

Case study ID

PO_01

URBAN POCKETS

CASE STUDY SHORT SUMMARY REPORT

Authors

Eng. Flora Krasniqi, Ph.D.
Ph.D. Candidate Sadmira Malaj

Name of the institution

POLIS University

Bylis St. 12, Highway Tirana-Durres, Km
5, Kashar, SH2, Tirana 1051, Albania

URBAN POCKETS

Case Study at a Glance

This initiative comes in the frame of the ‘Urban Activisms for Civic Democracy’, implemented by Co-PLAN in cooperation with the Municipality of Tirana and POLIS University, supported by the US Embassy in Tirana, Deutscher Zentrum, and the Balkan Art Angle. The project tackles the need for the community to assume its role and responsibility in city-making processes through increased participation in the processes that identify, raise, and address issues of collective concern. The focus of this project was the greening of the areas, and an improved organization/division of the public space, through urban activism and the contribution of the citizens themselves. The complete intervention makes for a very good example of participatory planning as well as that of the active participation of citizens in decision-making. The project, which was implemented in two stages, addresses problems identified by the community itself, in a way that was developed and agreed jointly. Such interventions are particularly important at times when public space has been affected by the great pressure and need to develop. Due to such reasons, they are often left unused, unattended, and are often treated as transitory spaces belonging to nobody. With some good will, and commitment we can transform these spaces into the most popular and frequented places in our neighborhoods.

This report was prepared by the team of Polis University within the UPRUN project. The team of Polis University is responsible for the content and the accuracy of the statements presented in this report.

Unless otherwise indicated, the rights to all images, figures, and photographs included in this report belong to the authors or the respective university team. Any third-party materials are used with appropriate permission or attribution where required.

Case Study Profile

Topic

- ☐ Community Gardening & Urban Agriculture
- ☐ Community Hubs & Cultural Activities
- ☒ Urban Design & Planning Processes
- ☒ Public Space Development & Management
- ☐ Local Economic Development
- ☒ Urban Regeneration & Rehabilitation

Scale

- ☐ Metropolitan / city region
- ☒ City scale
- ☒ Neighbourhood scale
- ☐ Block scale
- ☐ Building scale

Resilience Challenge

- ☒ Environmental and ecological resilience
- ☒ social & cultural resilience
- ☐ Infrastructure and technological resilience
- ☒ Economic & livelihood resilience

Duration

- ☐ Immediate (less than 1 month)
- ☐ Project-Based (1–12 months)
- ☐ Programme-Based (1–3 years)
- ☒ Strategic (3–5 years)
- ☒ Structural / Transformative (more than 5 years)

Stakeholders

- ☒ Community members
- ☒ Local government
- ☒ Non-governmental organizations (NGOs)
- ☐ Private sector
- ☒ Academic and research institutions

Type of Civic Engagement Supporting Neighborhood Resilience

- ☒ Resident-led and grassroots initiatives
- ☒ Collaborative planning projects or processes
- ☐ Advocacy and capacity building
- ☐ Volunteer and community service projects
- ☒ Short-term, more flexible project-based engagement
- ☒ Long-term, more institutionalized engagement (development of stable structures, etc.)
- ☐ Protest and resistance mobilization
- ☒ Art-and culture-based civic Engagement

Level of Civic Participation

- ☐ Information
- ☒ Involvement or participation
- ☒ Collaboration or co-creation
- ☐ Empowerment
- ☐ Resistance and protest-based empowerment

Empirical Basis and Methodological Approach

The Urban Pockets case study examines participatory urban regeneration initiatives implemented in several densely populated neighborhoods of Tirana, Albania. The empirical basis of the study draws on project documentation, participatory planning activities, and stakeholder engagement processes carried out through the collaboration of Co-PLAN, POLIS University, local authorities, and community groups. The methodological approach combines qualitative analysis, participatory design workshops, community consultations, and on-site engagement activities to explore how civic participation contributes to reclaiming underutilized public spaces, improving environmental quality, and strengthening neighborhood resilience through collaborative urban design practices.

As part of the case study, we conducted interviews with representatives from Co-PLAN and POLIS University who were directly involved in the conception, coordination, and implementation of the Urban Pockets initiative. The interviews focused on the participatory planning process, the role of local communities in identifying spatial challenges, and the collaborative mechanisms used to transform neglected public spaces into active neighborhood environments. The discussions also explored how partnerships between civil society, academic institutions, and local authorities contributed to long-term urban resilience and social cohesion.

Compendious summary

The Urban Pockets initiative was implemented in various densely populated neighborhoods of Tirana, Albania's capital and largest city. These neighborhoods are characterized by unplanned urban expansion, limited green areas, and inadequate public infrastructure.

The objective of this case study is to examine how civic engagement, and participatory processes contribute to shaping spatial planning strategies that enhance neighborhood resilience in Tirana, Albania. Focusing on Co-PLAN's Urban Pockets initiative, the study explores how community-led interventions in underutilized urban spaces can improve the built environment, strengthen social cohesion, and promote environmental sustainability. This analysis highlights the transformative role of civil society organizations, local residents, students, and municipal actors in reimagining and reclaiming public space through collaborative, bottom-up approaches. It aims to demonstrate how participatory urban design and inclusive spatial practices can build more resilient and livable urban neighborhoods, especially in cities experiencing informal growth and infrastructure strain.

The methodology combines both qualitative and spatial tools to assess how spatial planning interacts with civil participation in the development of Urban Pockets.

Phase 01	Participatory Design Workshops	Co-PLAN, in collaboration with POLIS University and local communities, facilitated workshops to co-design interventions for small urban spaces. Additionally, community members, youth, and students participated in ideation sessions to identify local needs, co-develop design ideas, and prioritize features (e.g., benches, greenery, play zones).
Phase 02	Community Consultation and On-site Engagement	Informal discussions and meetings were conducted in situ to gather input from residents, especially women, children, and elderly citizens. These interactions helped align interventions with local knowledge and daily lived experiences of space.
Phase 03	Designing process	3D designing process of the neighborhood and development of three scenarios proposed based on the community feedback generated from the workshop and consultation.
Phase 04	Pilot Interventions	Short-term, low-cost interventions (e.g., repainting walls, installing benches, planting trees) were implemented as prototypes. But was redesigned as well some green areas for sitting. These served both as testing grounds and as a way to build trust and interest in long-term spatial transformation.

Phase 05	Reflexive Monitoring and Documentation	The process was continuously documented through photographs, field notes, and stakeholder feedback. Monitoring focused on community participation levels, changes in space usage, and social interaction patterns post-intervention.
----------	--	--

Table 1. Overview of initiative's main phases, Source: Co-PLAN, Institute for Habitat Development

Key Urban Issues/Questions Analyzed (Spatial Resilience Challenges in the Neighborhood)

Key Spatial Issues:

- Lack of accessible and inclusive public spaces
- Environmental vulnerabilities and not well maintained, where the open space were mostly used as an informal parking area.
- A disconnected public realm reduced opportunities for social interaction and weakened the sense of place.
- Inadequate lighting, pedestrian paths, and seating limited the usability and safety of common spaces

The Urban Pockets project is a model of informal, grassroots civic engagement that gradually evolved into structured, participatory co-creation or planning through participatory. Participating in design workshops facilitated by Co-PLAN and POLIS University, where residents, students, and experts shared knowledge and envisioned solutions. Citizens were engaged in the implementation phases as well, such as in planting the trees, or fixing the bins etc.

The Urban Pockets initiative by Co-PLAN showcased a collaborative, primarily bottom-up model, where diverse stakeholders interacted around a shared goal of transforming neglected urban spaces. The dynamics were shaped by informal alliances, mutual support, and shared ownership over small-scale but high-impact interventions. The stakeholders where: initiators (researcher, urban planners, architects), community members, NGOs and Civil Society (Co-PLAN, POLIS University), local government (Municipality of Tirana), private sector. Decision-making was shared among residents, civil society, and youth, with each group bringing unique insights. NGOs served as bridging actors between citizens and authorities, ensuring both agency and accountability.

Mechanisms of Civil Engagement in Spatial Planning for Resilience

The Urban Pockets initiative was grounded in direct civic action, prioritizing face-to-face, neighborhood-scale forms of participation over formal policy frameworks. The participation was in co-design workshop process, community assembles and site talks during the budget preparation, and during the implementation phase.

Residents were invited to participate in the informative pre-workshop session, through leaflets and door-to-door communication. After their confirmation for the participation in the workshop, they were present in the workshop, where a model of their common space in the neighborhood was created, and with

elements symbolizing urban furniture (trees, benches, bins, streetlights, parking areas, no parking areas, paths etc.) they placed them according to their needs. This brought a lot of discussion and arguments among the residents of the neighborhood, and it took the moderator to assist on this process to reach out a common sense of the result.

After the results of the discussion during the workshop, it was decided that a part of the open space to be dedicated to urban farming, where a part of the neighborhood community could be involved in planting different fruits or vegetables, or even inviting kids to learn during this process.

The target group participation was consisting of woman, children, elders, young families etc. There were not present many of people who rented an apartment in that area. They were less interested in the process. The initiator team made sure to minimize the language and technical barriers through visual tools, drawings, and onsite engagement. However, overall, some elderly residents or single parents found it difficult to attend all events. As well as Informal tenants or unregistered residents were sometimes hesitant to participate, fearing visibility.

The Urban Pockets approach sparked grassroots enthusiasm and inspired several community-led efforts beyond the initial project. Resident led maintenance groups took over cleaning and upkeep duties around the neighborhood. Micro-initiatives emerged: neighbors added flower boxes, expanded green areas.

Case study findings and lessons learned

This case study explores how community engagement influenced spatial planning outcomes in a neighborhood revitalization project. It highlights the ways in which participatory processes shaped resilient, multifunctional urban spaces, while also uncovering challenges in sustaining institutional support. By examining both the successes and gaps in collaboration, the study offers valuable insights into the role of civil participation in driving inclusive and adaptive urban design. Some of the key findings and lessons learned are listed below.

- Community co-designed multifunctional public spaces enhancing resilience and social cohesion.
- Informative preparation led to strong workshop outcomes and a shared neighborhood masterplan.
- Diverse engagement methods ensured inclusive participation, including marginalized groups.
- Local representatives played a key role in bridging residents and project facilitators.
- Open communication-maintained trust and consistent community involvement.
- Municipality support declined mid-project, affecting budget and implementation.
- Strong community involvement throughout; weaker engagement with institutional stakeholders hindered execution.

Lessons Learned

- Balance is needed between community engagement and institutional collaboration.
- Early and transparent communication boosts participation and shared ownership.
- Use multiple methods to ensure inclusivity across all community segments.
- Involve the community at all project stages: inform, consult, co-design, co-fund, implement, and maintain.

- Actively manage political and economic risks by maintaining strong ties with key stakeholders.

Conclusion

The Urban Pockets initiative clearly demonstrated that civil engagement is fundamental in shaping resilient spatial planning at the neighborhood level. The most successful forms of engagement were participatory co-design workshops, hands-on community actions, and inclusive, informal neighborhood assemblies, which empowered residents to actively reimagine and reclaim underutilized urban spaces. These spatial interventions enhanced not only the physical environment, through improved public spaces, greenery, and infrastructure, but also social resilience by strengthening community ties and local stewardship. The case illustrated that resilience emerges most effectively when residents have direct influence over spatial decisions that affect their daily lives.

The Urban Pockets case study highlights the crucial importance of early and sustained involvement of the community throughout the entire spatial planning process. In this project, the continuous engagement of residents from the beginning to the end was a clear success, ensuring that local needs, preferences, and knowledge shaped every phase of neighborhood design and implementation. This comprehensive involvement fostered a strong sense of ownership and accountability, which significantly contributed to the resilience and sustainability of the interventions. However, a significant challenge emerged during the implementation phase regarding the involvement of the Municipality of Tirana. While the municipality was initially very promising and willing to support the project, over time, their engagement waned. The originally proposed budget was halved, and the allocation for equipment and urban furniture was similarly reduced. This shift complicated the implementation and limited the scope of physical improvements.

Attachments

Photos



© Silvi Jano, Co-Plan



© Silvi Jano, Co-Plan

References

- <https://www.co-plan.org/en/urban-pockets-in-tirana-s-neighbourhoods/> (last access on 25 May 2026)

UPRUN was cofunded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or Erasmus+ National Agency for Higher Education (German Academic Exchange Service). Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.



This project has received funding under ERASMUS+ Cooperation Partnerships programme. Project No 2023-1-DE01-KA220-HED-000167004.

