

WHERE ALBANIA WALK

CASE STUDY SHORT SUMMARY REPORT

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WHERE ALBANIA WALK

Case Study at a Glance

Albania is a country that has been through multiple political transitions for most of the 20th century. A process that transformed its capital, Tirana, into a constant construction site. Its first regulatory city planning projects date back to the 1940s. However, they have been reviewed according to contrasting ideologies of successive political shifts. Before the rise of the communist regime, Tirana was a small, compact city that provided its citizens with their daily needs. It had plenty of public and open spaces, housing, and schools, but everything changed after the fall of communism. Tirana's population increased rapidly, and the need to build more residential buildings led to unplanned occupation patterns. As buildings grew taller and tighter, public spaces became almost non-existent. In addition, the mobility system has not been upgraded to cover the demand of the growing urbanized area. That resulted in a sedentary and unhealthy lifestyle affecting most particularly children and the younger population that use parks and playgrounds as an essential part of their growth process. Therefore, the city council of Tirana is currently developing a comprehensive program to improve the quality of its urban environment combined with a city-wide active mobility strategy. It aims to expand the existing network of public places to increase both health outcomes and the perceived quality of life.

This paper reports on the Where Albania Walks - a partnership between the city council, GIZ, and the WOW team. WAW takes place during the European Youth Capital 2022. It aims to create evidence-based and community-driven strategies to regenerate the urban environment in the neighborhoods in Tirana with special attention to the needs of young citizens.

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.

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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

This case study investigates participatory urban mobility and public space planning initiatives implemented in Tirana within the framework of the European Youth Capital 2022 program. The empirical basis includes participatory workshops, community mapping exercises, field observations, and collaborative activities involving local residents, planners, academic institutions, civil society organizations, and municipal representatives. The methodological approach combines qualitative participatory methods with scenario development and community-based urban analysis to explore how pedestrian-oriented planning and civic engagement can contribute to healthier, more inclusive, and resilient urban environments. Particular attention is given to the co-creation of walkability strategies and the role of citizens in shaping neighborhood-level spatial interventions.

As part of the case study, interviews were conducted with representatives from academic institutions and civil society organizations involved in the development of the Where Albania Walk initiative. The interviews focused on the participatory methodologies used to engage communities in mobility planning, the challenges related to pedestrian infrastructure and public space accessibility, and the role of collaborative urban design in promoting healthier urban lifestyles. The discussions also examined the cooperation between municipal actors, researchers, and community stakeholders in shaping evidence-based and citizen-oriented mobility strategies.

Compendious summary

The *Where Albania Walk* initiative was implemented in Tirana, Albania's rapidly urbanizing capital, to address challenges related to unplanned expansion, lack of pedestrian infrastructure, and insufficient public spaces. The project, led by the Municipality of Tirana in collaboration with GIZ, the Institute of Social Studies and Humanities, GUtech, and Polis University, aimed to improve walkability and public space quality through participatory urban design.

The objective of this case study is to explore how civic engagement contributes to shaping spatial planning strategies that enhance neighborhood resilience and promote healthier, more inclusive urban environments. Focusing on the *Where Albania Walk* initiative, the study analyzes how community-driven processes inform pedestrian-oriented planning, strengthen social cohesion, and foster environmental sustainability.

The methodology employed participatory workshops, community mapping, and scenario development exercises that engaged local residents, students, planners, and decision-makers in co-creating pedestrian-friendly design concepts. Although the project did not reach implementation due to funding constraints, it generated valuable insights into how participatory urban design can lay the groundwork for long-term resilience and inclusive urban transformation.

Phase 01	Participatory Design Workshops	Engaged residents, students, and planners in identifying mobility issues and envisioning solutions.
Phase 02	Community Consultation and On-site Engagement	Conducted surveys, discussions, and participatory mapping in neighborhoods.
Phase 03	Designing process	Developed pedestrian-friendly scenarios and street layout proposals based on community feedback.
Phase 04	Pilot Interventions	Planned for small-scale, modular public space improvements (not implemented due to funding).
Phase 05	Reflexive Monitoring and Documentation	Documented the process and lessons for future replication.

Table 1. Overview of initiative's main phases

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

Key Spatial Issues:

- Unsafe and insufficient sidewalks and pedestrian crossings.

- Dominance of vehicular traffic causing congestion, pollution, and unsafe conditions.
- Underused and poorly maintained public spaces lacking amenities.
- Limited greenery and shading contributing to heat and environmental discomfort.
- Lack of inclusive design for children, elderly, and persons with disabilities.

Social and Environmental Implications:

- Reduced social interaction and sense of community.
- Increased sedentary lifestyles, particularly among youth.
- Diminished air quality and environmental resilience.

Mechanisms of Civil Engagement in Spatial Planning for Resilience

The Where Albania Walks initiative placed civic engagement at the core of its spatial planning process, using participatory tools and collaborative methods to explore how citizens could actively contribute to shaping more walkable and resilient neighborhoods in Tirana. The engagement strategy unfolded through a series of participatory design workshops, community mapping sessions, and collaborative planning activities that brought together residents, students, planners, and local authorities.

Through the participatory design workshops, participants collectively identified urban challenges related to pedestrian safety, accessibility, and the lack of inclusive public spaces. These workshops served as creative spaces where community members exchanged ideas, discussed mobility needs, and collaboratively developed pedestrian-oriented design proposals. The process encouraged a shared understanding of how small-scale spatial improvements—such as sidewalk widening, street reorganization, and pocket parks—could transform neighborhood quality of life.

Complementing this, community mapping exercises provided residents with tangible ways to express their lived experiences of urban space. Using printed maps, markers, and stickers, participants identified unsafe routes, physical barriers, and potential zones for improvement. This hands-on method enabled the generation of localized spatial knowledge that reflected everyday mobility patterns and revealed the specific needs of diverse user groups, from children to elderly pedestrians.

Building on the insights gathered, scenario development sessions invited participants to envision alternative futures for their neighborhoods. Together, they co-created pedestrian-friendly street layouts and public space designs aligned with community priorities. Although these scenarios remained conceptual, they represented important steps toward community-informed urban strategies that could guide future implementation.

Throughout the process, collaborative planning emerged as a key mechanism for integrating different perspectives and expertise. The partnership between academic institutions, municipal actors, and community representatives fostered cross-disciplinary learning and mutual understanding, positioning the local community as an active co-creator rather than a passive recipient of planning outcomes.

In terms of the level of participation, the initiative advanced beyond traditional consultation, reaching the stages of involving and collaborating. Residents were not merely informed about the process but directly engaged in discussions, mapping activities, and design sessions. Institutions and communities worked jointly during the planning phase, sharing responsibility for identifying problems and developing proposals, though decision-making authority and implementation power largely remained within institutional structures.

Efforts were also made to ensure inclusivity in the engagement process. Workshops were designed to be accessible and interactive, employing visual materials and participatory tools that allowed participants with different backgrounds to contribute meaningfully, including youth and non-experts. Nonetheless, the project faced challenges in reaching more marginalized or less vocal groups, mainly due to limited outreach capacity and resource constraints. Despite these limitations, the participatory framework successfully fostered dialogue, trust, and a sense of shared ownership among those involved, laying the foundation for more inclusive and resilient spatial planning practices in the future.

Case study findings and lessons learned

- Civic participation enriched spatial planning by incorporating local knowledge and experiences.
- Participatory mapping enhanced community awareness of mobility challenges and spatial resilience.
- Collaboration between citizens, academia, and local authorities fostered trust but highlighted institutional barriers to implementation.
- Although no physical interventions were executed, conceptual pedestrian scenarios served as advocacy tools for future projects.

Challenges:

- Limited funding prevented implementation.
- Weak integration of community proposals into formal planning frameworks.
- Power asymmetries between institutions and citizens limited decision-making influence.

Lessons Learned

- Early and transparent communication fosters ownership and participation.
- Co-design workshops and participatory mapping are effective engagement tools in spatial planning.
- Balance is needed between grassroots engagement and institutional support.
- Sustained mechanisms (e.g., neighborhood committees) are vital to maintain community momentum.
- Combining academic expertise with local knowledge strengthens contextual understanding and social cohesion.

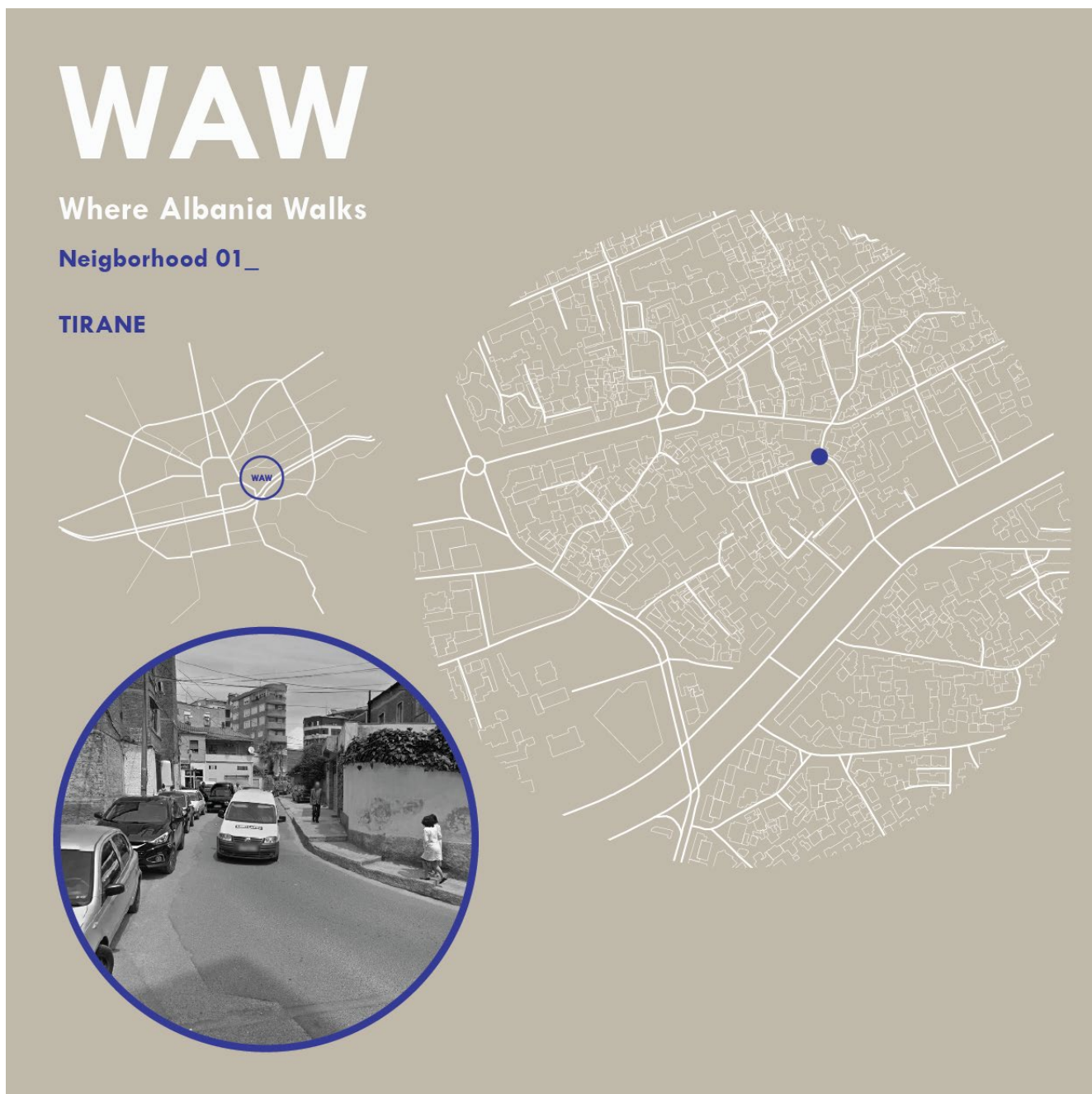
Conclusion

The Where Albania Walks initiative demonstrates that civic engagement can substantially improve the quality and inclusiveness of urban planning processes. Despite the lack of physical implementation, the participatory approach built social capital, strengthened awareness of urban resilience, and produced design concepts that could guide future interventions.

Institutionalizing such participatory methods within formal planning frameworks is essential to ensure community input translates into tangible outcomes. This approach aligns with global efforts to create people-centered, resilient cities by prioritizing local voices, pedestrian safety, and public space revitalization.

Attachments

Photos



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Workshop

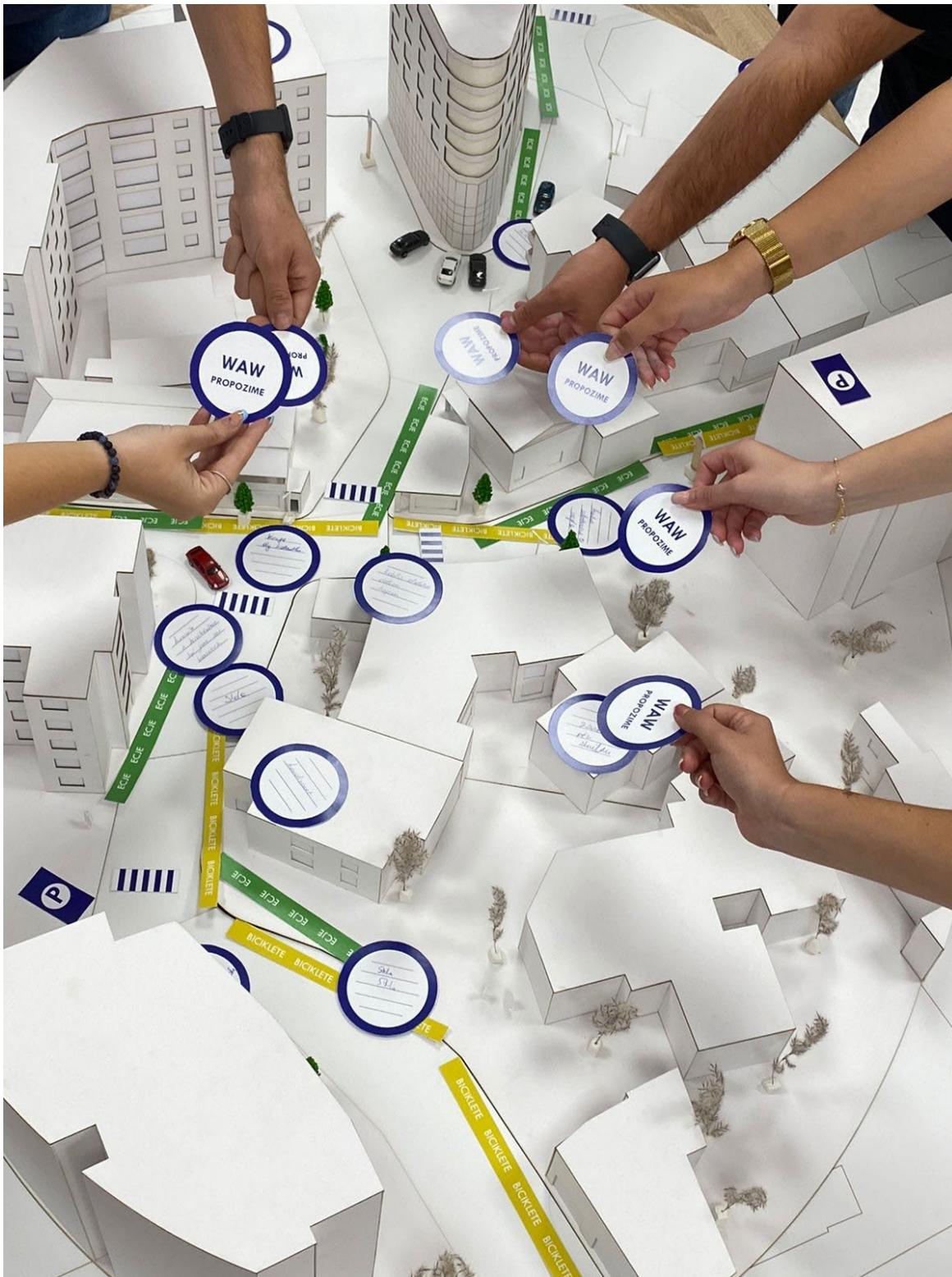


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Game Theory



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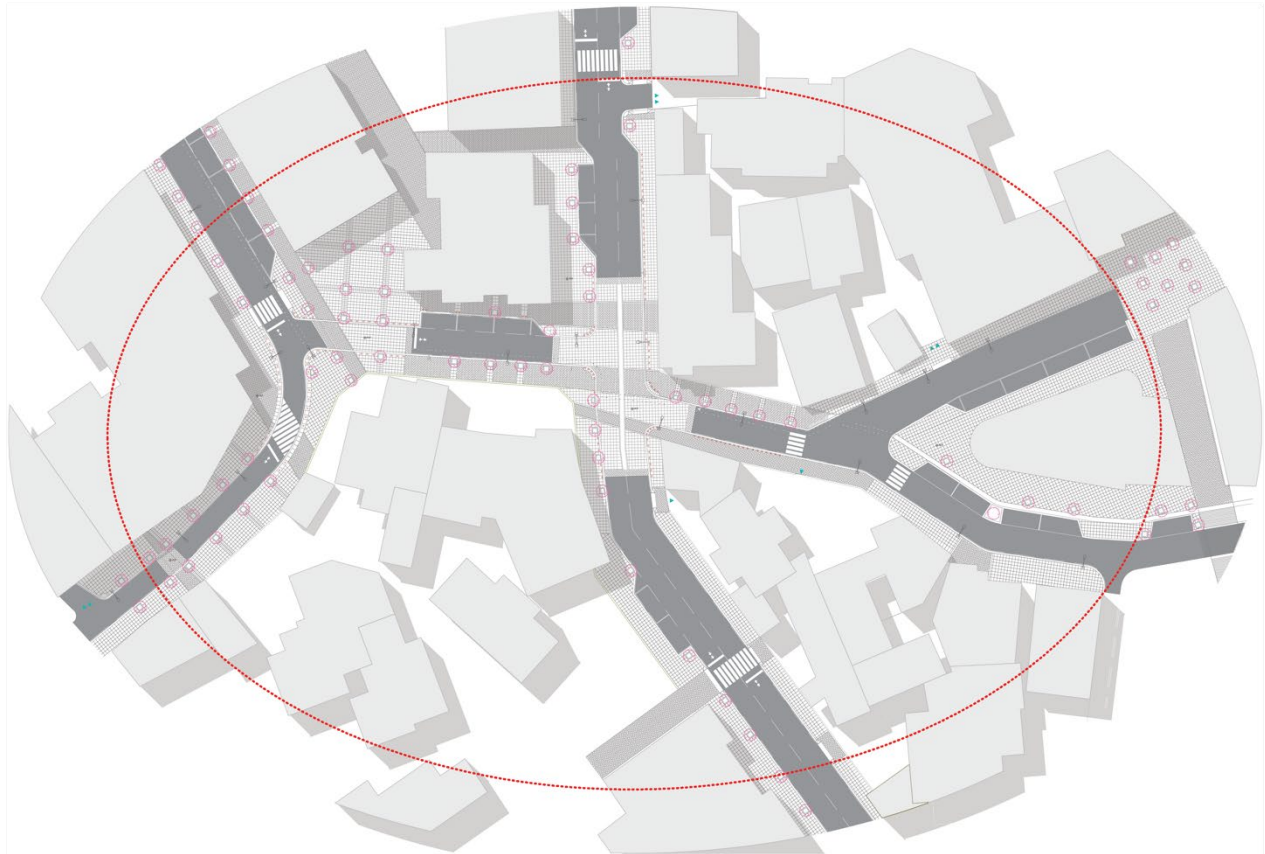


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Designing results



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https://isocarp.org/app/uploads/2023/05/ISOCARP_2022_Koka_ISO193.pdf

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