundations dedicated to promoting art and culture benefit from tax advantages due to their nonprofit status (Duda 2002, pp. 24-25).

Secondly, companies can strengthen their image and reputation as socially responsible actors through their investments in cultural projects. This can lead to a positive perception and sympathy among consumers, the public and employees (Borchardt 2009, pp. 44-46). Long-term partnerships institutionalised through a PPP can be particularly effective for this purpose, as they credibly substantiate the company’s charitable ambitions – more clearly than a one-off sponsorship, for instance (Duda 2002, p. 31). For cultural institutions, PPPs with companies can mean a gain in image by signaling openness to change and innovation. It is also an opportunity to address new target groups: for example, the company’s employees (Freisburger 2000, p. 146).

Next, collaboration with a private partner can offer cultural institutions efficiency gains, as private companies often have specialised know-how that is less common in the public sector (Freisburger 2000, pp. 139-141). In the example of the PPP between the Kunstpalast and E.ON, the museum and foundation benefited primarily from the company’s economic and managerial expertise as well as its experience in marketing and public relations. If integrated correctly and communicated within the company, the company’s employees can also benefit from the offerings of the cultural institution (Borchardt 2009, pp. 73-76).

Lastly, a well-funded and well-supported cultural institution can enhance the attractiveness of a given location and contribute to the revitalisation of its cultural life. For companies, a vibrant cultural environment is attractive because it improves the quality of life for employees and thus helps to attract and retain talent (Bzdak 2022, pp. 51-53). Within the framework of a PPP, companies can actively shape their immediate environment and expand their operational reach, gaining access to new target groups and stakeholders (Lamprecht 2014, pp. 18-19).

Risks of Public-Private Partnerships in the cultural sector

Cultural institutions also encounter various risks in entering into PPPs. Firstly, they may come under pressure to compromise their artistic freedom and independence to align with the commercial interests of private partners (Wilhaus 2008, p. 52). Similarly, companies may face conflicts if their commercial goals do not align with the cultural and social objectives of the institution.

Secondly, financial dependence on a single private partner can be risky and precarious, especially if the partner decides to end the collaboration. This could lead to a significant funding shortfall. Companies are complex entities subject to economic fluctuations, and changes in leadership or strategic direction can impact the partnership

immensely. These external factors are challenging to forecast accurately. Committing to a long-term and financially intensive partnership with a cultural institution can be risky for companies, particularly during periods of economic uncertainty.

Next, reputational risks must be considered. The involvement of a private partner in a scandal, whether directly affecting the partnership or occurring independently, could tarnish the reputation of the cultural institution. Conversely, companies risk reputational damage if their collaboration with a cultural institution is perceived merely as a marketing tactic rather than a genuine commitment to cultural values (Borchardt 2009, p. 50), or if they are accused of exerting undue influence, as illustrated in this case.

Finally, PPPs can be complex and resource-intensive to manage, as sustaining a long-term partnership often requires ongoing oversight and adaptation compared to one-time sponsorship arrangements, and they typically involve higher transactional costs (Bovaird, Jeffares and Sullivan 2013, pp. 167-168; Klein 2015, p. 13; Windoffer and Ziekow 2008, p. 45). This complexity entails additional administrative burdens and management resources for both the cultural institution and the participating company.

Key learnings and recommendations for future collaborations

Based on the analysis of the case study and the opportunities and risks associated with Public-Private Partnerships between cultural institutions and businesses, several recommendations can be drawn to make such collaborations advantageous for all parties involved and successful over the long term:

Individualisation as an opportunity

As previously outlined, PPPs are processes based on highly individual conditions and agreements, depending on which partners are involved and the motivations underlying the cooperation. Within the given legal framework, there is considerable scope for how the PPP can be structured. This potential should be recognised and fully utilised by those involved when reaching an agreement. As the case study shows, both advantages and challenges can arise from the

way a PPP model is designed – for example, how many parties are included, how the shares of financing and voting rights are distributed – particularly since these can create complex power dynamics. The PPP model can be tailored to the goals and needs of individual partners, provided these are communicated transparently and clearly defined in advance.

Clear goal setting and expectation management

All parties should clearly and transparently communicate their goals, expectations and boundaries from the outset to avoid misunderstandings and conflicts of interest. According to the differing interests of companies and museums, these goals do not have to be identical; however, ideally, they should complement each other to the advantage of both partners. Developing a shared vision and mission for the partnership that incorporates both cultural and commercial objectives is crucial (Budäus 2004, p. 12; Windoffer and Ziekow 2008, pp. 49-52). This vision should be endorsed by all participating institutions and not solely dependent on individuals at the decision-making level.

An example of a successful Public-Private Partnership (PPP) is the collaboration between the Philadelphia Museum of Art (PMA), the City of Philadelphia, the Philadelphia Energy Authority as well as Johnson Controls, a company specialising in sustainable building solutions. This partnership was formed in line with the City of Philadelphia's sustainability goal to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050. Given that buildings in Philadelphia account for the majority of the city's carbon footprint, it was necessary to make many of them more energy-efficient, including the PMA.

As part of this partnership, the museum was equipped with new building technology, which not only significantly reduces emissions but also leads to substantial cost savings. This project serves as an example of a well-defined PPP with clear objectives and the meaningful involvement of a private partner from the relevant industry. If the goals of this partnership are met, it could positively impact the public perception of all parties involved. The City of Philadelphia, the museum and Johnson Controls are thereby demonstrating their commitment to achieving sustainability goals

and are working together to realise these objectives (City of Philadelphia, Office of Sustainability 2021).

Willingness to cooperate

Don't collaborate unless you are willing to thoughtfully consider and educate yourself about the nature of the process involved' (Thomson and Perry 2006, p. 28). Leadership figures and their leadership qualities play a crucial role in partnerships. Certain traits, such as a proactive personality and an entrepreneurial spirit, can have a positive impact (Esteve, Longo and Ysa 2013, pp. 108-110). These qualities can be adopted by the decision-makers of all parties involved. Schmitz stated in his interview that no partnership in the true sense of the word could be formed in their case because the museum directors resisted, possibly out of concern about being instrumentalised – a not entirely unjustified worry, as this case study has shown. Instead, a trust-based, 'consensus-oriented behavior' (Windoffer and Ziekow 2008, p. 45) should be promoted (Wilhaus 2008, pp. 77-78).

Contractual design and flexibility

Contracts should delineate clear provisions defining roles and responsibilities, financial contributions, decision-making processes and termination conditions. At the same time, contracts must be adaptable to changes in the economic and cultural landscape without compromising the partnership's stability. Regular evaluation of the partnership is essential to ensure that agreed-upon goals are being achieved and to make adjustments as needed. A crisis management plan should be in place to respond appropriately to unexpected challenges and crises. PPPs are generally time-limited projects. Therefore, a suitable exit strategy should be devised to ensure that funding can continue if one of the parties withdraws from the collaboration. As will be further discussed below, diversifying or involving multiple private entities can be highly effective in reducing reliance on a single partner.

Preservation of artistic independence

Cultural institutions must safeguard their artistic and curatorial independence and autonomy. This can be ensured through contractual provisions that prevent interference in artistic decisions. Establishing an independent

ethics commission could further ensure that cultural values and standards are not compromised by commercial interests.

Financial diversification and sustainability

Models for sustainable financing should be developed to reduce dependence on a single private partner, such as diversifying revenue sources or establishing reserves. Involving multiple donors, whether private or corporate, in the PPP can enhance sustainability. Grosse-Brockhoff cited the Stiftung Schloss und Park Benrath (Benrath Castle and Park Foundation) in Düsseldorf as a positive example. This historical castle and park complex

formed a PPP in March 2000 with the involvement of various business, private and non-profit partners, and it has been highly successful ever since (Interview Grosse-Brockhoff). Providing general recommendations for selecting suitable corporate partners proves challenging. Wismer noted in his interview that companies with a strong tradition in cultural promotion, enjoying a solid reputation in this sector, are more likely to support such initiatives. Despite differing opinions on the significance of E.ON's relocation from Düsseldorf to Essen in the decision to terminate the partnership, it is evident that seeking partners operating within the region, with a long-term commitment to the area, has proven

beneficial. Such partners are motivated to enhance their environment accordingly (Müller and Siebenhaar 2019).⁶

Stakeholder engagement and public relations

Involving the local community and other stakeholders in the process is crucial to ensure broad support for the partnership and alignment with community needs. Open and transparent communication with the public about the goals, progress and challenges of the partnership fosters trust and acceptance (Wilhaus 2008, pp. 79-84).

The Public-Private Partnership between the Kunstpalast museum and E.ON illustrates the complexities and multifaceted outcomes of such collaborations. While PPPs are often viewed as innovative solutions to bridge the gap between public and private sectors, they are not without their challenges. As Windoffer and Ziekow (2008) emphasise, a successful PPP should be understood as 'a systematic modernization strategy' that bridges the boundaries between the market and the state, creating a 'hybrid governance structure'. This approach suggests that PPPs should not merely address isolated issues, but should be taken seriously as comprehensive procedures that integrate diverse expectations and objectives (Windoffer and Ziekow, pp. 34-35). In the case of the Kunstpalast and E.ON, the partnership initially brought substantial financial and managerial benefits to the museum. E.ON's contributions facilitated major renovations and operational funding, while the museum benefited from E.ON's business management expertise. However, the relationship also revealed significant power imbalances and external dependencies. Despite the foundation's statutes intending to guarantee artistic autonomy, the museum's reliance on E.ON's funding made it susceptible to corporate interests and economic fluctuations. Overall, the museum seems to have been reluctant to engage in a true partnership with the company, failing to fully exploit the potential synergies. This resistance limited the benefits that could have been derived from a more integrated collaboration. Thus, it is crucial to strike a balance that allows both parties to benefit while minimising dependencies and maintaining respective autonomy. Reeves (2013) notes that the diverse expectations placed on PPPs are often promises rather than guarantees: ones that do not automatically materialise. This was evident when changes in E.ON's leadership and economic pressures adversely impacted the partnership. These external factors led to reduced financial support and ultimately the partnership's dissolution. This underscores the importance of clear goal-setting, transparent communication and flexible contractual arrangements in PPPs. Moreover, including an exit strategy in the contract is crucial to mitigate risks associated with unforeseen changes in circumstances or partner commitment. It also highlights the necessity for cultural institutions to maintain their artistic independence and develop sustainable financing models that reduce reliance on a single partner.

Engaging multiple stakeholders and maintaining open public relations can foster broader support and alignment with community needs, enhancing the partnership's resilience and success.

In conclusion, while the PPP between the Kunstpalast and E.ON had its successes, it also demonstrated the inherent risks and complexities of such arrangements.

Future PPPs must consider these lessons to balance the benefits of private sector involvement with the need to safeguard public and cultural interests.

NOTES

1 In 2021, a private household spent an average of €3,060 on leisure, entertainment and culture. That was €192 more than in the previous year (€2,868), but €348 less than before the Covid-19 pandemic in 2019. This represented 9.7 per cent of a private household's total consumer spending in 2021 (Statistische Ämter des Bundes und der Länder 2022, p. 7).

2 Statements based on the expert interviews conducted by the author, Nienke Wüst, are marked with the note 'Interview' and the last name of the respective interviewee, e.g. '... (Interview Grosse-Brockhoff)'.
3 The decision not to interview other actors was based on the significant roles these five individuals played, which were deemed sufficient to comprehensively understand the dynamics and outcomes of the partnership.

4 Jean-Hubert Martin, a key figure in the PPP, has since worked abroad in Milan and Geneva and is no longer actively involved – therefore he could not be reached for an interview.

5 Unfortunately, Dorothee von Posadowsky-Wehner was not available for an interview.

6 This also seems to be confirmed by the fact that E.ON has been increasingly supporting the Folkwang Museum in Essen since ending its partnership with the Kunstpalast and relocating to Essen (Interview Wismer).

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INTERVIEWS:

- ▶ Interview with Hans-Heinrich Grosse-Brockhoff, conducted by Nienke Wüst on 31 May 2024, recorded via Zoom.
- ▶ Interview with Harry Schmitz, conducted by Nienke Wüst on 31 May 2024, recorded via Zoom.
- ▶ Interview with Beat Wismer, conducted by Nienke Wüst on 17 June 2024, recorded via Zoom.