

Case study ID

MK_02

KOMSHILOOK

CASE STUDY SHORT SUMMARY REPORT

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KomshiLOOK

Case Study at a Glance

KomshiLook is a civic festival initiated in 2024 in the Skopje neighbourhood of Železara, aiming to restore the fading sense of *komšiluk*—the everyday feeling of neighbourhood closeness and care. The project highlights the importance of living together and sharing responsibility for the spaces we inhabit. It activates often-overlooked architectural elements—balconies, staircases, entrances, and garages—treating them as everyday stages for gathering, exchange, and creative expression. These spaces hosted exhibitions, installations, food prepared by residents, and small-scale concerts and performances. The initiative was self-organized by a small civic group of 4–5 people, self-funded with some minor local support, and operated as a mediator between neighbours and guest artists. Members of the group wanted to elevate the local, the familiar, and the informal on a higher level by fostering belonging and reminding us that small acts of participation and kindness can shift how we relate to each other and to our neighbourhoods. Through this localised and collaborative activation, the festival reclaims communal space as a site of connection, care, and shared urban imagination.

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Case Study Filtering System

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 KOMSHILOOK civic initiative in the Skopje neighbourhood of Železara, various local actors, including the initiator, participating residents, and collaborating cultural practitioners, contributed to the development and implementation of a neighbourhood-based civic festival focused on activating shared residential spaces. The initiative operates as a small-scale, self-organized platform (4–5 core members) that functions as a mediator between residents and invited artists, aiming to reactivate everyday spatial elements such as balconies, staircases, courtyards, garages, and entrances as sites of cultural production and social encounter.

A key feature of KOMSHILOOK is its informal and horizontally structured mode of organization. Decision-making is not institutionalized but instead takes place through direct communication between organizers and residents, primarily through door-to-door outreach, informal conversations, and open invitations. The initiative is self-funded with minor local and in-kind support, and relies heavily on volunteer engagement and temporary collaborations with cultural actors, NGOs, and private contributors. This structure enables broad participation in the activation of residential environments, where residents act simultaneously as hosts, participants, and co-creators of the program.

The initiative generates a wide range of (potential) beneficiaries, including local residents of Železara, visiting audiences from other parts of Skopje, participating artists, and informal cultural practitioners. Beyond direct participants, the project also contributes to broader discussions on neighbourhood cohesion, the reuse of residential infrastructure, and the role of micro-scale cultural interventions in strengthening social resilience in post-socialist housing environments. While implemented as a localized event in Železara, the format demonstrates partial transferability, as similar models of courtyard- and block-based cultural activation may be adapted to other residential districts with comparable spatial conditions.

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

- » **One interview with the initiator and representative of the KOMSHILOOK initiative**, who has been actively involved in conceptualizing, organizing, and mediating the festival since its establishment in 2024. The interview focused on the project's organizational logic, spatial strategy, and its relationship to neighbourhood-based cultural production.
- » **One interview with a participating beneficiary and collaborator from KOMBO – Association for Creative Sustainability**, who was involved in both the KOMSHILOOK event and subsequent community initiatives emerging in Železara. The interview provided insight into participant experience, forms of engagement, and the longer-term effects of the initiative on local civic and cultural practices.

In addition to interviews, the case study is based on on-site observation during the KOMSHILOOK festival in June 2024, analysis of visual documentation (photographs, video material, and social media content), and review of publicly available digital platforms maintained by the initiative. Supplementary material includes informal conversations with residents, spatial sketches produced to support understanding of the housing block layout, and secondary sources documenting the historical and

spatial development of Železara. These combined empirical sources allow for a comprehensive understanding of KOMSHILOOK as both a cultural event and a spatial practice embedded in everyday residential life.

Compendious summary

The Železara case is classified as a socially and culturally driven resilience initiative, rooted in informal spatial activation and grassroots civic engagement. This makes the case relevant for contexts where the built environment is largely in place, but the social and cultural life that was once active has almost disappeared. In contexts like Železara—where physical urban form is intact but social cohesion is deteriorating—such approaches offer valuable insights into how public space and cultural production can rebuild trust, visibility, and shared ownership over the neighborhood.

In terms of methodology, besides the interviews with both the initiator and one of the active local participants (beneficiary), the research included on-site observation during the event as well as the social media platform of the initiator. The place was also documented through photographs. Since original plans of the site were difficult to access or incomplete, additional site drawings/sketches were produced to better understand the spatial layout and how it related to the activities. Insights into how the space was originally intended to function—and how it is experienced today—came largely from informal conversations with residents. Altogether, these methods helped build a more layered understanding of the intervention and its reception in the neighborhood.

Neighborhood challenge

Železara is a peripheral neighborhood in Skopje, located near the Gazi Baba forest park and just a short distance from the city center. It was originally built to house workers from the nearby steel factory, which is also how the neighborhood got its name. The residential blocks follow a typical socialist-era urban layout — mid-rise buildings organized around shared courtyards, pedestrian connections, and public platforms that cascade down a sloped terrain.

This part of the city was designed with a clear vision for community life. The ground floors of the buildings were intended for mixed uses — small workshops, community rooms, green pockets, and play areas — all integrated into a compact, walkable environment. Over time, however, many of these spaces lost their original function. Courtyards became parking lots, community rooms remained locked, and the pedestrian areas stopped being used as spaces of encounter.

Although Železara is spatially well-connected and surrounded by nature, it has increasingly become disconnected in social terms. Cultural infrastructure is lacking, and most public activities are centralized in the city core. Residents — especially the younger generation — rarely see their neighborhood as a place where something meaningful can happen. The urban form is still there, but it has become passive.

The challenges here are not about dramatic environmental risks or infrastructure failure, but about the slow erosion of social life in shared space. Resilience in this context is about reactivating everyday places, rebuilding trust among neighbors, and creating situations where people can feel visible, engaged, and connected again.

Response to the challenge

The idea for KomshiLOOK emerged from direct experience with everyday urban neglect in the area and from long-term observation of spatial and social fragmentation in peripheral neighborhoods like Železara. The initiator is a resident of the block and has a background in architecture and film, recognized

that the social dynamics that once animated shared space had significantly weakened and with that the physical space was decaying as well. The project was initiated as a response to the absence of cultural programming and meaningful public life in a part of the city that had been left behind in both planning and cultural discourse.

The core challenge was not just the physical underuse and decay of shared spaces, but also the symbolic invisibility of the neighborhood itself. Residents live in close proximity, but there were few situations in which they encountered each other meaningfully. The goal, therefore, was to activate the latent potential of semi-public and communal areas like balconies, staircases, garages and courtyards, by using them as small platforms for cultural expression, gathering, and exchange. These spaces were chosen not only for their spatial qualities, but for their everyday familiarity. Reimagining them as sites of encounter was central to the project's approach to resilience.

The first edition of KomshiLOOK took place in June 2024 and lasted for several days, with the main program concentrated on a single day of coordinated performances, exhibitions, and community-led actions. Preparation began weeks earlier through informal outreach like door-to-door conversations with residents, printed invitations, and casual gatherings aimed at introducing the idea and building trust. Residents were invited to open their apartments to host artists or events like movie screening and dinners or just lend electricity and participate in every form they wished. As the event drew closer, these everyday gestures became part of the spatial setup. A resident painted the fence of their building, others cleaned staircases or moved furniture to make room for performances. The event unfolded across several buildings and platforms in a specific housing block. The location was intentionally chosen for its architectural layout, originally designed to support communal life. By working within this existing structure, the project not only highlighted the qualities of the space but also reactivated its original intent.

Mechanisms of civic engagement

Public involvement in KomshiLOOK was based almost entirely on informal methods. The issue was not defined through public hearings or institutional/ formal processes but rather observed and interpreted through local knowledge. The initiators engaged with the community directly, using approaches such as door-to-door conversations, letters left in entrances, spontaneous chats in courtyards, and open invitations via printed materials and social media. There were no formal planning sessions or public debates. Instead, the approach relied on trust-building and presence over time, allowing for a more natural and open form of participation. In addition to direct involvement from residents and volunteers, a significant part of the public/audience engaged with the project simply by attending. Many visitors came from outside Železara.

Participation in the action itself unfolded gradually. Residents were invited to contribute in various ways: by offering their balconies or garages as venues, helping with electricity and lighting, or simply being present. Volunteers took on multiple roles, including assisting artists, managing crowds, and even holding flashlights. While there was no participatory budgeting, many of the program elements were shaped in direct response to the spatial qualities and social patterns of the neighborhood. Citizen engagement methods were therefore based on relational, not procedural, planning. This approach gave residents a real sense of involvement and connection to the project, even though they weren't part of a

formal planning process. They didn't need to know how to read maps or make design proposals to contribute meaningfully.

One example of this is the project's name, "KomshiLOOK," which came out of early conversations with neighbors. It combines the Macedonian word for "neighbor" (*komšija*) with the English word "look," turning it into a light, friendly invitation to pay more attention to the neighborhood and to each other.

The action also created new grassroots not in the notion of new organizations, but multiple small actions, gestures, or follow-up efforts. After the event, some residents initiated meetings to discuss the condition of shared spaces in their building blocks. Others went on to start their own civic projects (the Kombo creative studio and café), such as donation and reuse spaces, inspired by the experience of collective care during KomshiLOOK event. These community-led activities show that even small-scale cultural actions can activate longer-term civic initiatives.

In terms of stakeholder dynamics, the project was primarily community-led. The local government provided only basic logistical support, such as grass cutting and waste removal, and showed limited interest in deeper involvement. NGOs and the private sector entered the picture later, mostly offering minor technical or support in the form of materials, equipment, or services, rather than direct funding. The strongest relationships were those between residents and the organizers, who functioned as mediators and facilitators, rather than external actors imposing a vision.

As for inclusiveness, the informal nature of the process allowed for broad involvement, but also had its limits. Participation depended largely on personal networks, visibility, and physical accessibility. While there was a visible mix of age groups and social backgrounds, physical access for people with disabilities remained a challenge in certain buildings, as pointed out by residents themselves. There were no specific strategies to reach marginalized groups, but the project's location-based logic and casual communication did create space for participation that felt open and approachable.

Case study findings and lessons learned

The KomshiLOOK initiative showed that even small-scale civic participation can have a significant impact on social resilience, especially in neighborhoods where social infrastructure has deteriorated. While there was no formal planning instruments involved, the event created new forms of visibility, interaction, and care within the everyday spaces of Železara. Shared courtyards, balconies, staircases, and garages: spaces that had largely fallen out of use, were temporarily transformed into venues for cultural exchange. These spatial activations did not result in permanent redesigns, but they reintroduced a sense of shared ownership and made residents see their surroundings as something they could shape and participate in.

What made this case interesting is the way both public and private spaces were involved in the process. In some instances, residents offered not just their entrance halls or stairwells, but also the interiors of their own apartments as sites for installations. This act of opening one's intimate domestic space to the public demonstrates a high level of trust and a powerful redefinition of what neighborhood participation can mean. It blurred the boundary between private and public, showing how resilience can also be built through generosity and the willingness to share space in unexpected ways.

The most effective forms of engagement were informal and relational, grounded in everyday life. Rather than co-design workshops or mapping tools, what proved most effective were simple and accessible ways of getting involved, such as offering a bit of space, sharing electricity, giving time, or just being present. These practices-built trust slowly and allowed residents to join on their own terms. The informal structure gave space for spontaneous contributions, and in many ways, it was this openness that made participation possible for those who had never taken part in public initiatives before.

One of the most interesting spatial outcomes was the use of existing semi-public architecture as cultural infrastructure. Instead of building new structures or introducing external interventions, the project made use of what was already there, balconies as stages, stairwells as galleries, garages as screening rooms. This reframing of space was both symbolic and practical, and it revealed how flexible and multifunctional everyday environments can become when trust and imagination are present. In that sense, KomshiLOOK proposed a quiet but powerful spatial strategy: to work with what is available and make it visible through collective use.

At the same time, several obstacles became apparent. The lack of financial resources was a constant limitation, making the event highly dependent on volunteer labor, improvisation, and personal networks. While this created a strong sense of ownership, the informal and resource-limited nature of the initiative may make it less easily transferable or sustainable in different contexts or over time, unless more stable support structures are in place. Also, institutional support from the municipality was minimal, limited to basic cleaning and maintenance. More structural collaboration with public institutions could have helped ease logistical pressures and offer stability.

Conclusion

The KomshiLOOK case illustrates how civic engagement, even in informal, small-scale forms, can activate spatial and social resilience in overlooked urban areas. In Železara, the initiative succeeded in reanimating both space and social relations. Everyday common spaces and even private apartments became temporary venues for cultural activity. These interventions did not impose new functions onto the neighborhood but rather revealed and amplified what was already there, forgotten or taken for granted. By working within the existing spatial structure, the project reactivated its original intent: to support shared life through architecture.

The initiative showed that democratic urban practice does not always require formal planning processes. Residents did not need to read maps or make design proposals to contribute meaningfully. Instead, through gestures such as opening their homes, offering electricity, or simply being present, they became co-authors of the event. This approach gave participants a real sense of involvement and connection. The strongest relationships were those between residents and the organizers, who acted as facilitators rather than external agents imposing a vision.

The most effective engagement practices were based on trust, informality, and invitation. The project succeeded in its original intent to show that cultural life does not have to be centralized in the city core and has activated the peripheral neighborhood. This reframing of space was both symbolic and practical, revealing how flexible and multifunctional everyday environments can become when trust and imagination are present. In that sense, KomshiLOOK proposed a quiet but powerful spatial strategy: to work with what is already available and make it visible through collective use.

Moreover, the initiative is first of its kind in the country even and the main event high attendance brought awareness to the issue of neglected common spaces and the lack of cultural events.

In terms of policy implications, this case shows the importance of creating space within urban planning for informal and place-based civic initiatives. Municipal support, even at a basic logistical level, can significantly ease the burden on organizers. More durable forms of collaboration between civic actors and local authorities could support continuity and allow these kinds of projects to evolve. It is advisable for local governments to offer micro-grants, or to simply recognize the value in the informal urban actions and to embed these processes into long-term resilience strategies.

Though deeply rooted in its local context, many elements of KomshiLOOK's approach are adaptable elsewhere: activating underused residential spaces, building engagement through personal communication, and working with the existing architecture. These small-scale actions, though moderate in scale, can inspire longer-term civic initiatives and shift how neighborhoods imagine their role in the cultural and social fabric of the city. One such example is the emergence of KOMBO – Association for Creative Sustainability, initiated by residents who first participated in KomshiLOOK as volunteers. Motivated by the energy and visibility the event generated, they went on to open their own space in Železara — dedicated to donation, reuse, and cultural programming. KOMBO's activities show how even temporary interventions can seed ongoing community efforts, creating a sense of continuity and opening space for new civic actors to step forward. This outcome highlights the transformative potential of informal participation not only to strengthen resilience in the short term, but to sustain and multiply it over time through local initiative.

This outcome also offers reflection on the legacy of local community centers that once existed in socialist Yugoslav cities. They were often based on the scale of a building block or neighborhood and managed common areas, organized activities, and maintained a sense of local self-governance. While most of these structures disappeared in the post-socialist transition, their memory remains embedded in the spatial and social fabric of places like Železara.

Attachments

References

KomshiLook Facebook Page: <https://www.facebook.com/komshilook>

KomshiLook Photos database on Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/komshilook/photos_by

KomshiLook Instagram Page: https://www.instagram.com/komshilook_/

KomshiLook Tiktok Page: https://www.tiktok.com/@komshilook_

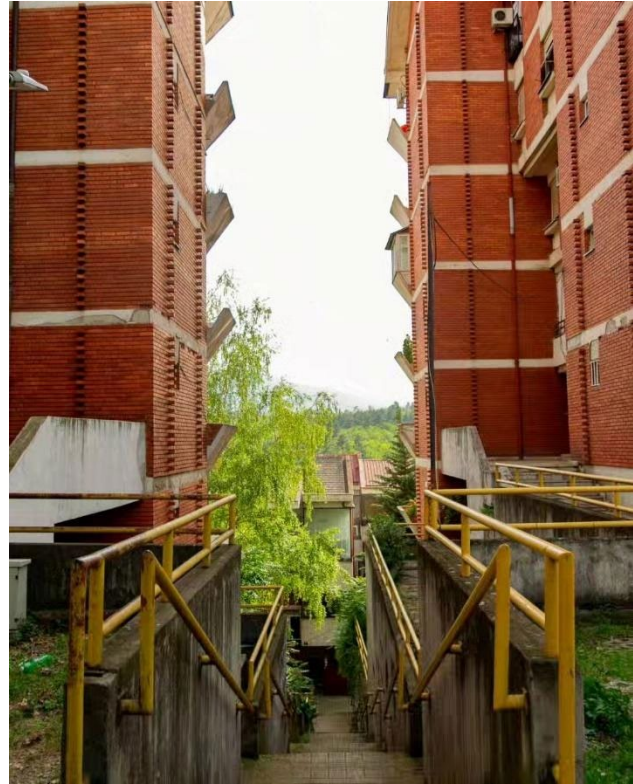
KomshiLook website: <https://www.komshilook.com/>

Information of Zelezara: <https://marh.mk/stanbeni-blokovi-zelezara-krstev/>

KOMBO Creative Studio and Café Instagram Page: <https://www.instagram.com/kombo.creativestudio/>

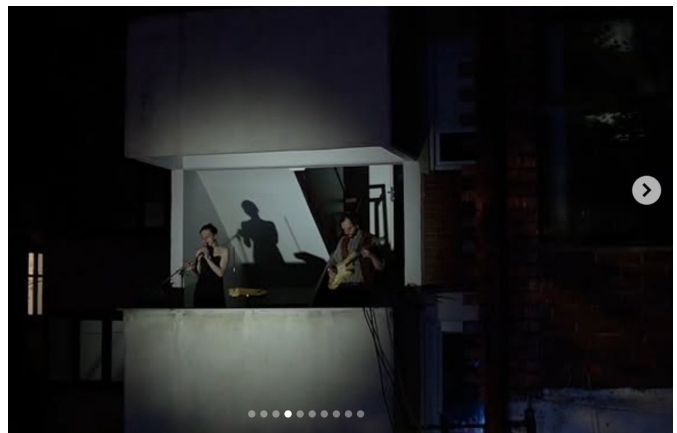
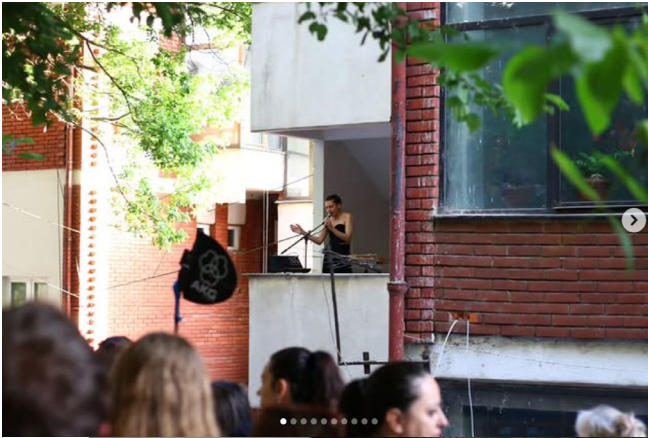
KOMBO Creative Studio and Tiktok Page: <https://www.tiktok.com/@kombo.creative.studio>

Photos



SITE PHOTOS, SOURCE:

<HTTPS://WWW.FACEBOOK.COM/PHOTO/?FBID=122134414610268096&SET=PB.61558042886216.-2207520000>



“Live musical performance”, Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/C_BLOfds0TF/?img_index=4



“Evening with a stranger” side event as part of the main event, Source:

https://www.instagram.com/p/C9Kxoy1MJia/?img_index=5



“Live musical performance”, Source:

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=122147956160268096&set=pb.61558042886216.-2207520000&type=3>



“Dance performance”, Source:

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=122146916024268096&set=pb.61558042886216.-2207520000&type=3>



Photos from the event, Source:

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=122146916024268096&set=pb.61558042886216.-2207520000&type=3>



“Exhibitions”, Source:

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=122129134766268096&set=pb.61558042886216.-2207520000&type=3>



Art performances, Source:

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=122135226458268096&set=pb.61558042886216.-2207520000&type=3>

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