

Case study ID

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BOSTANIE

CASE STUDY SHORT SUMMARY REPORT

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Bostanie

Case Study at a Glance

This case study report investigates the Bostanie Community Garden in Skopje, North Macedonia, through the lens of civic participation and spatial resilience. Based on field observations and interviews with initiator and a beneficiary, the report examines how grassroots spatial interventions can respond to systemic urban challenges such as green space scarcity, institutional disengagement, and social fragmentation.

Bostanie emerged in 2020 as a resident-led initiative aimed at transforming a neglected urban parcel into a shared ecological and social resource. The project evolved through phases of informal coordination, spatial planning, and communal engagement, resulting in a functioning urban garden managed collectively by participants.

The report documents both the spatial design—featuring individual plots, communal areas, and sustainable infrastructure—and the mechanisms of civic governance, including consensus-based decision-making and open access to participation. It highlights the project's impact on micro-ecology, neighborhood relations, and everyday practices, while also acknowledging limitations such as the absence of legal tenure and reliance on volunteer labor.

Overall, Bostanie is presented as a model of civic-driven urbanism with relevance for participatory planning strategies. The report situates the initiative within broader discussions on urban resilience and post-socialist spatial transformation.

This report was prepared by the team of Ss. Cyril and Methodius University within the UPRUN project. The team of Ss. Cyril and Methodius 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

As part of the BOSTANIE Community Garden initiative in Skopje, various actors, including local residents, the initiator and members of Green Ark NGO, and participating beneficiaries, collaboratively developed a formerly neglected urban plot into a collectively managed community garden. The project integrates ecological production, informal social infrastructure, and shared governance of green space within a dense residential neighbourhood. A key feature of this initiative is the inclusion of residents as active decision-makers in the organisation, maintenance, and spatial development of the garden, with governance based on consensus and open access rather than formal hierarchical structures.

To facilitate this collaboration, various informal cooperation structures and participatory practices have been established, enabling residents to engage directly in planning, maintenance, and programming of the site. These include regular on-site assemblies, seasonal coordination meetings, rotating responsibility for garden zones, and collective decision-making on planting schemes, infrastructure improvements, and event organisation. While not institutionalised in a formal administrative framework, these mechanisms function as a stable participatory system that allows continuous involvement of community members and flexible adaptation to seasonal and spatial conditions. The involvement of both local residents and supporting civic actors results in a wide range of (potential) beneficiaries, including immediate participants, neighbouring households, informal users of the space, and broader urban audiences engaged through educational and ecological activities. Furthermore, the outcomes of this initiative – particularly its model of low-threshold, community-based green space governance – are considered transferable to other residential areas facing similar deficits in accessible green infrastructure and social cohesion.

As part of the case study, we conducted a total of two interviews:

- » One interview with a local stakeholder and initiator of the BOSTANIE Community Garden, who has been actively involved in the development process since its establishment in 2020 on behalf of Green Ark NGO and the resident collective. This interview focused on the initiation process, spatial transformation of the site, and the evolution of informal governance and maintenance structures over time.
- » One interview with a representative of a long-term beneficiary and active participant in the garden, who has been involved in daily maintenance, seasonal gardening activities, and collective decision-making processes. This interview provided insight into lived experience, participation dynamics, and the social and ecological impact of the initiative at the neighbourhood scale.

Compendious summary

The Bostanie Community Garden is examined as a neighborhood-scale spatial resilience initiative rooted in ecological restoration and participatory civic practices. Its development was catalyzed by a growing deficit of accessible and organized green spaces in a residential district of Skopje, North Macedonia—a condition symptomatic of broader urban fragmentation and institutional neglect. The case is particularly relevant in contexts where the urban fabric is overbuilt or densified, but lacks adequate ecological and social infrastructure. In such settings, community-driven spatial interventions like Bostanie demonstrate how informal and collaborative practices can reclaim underutilized land to generate collective benefit.

The garden's emergence reflects a hybrid model of spatial agency: informally initiated by residents yet tolerated by formal authorities. Rather than altering the built form of the neighborhood, Bostanie inserted a new layer of ecological and social use into an existing urban gap. In doing so, it provided an experimental site for urban cohabitation, ecological learning, and participatory governance.

In terms of methodology, the report draws on two in-depth interviews—one with the project initiator and one with an active participant—complemented by site visits, spatial mapping, and visual documentation. The study also included analysis of the garden's organizational structure, seasonal rhythms, and patterns of civic interaction. Since formal urban documentation of the site was limited, diagrams and observational sketches were produced to clarify spatial organization and evolving functions. The interviews served to contextualize the spatial outcomes within the lived experiences and motivations of those involved. Through this combination of narrative and spatial analysis, the case was interpreted not only as a gardening project, but as a civic platform responding to environmental degradation, social disconnection, and weak public stewardship.

The findings offer insights into the value of low-threshold, community-led spatial initiatives in enhancing resilience through ecological regeneration and participatory inclusion. The case also underscores the importance of informal governance models, peer-led decision-making, and shared maintenance as essential components of sustainable urban practices. Bostanie's model is modest in scale but conceptually significant, presenting an adaptable framework for community action in cities marked by underinvestment in public infrastructure.

Introduction

The Bostanie Community Garden, located in an urban neighborhood of Skopje, offers a relevant case study in community-led resilience through spatial intervention. As a resident-led response to the growing challenges of urban disorganization, environmental degradation, and social fragmentation, Bostanie exemplifies the transformative potential of participatory urban gardening. This initiative aligns with broader principles of spatial resilience, whereby local actors actively address the ecological, social, and infrastructural vulnerabilities in their neighborhoods.

The selection of this case is consistent with typologies of participatory spatial interventions that arise in post-socialist cities where formal planning has retreated or stagnated. As a spatial practice, Bostanie can be classified as a hybrid action involving both top-down institutional tolerance and bottom-up civic initiative. It offers a spatially bounded yet socially expansive example of how grassroots engagement can mobilize to address deficits in green infrastructure and communal cohesion.

In addition to qualitative interviews, data collection for this case involved field observation, archival review of online media coverage, spatial mapping of the site in relation to adjacent urban morphologies, and comparative analysis with similar community initiatives in Skopje.

Neighborhood challenge

Bostanie is situated in a dense, mixed residential neighborhood in Skopje, marked by mid-rise housing blocks and fragmented remnants of public space. Originally planned during the socialist era, the area once featured a balanced combination of housing and green infrastructure, but this equilibrium has been severely disrupted over time. In the decades following the post-socialist transition, unregulated infill construction and vehicle-driven land use have steadily diminished semi-public green pockets and pedestrian pathways. What remains is an uneven and poorly maintained urban fabric, where space is often contested, repurposed, or left neglected.

Although the neighborhood is centrally located and fully built-up, it suffers from pronounced ecological and social vulnerabilities. Air pollution, lack of shade, and declining walkability have become everyday concerns. According to Lence Despotoska, a long-time resident and active beneficiary of Bostanie, the environment is shaped not just by physical constraints, but by institutional disengagement. She described the neighborhood as lacking “space to move” and being marked by a pervasive “neglect of responsible institutions.” The problem is not simply an absence of green areas, but the absence of frameworks—formal or informal—that could support their care, use, and collective meaning.

In this context, Bostanie emerged as a targeted spatial intervention. Rather than introducing a new building or formal infrastructure, it reclaimed a marginal plot and reactivated it through gardening, shared labor, and civic presence. The garden filled a void left not only by spatial degradation but by a general lack of organized communal activity. It became both a spatial and social response to fragmentation—restoring biodiversity on a micro scale, while simultaneously strengthening bonds among residents who had previously lived parallel but disconnected lives.

Bostanie did not aim to transform the entire neighborhood, but it reoriented attention to the everyday environment and the potential of shared public initiative. It inserted meaning into a space that had lost its purpose, showing that even modest-scale interventions can recalibrate perceptions of agency, ownership, and care. The garden's emergence underscores that urban resilience is not only about managing risks or infrastructure, but about enabling relationships, restoring civic confidence, and cultivating sustainable forms of everyday participation.

Response to the challenge

The Bostanie Community Garden emerged in response to the spatial and institutional deficiencies characterizing its host neighborhood—particularly the lack of accessible green infrastructure and participatory civic mechanisms. The initiator, Dimitar and fellows from the The Green Ark, NGO from Skopje, identified a vacant, underutilized plot as a potential site for ecological restoration and collective use. His initial idea was informed by long-term observation of environmental neglect and the absence of structured platforms for community interaction. The proposal gradually moved from individual interest to collective engagement through informal conversations, outreach, and iterative spatial activation.

The selection of the site was driven by a combination of pragmatic considerations—such as its availability and visibility—and symbolic potential, given its status as an unclaimed residual space. This framing positioned the site as a test ground for shared reinterpretation and reprogramming of the urban commons.

The garden's implementation followed a phased sequence of actions, beginning with clearing and preparing the site. Initial infrastructural interventions included the delineation of planting beds, the introduction of composting and water collection systems, and the construction of basic amenities such as seating and shade structures. These were accompanied by periodic workshops and communal planting events. Spatial transformations coincided with the structuring of social practices: participants co-developed rules for garden use, introduced rotation schedules, and held decision-making meetings to coordinate maintenance tasks.

The rhythm of the intervention was shaped by seasonal cycles, with spring and summer intensifying the frequency of activities and fall-winter periods focusing on site maintenance and planning. Participation varied according to individual availability and interest but was anchored by a core group of engaged users. Tools and materials were either donated, repurposed, or sourced through micro-funding, which influenced the pace and scale of infrastructural additions.

Throughout the process, both spatial and social infrastructures were developed in parallel. Physical interventions remained small-scale and adaptable, while the organizational framework evolved through consensus-driven protocols. Communication between participants occurred mainly through in-person meetings and digital messaging platforms. There was no formal hierarchy; instead, responsibilities circulated according to need and availability.

This approach emphasized continuity through collective routines, enabling the garden to function as both a productive landscape and a site of low-threshold interaction. The evolving configuration of the garden responded to user input, environmental conditions, and material constraints, resulting in a layered and adaptive spatial practice.

Mechanisms of civic engagement

Public involvement in the Bostanie garden was characterized by informality, continuity, and inclusiveness. Lence learned of the initiative through digital media, having seen an interview with the organizers. This reflects the project's visibility strategy, which included appearances in alternative media platforms focused on urban innovation.

Once engaged, she became a regular participant, attending monthly meetings, contributing to maintenance work, and taking part in organizing events. Her testimony confirms that decisions in the garden are made "by majority consent," and that the seasonal nature of gardening required the community to adapt in a flexible but structured manner.

The civic engagement mechanisms employed include consensus-based assemblies, distributed operational responsibilities, and peer-led workshops. Unlike formal participatory planning channels such as public hearings, Bostanie relied on grassroots coordination. As Lence described, all tasks were collectively discussed and prioritized according to their urgency and seasonality.

The participatory process also included educational and advocacy functions. The garden hosted events open to the broader public, offering training on urban gardening techniques and ecological awareness. While these were not part of a formal co-design process in the planning sense, they served to broaden the project's civic interface.

Stakeholder dynamics were primarily horizontal, with minimal intervention from municipal authorities. Although tolerated, the garden operated independently of institutional support. This autonomy allowed for rapid and context-sensitive responses, but also introduced limitations in scale and long-term security.

Inclusiveness was maintained through open access and non-hierarchical decision-making. As Lence emphasized, the diversity of the community required a high degree of tolerance and communication. She reported that "all my suggestions are taken into account," suggesting that the project maintained a participatory ethos throughout its operation.

Case study findings and lessons learned

The Bostanie initiative illustrates how small-scale civic participation can activate underutilized green infrastructure and foster neighborhood-scale spatial resilience. Through the co-creation of a community garden, residents repurposed a neglected plot into a multifunctional space for ecological cultivation, informal gathering, and environmental education. According to Lence, a resident and regular participant, the garden is now frequented not only by its core group of gardeners but also by neighbors who use it as a space for relaxation and social interaction. These overlapping uses have turned the garden into a local reference point, with visible effects on both the built and natural environment.

One of the spatially measurable impacts has been the expansion of plant life into adjacent areas. As Lence observed, "some plants have spread into the surrounding park," subtly contributing to the broader ecological fabric of the neighborhood. This informal process of rewilding aligns with the garden's original intent to act as a low-maintenance green node within a densely built context. Socially, the project enabled new relationships to form across age and background lines, creating a sense of shared stewardship over the space. The informality of engagement—based on face-to-face coordination, shared labor, and analog communication—proved particularly effective in a context where formal planning mechanisms and digital platforms are underutilized or distrusted.

Nonetheless, several structural limitations persist. The garden operates without formal tenure or long-term legal protection, leaving it vulnerable to future land repurposing or administrative redirection. While participation is voluntary and flexible, it inherently favors those with available time, physical capacity, or prior familiarity with civic involvement. Lence experienced no personal barriers, but others in the community may be less able to contribute consistently. Dimitar, one of the initiators, also acknowledged episodes of internal tension, which required careful mediation and continuous dialogue. These challenges suggest a reliance on sustained interpersonal trust and emotional labor.

Material and environmental constraints further shaped the initiative's scope. The absence of institutional support limited access to tools, infrastructural upgrades, and formal recognition. Seasonal weather shifts influenced planting cycles and meeting frequency, requiring a high level of adaptability from participants. Despite these challenges, the space remains active, shaped through incremental, low-cost interventions and a loosely organized but persistent culture of care. The project demonstrates the

interaction between ecological renewal and social routine as a mechanism for grassroots spatial transformation, contingent on ongoing participation and contextual responsiveness.

Conclusion

The Bostanie Community Garden offers insight into how grassroots spatial practices can shape resilience at the neighborhood level. In a context marked by limited public green infrastructure and weak participatory mechanisms, the initiative succeeded in transforming a marginal space into a site of ecological productivity and social reactivation. What was once an overlooked plot became part of the local environmental and social ecosystem—visited not only by those who cultivated it but by neighbors who used it for informal gatherings, rest, and observation. Through seasonal rhythms, shared labor, and minimal infrastructure, the space developed into a hybrid environment where nature and civic interaction intersect.

The most effective forms of engagement were those that remained low-threshold and analog—cleaning the land together, negotiating responsibilities through open conversation, and planning activities in response to the natural cycle of the site. These practices allowed for wide and informal inclusion, without requiring technical expertise or digital access. Participants joined not through formal invitations or institutional outreach, but through visibility, proximity, and shared effort. Trust and mutual recognition became the primary drivers of participation.

Spatially, the garden not only restructured its own site but influenced its surroundings. As Lence observed, plant life began to spread into the neighboring park area, and the site itself gradually became a reference point within the everyday landscape of the neighborhood. Socially, it fostered new bonds among residents who previously shared space without interaction. These effects emerged through slow and accumulative processes rather than through planned interventions. The garden's evolution followed an organic logic, shaped as much by seasonality as by social dynamics.

Yet, the limitations of the initiative were also shaped by this informality. Operating without legal tenure, the garden remains vulnerable to land-use shifts. Its reliance on volunteer labor and self-organization means that participation is uneven and potentially unsustainable over time. Internal disagreements and the lack of structural support required continuous negotiation and emotional investment. The absence of municipal involvement, beyond passive tolerance, limited opportunities for scaling up or stabilizing the initiative.

Still, Bostanie has produced a form of civic infrastructure that functions independently of formal planning systems. Its structure—based on autonomy, shared responsibility, and ecological stewardship—suggests a framework that could be applied in other contexts marked by institutional gaps or socio-environmental stress. It also opens space for reflection on past and future modes of self-management in urban neighborhoods. While temporary and precarious, such initiatives form part of a longer genealogy of resident-led spatial production—one that operates quietly, but persistently, at the edges of formal systems.

Attachments

PHOTOS



SITE PHOTOS, SOURCE:

[HTTPS://WWW.FACEBOOK.COM/PHOTO/?FBID=951820053652954&SET=A.571801088321521](https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=951820053652954&set=A.571801088321521)

[HTTPS://WWW.FACEBOOK.COM/PHOTO/?FBID=571801101654853&SET=A.571801088321521](https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=571801101654853&set=A.571801088321521)



PREPARATION FOR THE FIRST ACTIVITIES ON SITE PHOTOS, SOURCE:
<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=2405626132818377&set=a.571801088321521>

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