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Reshaping Playscapes
with Children
in the Western Balkans

RE:PLAY

Reshaping playscapes with
children in the Western Balkans

A handbook on play, playscapes
co-creation, the Western
Balkans, and other stories





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Redesigning playscapes with
children in the Western Balkans

A handbook on play, playscapes
co-creation, the Western
Balkans, and other stories



Qendra
Marrëdhënie
Relationship
Center



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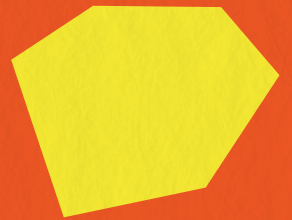
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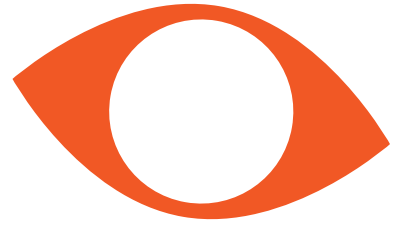
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01

IMAGINE





INTRO

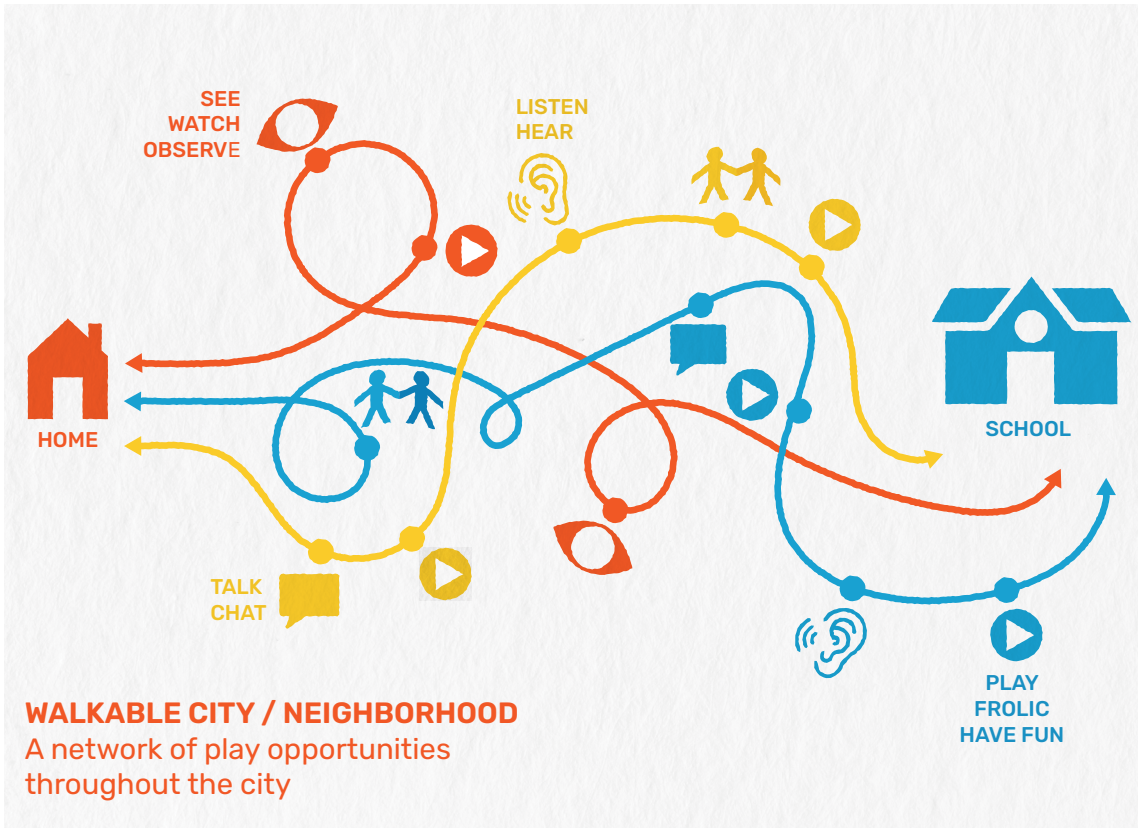
What's all the fuss about play?

Play isn't serious. Play is just fun, it's entertainment. It is something kids do, not adults. When adults play, they are considered childish. These are just a few of the presumptions prevalent in the contemporary Balkan societies, adding to the perception that play is not essential. However, what many fail to realize is that play is as serious as it gets: play is a profound form of learning. Evolutionary biologists recognize play as a fundamental human instinct driven by curiosity and the desire to experiment. Play is how toddlers begin simulating the world: when they stomp, scream, laugh or elicit a dramatic response with a simple facial expression. As children grow, play becomes more complex, involving role-playing and collaborative scenarios where they construct imaginative narratives that explore conflicts and their resolutions.

Children develop their imagination, creativity and social skills like cooperation, empathy, negotiation and sharing through play. The Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes the importance of play,

stating that children have the right to rest, engage in age-appropriate play and recreational activities, and freely participate in cultural life and the arts (Article 31).

Children's unfavorable position in contemporary society, particularly regarding access to play, is a complex issue to delve into here. However, these reasons persist and continue to restrict their opportunities to play. Efforts to include children in urban planning gained traction in the 1970s, inspired by Henri Lefebvre's "The Right to the City" concept. Urbanist Colin Ward introduced the idea of the "city as school" through exploratory excursions called *dérives*. During these excursions, school children investigated their neighborhoods, identified exclusionary elements, and discussed ways to foster inclusivity and child-friendliness. Unfortunately, despite the increased attention to urban proximity and health in recent decades, children's right to the city and their right to play have remained secondary concerns. In urban environments, children's play is



restricted to designated indoor and outdoor spaces due to parental concerns about road safety and stranger danger. Standardized playgrounds, prioritizing safety over play value, have become uninspiring. Consequently, play has become an occasional activity rather than a pathway to social integration.

How can we rethink the city so children can have more opportunities for play? Play should not be limited to designated playgrounds but rather embedded throughout the urban landscape. This can be achieved by creating safe walking routes, walkable neighborhoods, interactive public spaces, and incorporating pockets of nature. By doing so, we create chances for spontaneous and improvised play in every corner of the city, transforming it into a vibrant playscape exceeding traditional playground boundaries.

The importance of play for children is explored and explained from various perspectives, but that is not the purpose of this publication. The aim of this handbook is to bring attention to the importance of well-designed public spaces for children that are designed together with children because “a space for play doesn’t have to cost a million euros and come in a box.” Solutions can be simple and low-cost and they are right there – within your reach.

Our vision

The right to the city encompasses more than mere access to pre-existing urban spaces; it represents a collective entitlement to shape our environment according to our needs. The concept of child-friendly cities has evolved over time. In the early 20th century, Ebenezer Howard, the pioneer of the garden city movement, envisioned communities featuring green spaces and secure play areas. Subsequently, in the 1960s, the Netherlands witnessed mobilization for the children's right to play, spurred by a series of tragic accidents involving collisions with vehicles. The movement called for safer streets and increased pedestrianization to protect children and provide them with the freedom to fully enjoy their urban surroundings. During the 1980s, Matrix, a women's architecture collective, brought attention to the necessity of a more child-oriented approach to urban planning. They shed light on the challenges and safety issues stemming from a predominantly male-designed world. In 2004, the European Commission emphasized the concept of "design for all" to promote a more user-friendly society and environment for all, including children. The idea of the "right to the city" gained global recognition, with the United Nations' Habitat III (The New Urban Agenda) embracing the vision of creating inclusive "cities for all".

Children's lived experiences must be acknowledged and prioritized in the design process to address their specific needs and adapt the city accordingly. Our claim stems from recognizing the lack of play opportunities and natural spaces in urban environments, as well as the prevailing trend of standardized playgrounds characterized by the kit-fence-carpet approach.

RE:PLAY and play in general possess a unique quality as both an objective and a methodology. Through the power of play, we strive to improve the playing conditions for children, actively involving them in the




Play is a cultural activity and it needs cultural acceptance to thrive. We need a shift in the perception of children's capabilities and identities. As we reflect on the past three years, we are even more aware of how difficult this shift is.

process. At the beginning of this project we were all keenly aware that children have been neglected in the city-making process. Our mission is to ensure that every child has equal access to play whenever and wherever they want and for as long as they want.

Play is a cultural activity and it needs cultural acceptance to thrive. We need a shift in the perception of children's capabilities and identities. As we reflect on the past three years, we are even more aware of how difficult this shift is.





“Children’s participation in the urban planning process is essential for creating cities that prioritize their needs, rights and desires, enabling them to actively contribute to the development of their communities.”

Marjetica Potrč,
Slovenian artist and architect

Who we are

Pazilpark

We are a non-governmental and non-profit organization based in Ljubljana, Slovenia, comprising spatial planning experts, predominantly landscape architects. Our mission is to enhance the quality of life by recognizing and utilizing the inherent qualities of existing spaces while creating new ones. Our primary focus is on open spaces for children, as we firmly believe that a child-friendly city is a city that benefits all its residents. We advocate for user participation in the spatial planning process because we believe it is the ideal approach to identify their desires and concerns.

Children, being the primary users of play areas, possess valuable insights into their own needs and preferences. We consider them competent co-creators of space and strive to involve them in participatory, creative and inclusive processes.

We are raising awareness of the importance of green spaces within urban areas. We also believe that providing children with opportunities to experience nature and

"If you are thinking a year ahead, sow a seed. If you are thinking ten years ahead, plant a tree. If you are thinking one hundred years ahead, educate the people."

Kuan-Tzu

form strong connections with it at an early age creates the foundation for responsible behavior and the preservation of natural environments in adulthood.

Through our planning, design and collaborative efforts, we have come to firmly believe that even small steps can have a substantial impact on creating a better world. The RE:PLAY initiative represents one such step, aimed at expanding the network of professionals who share similar perspectives and take action in the Western Balkans. By fostering partnerships, we seek to enhance knowledge and elevate the quality of playscape design.





Kreativni krajobrazi

Once upon a time in Croatia, a group of landscape architects and architects came together with a vision. We dreamed of creating spaces that were more than just functional and beautiful. We wanted to create spaces that were alive with the spirit and character of the people who used them – spaces that told a story, weaving together the natural environment, cultural heritage, social dynamics and economic realities of each place into a vibrant tapestry of outdoor spaces.

One of our key principles is collaboration. This collaborative approach helps build trust and foster a sense of ownership within the community, which can lead to greater sustainability and longevity of the space, so we stay focused on designing spaces that are environmentally responsible and promoting biodiversity.

Realizing that children are important participants of tomorrow's world, we shifted the focus on designing spaces that value children as active participants.

Since this topic could not be solved by adults alone, we came together with a vision that playscapes can be reimagined and created together with children, reflecting their needs and desires.

This is how the project RE:PLAY was born and a new story began.

"The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The second best time is now."

Chinese Proverb

Škograd

We are Škograd, a participatory action research-based collective from Belgrade (Serbia) committed to disentangling the structural discrimination against marginalized children of the urban periphery of Belgrade and beyond.

Škograd is a word coined in Serbian derived from Škola (School) and Grad (city) – Schoolcity. We are devoted to rethinking and seeing the city as a school, and school as a city, environments in which pedagogy always takes place and should be the focus of our lives together with the children.

The team brings together experts from the fields of psychology, pedagogy, art, design, architecture and urban studies. Through post-disciplinary work, we engage ourselves creatively with marginalized communities that manifest the potential to positively affect the quality of life in the city, using urban co-production practices.

It is at the site of marginality and exclusion of children (on the basis of ethnicity, economic status, language, religion and skin color of their families) that our organization has based its work:

“There is no change without a dream as there is no dream without hope.”

Freire, 2006:77

in one of the marginalized suburban neighborhoods of Belgrade – neighborhood Ledine – since the organization’s inception in 2016. Our collective attempt is to build up opportunities for both formalized and marginalized communities to meet and engage in a creative exchange, developing trustful relationships and improving their sociomaterial status in society by creating infrastructure of hope. The nature of play and nurturing playfulness are at the core of our methodology, of how we work and live, and through play we are collectively walking towards a free society.





Qendra Marrëdhënie

“Marrëdhënie” translates to “relationship” in English. In Albanian we say “Marrëdhënie ndërkombetare” for “international relations”, or we might say “kanë nje marrëdhënie e mirë” – to express that two people’s relationship is on good terms. It’s a word consisting of two smaller words: “marrë” – to take and “dhënie” – to give. Give and take, take and give, give and get are shorthand for negotiation. Relationship as a negotiation may sound transactional, but it resonates with urban planning processes. After all, planning at its core is about creating the conditions in which no party holds power over another when we make choices about organizing urban space. Marrëdhënie expresses balance between people – a fair distribution of power, face to face.

Qendra Marrëdhënie (Relationship Center) is a non-profit urban research and action group based in Tirana, Albania, wholly dedicated to improving the public realm to better support thriving childhoods.

Our work boils down to one idea: that caregivers’ ability to raise thriving children is less a matter of their personal choices as much as it is a systemic matter of what choices their environment provides them. It is the cities’ responsibility to provide the healthiest environments possible for young children; and getting there requires an approach that is sensitive to each cultural and economic context.

We have been working closely with mayors in the Balkans and Central Europe since 2018, trying to mainstream child-friendly planning practices within municipal departments, with a focus on the early years and the needs of caregivers. We provide technical assistance to local governments in data collection and analysis, urban design, staff training, research and policy, public engagement and communication, in order to establish pathways to scaling healthier streets and public spaces in neighborhoods that center mobility and climate justice.

Gradionica

Gradionica is a relatively new and small community of architecture and design professionals and enthusiasts from Bar, Montenegro, which is trying to tackle the topics of burning urban planning issues that are quickly arising in our neighborhoods, cities and countries due to a lack of vision for our communities. The name 'Gradionica' combines two words: 'grad' (city) and 'radionica' (workshop).

Our primary focus at Gradionica revolves around common goods, cultural heritage, the environment, and digital transformation within the realms of design, architecture, and urban planning. We are dedicated to raising awareness about the importance of public spaces, culture, and the environment, which converge into a single, fascinating journey that we embarked on when joining the RE:PLAY team.

We embraced this adventure with the aim of making playgrounds more harmonious with nature, and what better way to achieve this than by involving children. Their incredible ability to transform ordinary objects into something magical through the sheer power of their imagination became a central theme for our development and networking. Our role was simply to nurture

"Work consists of whatever a body is obliged to do, and that play consists of whatever a body is not obliged to do."

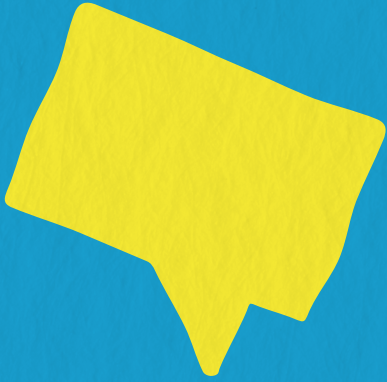
**Mark Twain,
The Adventures of Tom Sawyer**

and facilitate that magic of play. And so play became the main theme of our development and networking, as an indivisible part of the human psyche and body. It connected us with high school students and showed us the possibilities of the community when united. New acquaintances, partnerships and friendships were born as a result of this adventure, and many new doors were opened.

Our goal is to create places, not spaces, and students helped us out on this journey by participating in workshops that centered around their needs and requirements for the equipment for the future courtyard. We embarked on this wonderful adventure like Dory from Finding Nemo – we went with the flow and just kept swimming.







02

RELATE





WESTERN BALKAN CONTEXT

Play in the Western Balkans

RE:PLAY is our ongoing commitment to critically assessing the state of play and its supporting infrastructure, and the playability of cities in the Western Balkan region. In order to gain insights, we organized study visits and partner exchanges, which allowed us to compare local practices with global benchmarks. By examining these practices from multiple perspectives, including the physical, spatial, social, pedagogical and psychological aspects, our diverse team of professionals drew upon their expertise and personal experiences to conduct a comprehensive evaluation.

The common background in the Western Balkans

The scarcity of economic, political and social transformations has led to constant inventiveness in everyday life in our region. This resourcefulness is reflected in our built environment, where concepts such as reuse, redesign and integration of natural elements

are prioritized. Engaging with nature through play has been a longstanding tradition.

A common trend in the region is the shift from collectivism, rooted in socialism, to individualization through private ownership, accompanied by collective skepticism towards neoliberal regimes. This transition has fostered a belief that anything new is inherently superior, meanwhile associating the old with challenging times. Unfortunately, this mindset has often marginalized critical thinking and thoughtful decision-making in urban development practices, leaving little room for an in-depth analysis.

The standard play infrastructure

Like elsewhere in the world from the 1940s to the 1980s, designated playgrounds were systematically created across the Western Balkans. These playgrounds were evenly distributed and well-maintained, typically located within residential zones and school-

yards that prioritized pedestrian access and offered large public green spaces. Design featured simple and practical metal equipment such as monkey bars, merry-go-rounds, seesaws, swings and slides – all reaching high altitudes.

As the popularity of these playgrounds grew, so did concerns about safety. A limited level of professional expertise on playground safety and technological advancements in materials that haven't been made yet resulted in different interpretations of safety standards compared to the present-day norms.

In the 1990s, after the collapse of socialism, a noticeable decline in the maintenance of public spaces, including the play infrastructure, was recorded. These areas were left to degrade, becoming not only neglected but also prone to acts of rebellion and vandalism. Consequently, this period marked a significant shift in trust in the safety and suitability of these playgrounds for children.

In the 2000s, following the transitional period, a renewed focus on investing in play infrastructure within the public domain occurred – mostly city parks, while neighborhood play spaces were often left to individual developers. That resulted in simplified kit-fence-carpet design that did not keep up with the innovative global practices and research, particularly those observed

in the Western and Northern Europe, failing to align with the evolving understanding of play and the corresponding infrastructure developments within the region.

In recent years, a significant effort has been made in Ljubljana to renovate the existing public playgrounds and construct new ones, drawing inspiration from Scandinavia and Germany. These new playgrounds boast distinctive designs customized to their respective locations, blending high-quality equipment with abundant vegetation. However, the costs associated with construction and maintenance, particularly for the costly play area equipment and safety surfacing, present financial burdens. As a result, there may be a future trend toward more cost-effective natural playgrounds.

The unique play infrastructure

The Western Balkans, like other post-World War II regions, was influenced by modernist architecture and its principles. This era sparked a creative revolution in public space design, producing a few distinctive abstract sculptures crafted from concrete. Strategically placed in public spaces, such as parks and playgrounds, these sculptures, with their bold and monumental forms, invited children to engage and explore. They stand as a testament to the region's architectural heritage, providing imaginative and captivating play experiences.



Postwar, socialist play equipment.



Iconic playful landmarks: Vladimira Bratuž Furlan's captivating Fish sculpture in Tivoli, Ljubljana.

Examples can be found in Tivoli Park in Ljubljana (The Fish by Vladimira Bratuž Furlan), Taš Park in Belgrade (the family climber sculpture and the Ear slide sculpture), and the Park of Sculptures in Vrsar. These enduring pieces have become beloved landmarks that still captivate children’s play radar and offer them an engaging and unique play experience.

Monuments, whether designed as play structures or not, often capture children’s attention. In Bar, Montenegro, the archaeological remains of a triconch, that withstood the city’s urban development, have become a well-known play area where children partake in imaginative play.

The playability of our cities

In the past, streets served as vibrant play areas, often even more popular than playgrounds. With fewer cars and residential neighborhoods planned as garden cities, every street in the neighborhood was a play street. Backyards were transformed into play yards, creating a sense of play throughout the entire neighborhood.

Schoolyards played a central role in this network of play infrastructure, serving as public playgrounds available for use during off-school hours. In many cases, these were only asphalt sports fields. On that note, it’s important to acknowledge the exclusivity of ball games, primarily considered activities for boys and sports fields primarily associated with male spaces. This exclusion limited girls’ participation, underscoring the need to reconsider the design of school playgrounds and the importance of gender sensitivity and inclusivity in contemporary Western Balkan cities’ public spaces.



Promoting nature-inspired play and a blooming connection to green spaces.

Nature – city – play

During the modernist era, carefully landscaped green spaces provided children with safe and secluded areas for imaginative play. Water streams, urban wood patches and thoughtfully planted trees, shrubs and perennials allowed children the creation of unique play areas and make-believe adventures.

Urbanization, car dominance and reduced maintenance costs have led to a decline of play and nature within cities. Furthermore, the prioritization of private development initiatives has led to a profit-oriented approach to urban development.

Public spaces, particularly green areas and undeveloped plots, have been neglected or privatized, giving way to exclusive, inaccessible spaces and impermeable paved areas. This shift has resulted in high

soil sealing, inadequate provisions for air and water flow, and an imbalance between green and gray areas, with some cities like Belgrade having ratios as imbalanced as 10% functional green to 90% gray in newly developed areas.

In today's Western Balkans, the incorporation of nature-inspired design solutions for play is impeded by concerns over safety and maintenance responsibilities.

It is crucial for adults to reconsider their perception of safety and for children to reclaim spaces for unrestricted play. This requires a shift in design, fostering a renewed appreciation for the importance of free play in a natural environment.

Privatization of playscape

Scarcity of public spaces has led to the privatization of play areas, with shopping malls, recreational zones and cafés assuming the role of providing play activities. While commercial establishments may appear play-friendly, this trend contributes to social exclusion, as access becomes limited to those who can afford it. Inequality deepens as certain public areas are occupied by private play infrastructure, restricting free and inclusive play options. This issue is prominent in densely developed cities like Tirana, where the dominance of privatized playgrounds highlights the lack of available public spaces for play.



Private Café Playground in Belgrade



Play can happen everywhere: safe and green modernist neighborhoods became playgrounds.

Participation in the Western Balkans

In the socialist era, the community participation played a key role in managing, building and caring for shared spaces and community needs. This spirit of collective involvement diminished in later years, leading to a decline in the public realm in most cities within the region. During the democratization process, citizen participation often became more of a formality than a genuine collective effort in shaping public spaces and urban decision-making.

Over the past decades, non-governmental organizations have spearheaded the inclusion of participation and needs assessment in the region's public realm and urban practices. However, citizens have expressed skepticism regarding the true intentions and effectiveness of these initiatives. Their


voices in neighborhood development have often been overlooked by professional practices and political actors.

Our collectives have dedicated efforts to rebuilding trust and encouraging citizen engagement throughout the spatial planning process. We strive to promote the right to the city through active citizen participation. Our approach revolves around placemaking, co-design and co-creation, creating opportunities for meaningful collaboration and collective action.



Reviving urban nature-inspired play and bridging the gap between children and green environments.



A multi-story apartment building with balconies and a green lawn in the foreground. The building has several floors with windows and balconies. Some balconies have plants and flowers. The foreground is a lush green lawn. An orange speech bubble is overlaid on the right side of the image, containing a quote by Jane Jacobs.

“Children in cities need a variety of places in which to play and to learn. They need, among other things, opportunities for all kinds of sports and exercise and physical skills... However, at the same time, they need an unspecialized outdoor home base from which to play, to hang around in, and to help form their notions of the world.”

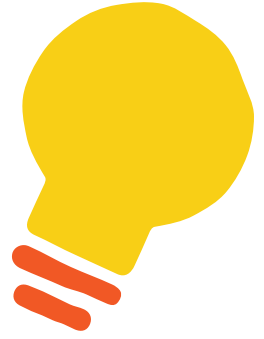
Jane Jacobs



03

INNOVATE





REDESIGNING WITH CHILDREN

Creating safe, inclusive, and playful cities is crucial for the well-being of children and our communities. While our long-term vision aims to transform the entire city into a playscape, we have chosen to start with the local school grounds. This decision was driven by practical considerations, as school grounds already serve as gathering spots for children, caregivers, and the wider community, making them ideal for our focus.

When it comes to the RE:PLAY project, collaboration is at the heart of our approach. We work closely with partners and key stakeholders including children, caregivers, teachers, and decision-makers. Our

participatory process revolves around three main stages: spatial analysis and user needs assessment, design development, and the implementation of creative solutions. These stages align with the chapters in this handbook: relate, imagine, and create.

Through engaging workshops and by utilizing various mediums and scales, we encourage participants to express their unbiased needs, think beyond traditional play environments, and foster innovation. By promoting inclusive participation, our aim is to create meaningful play experiences that resonate with our communities.

Find A Gooood Spot

Dynamics: Form three groups using random 1-2-1-2 split activity. Each group brainstorms suitable names based on participants' favorite activities. Explore the area with your group to find spaces that can support these activities. Once you find a suitable spot, stay there for a while, and use available tools to create mockups that enhance the desired activities.

Tools and materials: Create a magic toolbox that houses various sets of reusable materials like fabric, cardboard boxes, tubes, chinks, plastic bottles, and more for prototyping 1:1 scaled models. Enhance the toolbox with on-site materials like branches, flowers, and rocks.

Goals:

- ▶ getting familiar with the surroundings;
- ▶ discovering spatial potentials through play;
- ▶ encouraging creativity by making prototypes and models;
- ▶ fostering interaction and collaboration.

RE:PLAY partner:
Škograd

Participants:
30

Moderators:
3

Duration:
2-3 hours
for 2-3 days

Age:
6-13 years

Phase:
Spatial analysis and
needs assessment







Watch out, camera!

RE:PLAY partner:
Pazi!park

Participants:
20

Moderators:
4 + a professional filmmaker

Duration:
2 hours

Age:
7–13 years

Phase:
Spatial analysis and needs assessment

Dynamics: Before the activity starts, gather the consent from parents allowing the use of photos and videos featuring their children. Also, ensure that the batteries of phones and cameras are fully charged.

Then gather children in the schoolyard and divide them into groups of 3–4 individuals: a cameraman, an interviewer and 1–2 interviewees. Rotate roles throughout the workshop to ensure everyone participates. Provide phones and cameras for each group and explain the basics of video filming. Give clear instructions on what to capture and encourage exploration of liked or disliked locations. To assist with the interviews, prepare a set of simple questions for the children to ask, inquiring about their favorite or least favorite places, friends they hang out with, and activities they engage in. Once children start filming, mentors should observe from a distance, without interfering to capture genuine and unbiased comments. Repeat instructions multiple times to maintain focus. Limit the activity to one hour to manage intensity and volume of video material.

After filming, gather and prepare all video material for further processing, including content analysis, video selection, and editing.

Tools and materials: Provide enough cameras and/or smartphones, at least one per group of children (with spares), and make sure there are plenty of power banks available. Consider having a professional filmmaker present to capture answers, moments, and document the workshop process.

Goals:

- ▶ analyzing the use and activities in the existing outdoor school environment;
- ▶ capturing children’s preferences and experiences within the outdoor school environment;
- ▶ facilitating self-expression and communication skills;
- ▶ fostering interaction and collaboration.

My favorite place in the city is... because ...

RE:PLAY partner:
Gradionica

Participants:
25

Moderators:
3

Duration:
2-3 hours

Age:
14-18 years

Phase:
**Spatial analysis and
needs assessment**

Dynamics: Prior to the workshop, map key public spaces along an interesting route for pupils to observe and analyze. Focus on recommended spaces like squares, cultural centers, parks, museums, and promenades, which are familiar to the pupils and frequently utilized in their daily lives.

On the first day, guide pupils to observe the usage and appealing features of public spaces. Discuss their experiences and explore both positive and negative aspects. Have them photograph or record at least one favorite and disliked place. Encourage additional suggestions, even from locations outside the designated route. Request material submission with mandatory personal comments.

During the second workshop, present the received suggestions and facilitate a dialogue among pupils, exploring diverse perspectives on certain spaces. Encourage pupils to propose improvements for those areas, as an introduction into a playscape design workshop.

Tools and materials: During the visits, pupils can engage with the space in different ways to emphasize its significance to them. Options include showcasing historical photographs, before/after effects, or organizing a drawing class at a mapped location. The essential tool they should bring is their smartphone with a functional camera, making the most of what is already readily available to them.

Goals:

- ▶ introducing the concept of public space and its significance, including the schoolyard as a type of public space;
- ▶ enhancing spatial awareness and architectural perspective;
- ▶ encouraging critical thinking;
- ▶ building a culture of dialogue.



Engaging children in discussions about familiar public spaces, seeking their opinions on both the positive and negative aspects, and exploring ways to enhance these common places to better meet their needs is a valuable approach.



Using various coloring methods offers the opportunity to teach children multiple techniques, create smaller groups, distribute the workload, and engage more children in the process.



Design your dream spot!

RE:PLAY partner:
Škograd

Participants:
30

Moderators:
5 or less

Duration:
2-3 hours

Age:
6-13 years

Phase:
Design development

Dynamics: Begin the activity by presenting a variety of printed examples showcasing good spatial interventions with diverse styles and materials. Divide the children into small groups and collaboratively create inspiration boards. During this process, engage in discussions about what aspects of the examples they are most drawn to and why they like them.

Next, arrange all modeling materials neatly on one surface, resembling a grand dinner presentation in pots. Set a pleasant atmosphere by playing some enjoyable music. Introduce the idea of the children being constructors and designers, emphasizing that this is a tool for expressing their ideas. Encourage individual creation, allowing everyone to fully express their visions. However, if they prefer, they can collaborate and work together in smaller teams or groups.

In the end, organize an exhibition to showcase their creations. Let them conduct audio or video interviews with each other, gathering insights on what each model and its elements represent to them.

Tools and materials: Provide a 30 x 30 cm styrofoam board as a modeling base. Gather crafting materials such as: colorful and differently shaped stones, glass stones, sticks of various sizes and glue. Incorporate on-site materials like branches, leaves and stones. Create an inspiration board to spark ideas. Include tiny human figures to use as scale references within the models.

Goals:

- ▶ testing spatial perception and enhancing design thinking by making models;
- ▶ collecting data for the typology of design elements and activities desired by children;
- ▶ gathering design ideas.

Architectural workshop with children

RE:PLAY partner:
Kreativni krajobrazi

Participants:
7

Moderators:
3

Duration:
2-3 hours

Age:
11-14 years

Phase:
**Design
development**

Tools and materials: Print out a large-scale blueprint of the schoolyard and paste it onto the Kapafix adhesive cardboard to create a base for the making of a 3D model. Bring drawing tools (pencils, markers) and various colorful materials (toothpicks, wires, pins, glue, colored paper, felt, styrofoam, wooden sticks) for the students to create a 3D model of the future schoolyard.

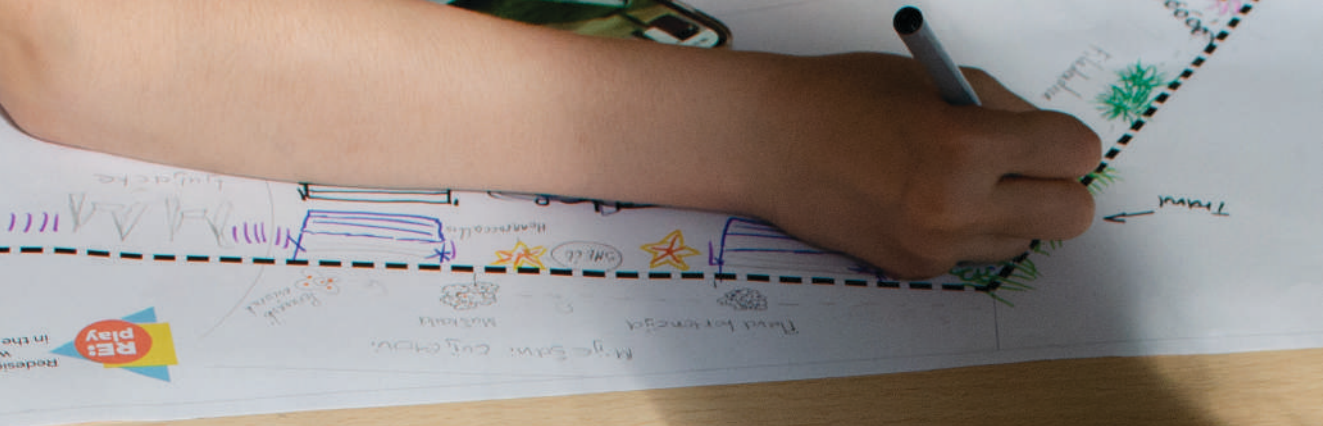
Goals:

- ▶ engaging students in hands-on activities to develop spatial awareness and design skills;
- ▶ encouraging collaboration and teamwork among the participants;
- ▶ creating a sense of ownership and pride in the schoolyard among the students;
- ▶ promoting outdoor learning and engagement with the workshop conducted on-site.

Dynamics: Conduct the workshop on-site, outdoors, to enhance the children's understanding of the pilot project area. Walk with children through the pilot area and discuss in situ about the future sensory garden. Introduce them to specific kinds of plants (printed photos and internet research) that bring biodiversity to your surroundings and encourage them to think how sensory senses could be emphasized by plants and other natural elements. Encourage children to feel free to express their ideas by using their imagination and drawing and writing on the printed empty blueprint of the schoolyard. Keep the workshop practical and engaging, considering the children's attention span. Ensure the children feel motivated and valued by asking for their opinions and incorporating their ideas into the design phase.



Engaging students in hands-on activities to develop spatial awareness and design skills.





Schoolyard Party

RE:PLAY partner:
Qendra Marrëdhënie

Participants:
50

Moderators:
7

Duration:
4-5 hours

Age:
0-70 years

Phase:
**Spatial analysis and
needs assessment**

Dynamics: Open up the schoolyard on a holiday. Provide different activities all around the schoolyard for all ages. Play different games with children, meanwhile observing how they use the schoolyard. Have discussions with the caregivers, share ideas and note down their requests. Introduce some new features, like water play. Conduct surveys to gather data and thoughts from the community. Provide drinks and food for the community to make everyone comfortable. Arrange a crafts area and session, with kids painting and creating models from cardboard.

Tools and materials: Provide a full set of activities to engage both kids and their caregivers. Create a toddler play area with astroturf, hula hoops, skipping rope, a pipe as a playing equipment and a tent. Make a

craft area with colored papers, paints, markers, brushes, tape, rope, cardboard. Make a survey corner with seating, tents and printed out forms.

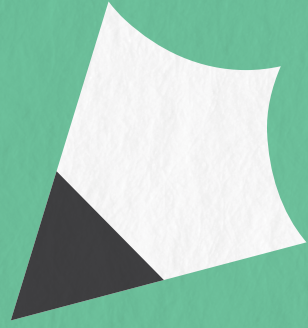
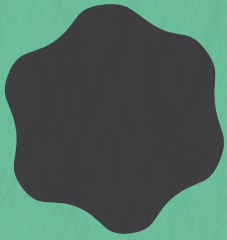
Provide different water play opportunities, like sprinklers, water balloons.

Goals:

- ▶ creating a functioning example of an open schoolyard that inspires creative use;
- ▶ collaborating with caregivers to open and design the schoolyard;
- ▶ gathering data through surveys and conversations to support the development of open schoolyards;
- ▶ fostering support for open schoolyards as neighborhood parks.

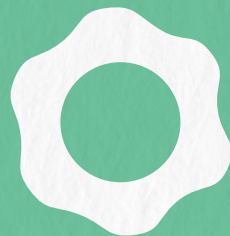


Providing activities for kids of all ages.

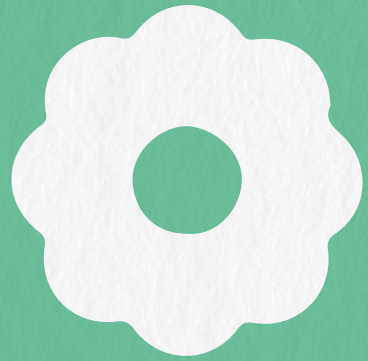


04

CREATE



PLAYSCAPES



Dotting the Green, Ljubljana



Kulturno okoljsko društvo Pazilpark

Location: Elementary School Karel Destovnik Kajuh, Ljubljana, Slovenia

Participants: children aged 7–12 from various ethnic backgrounds, facing social challenges due to lower family income

Key words: co-design, schoolyard, play elements, multifunctional, inclusive, greening, community

We had the incredible opportunity to collaborate with school kids on a co-designing and co-creating project aimed at the revitalization of their schoolyard. By analyzing the space and its use, we gathered suggestions from the students, teachers, and school management. It became evident that the schoolyard was primarily used for sports activities, lacking play equipment, benches, or designated spots for kids to sit and socialize.



After discussion and brainstorming, we prepared a master plan for the complete renovation of the area. The plan was structured with a phase-by-phase approach, taking into consideration available financial means, necessary permits and estimated construction time. The proposal outlined specific interventions to be implemented as part of RE:PLAY. We agreed that the schoolyard needed areas where kids could comfortably sit and engage in social activities, while also

providing play opportunities for younger children. We proposed three interventions to improve the space and make it more inclusive and engaging.

The sports field used for informal ball games underwent a painting transformation in collaboration with the Youth Centre Moste and a local parents' initiative. Over the course of two afternoons, a painting workshop took place. Layout was designed based on teachers' proposals for floor games

and students' wishes for a labyrinth.

To further enrich the environment, we embarked on a greening initiative. We planted vegetation along the fences and between the play area and outdoor classroom creating distinct areas with different functions and uses. Careful consideration was given to the selection of plants to enhance biodiversity (attract birds and butterflies), ensure the aesthetics (various shapes and colors of bark, leaves, flowers and fruit) and year-round educational and play value.

The third proposal involved the development of a new versatile element for sitting, playing, outdoor classes, and as a small stage. In addition to the multifunctionality, we took into account vandalism and used resistant materials and sturdy form. The

students participated in the design process, contributing their creative ideas and preferences.

Throughout the implementation of these proposals, the project progressed in stages, allowing everyone involved to contribute actively. Students, guided by parents, teachers and mentors, took pride in their schoolyard transformation, nurturing a sense of ownership and responsibility. The process not only improved the physical aspects of the space but also fostered a stronger sense of community and camaraderie among the students.



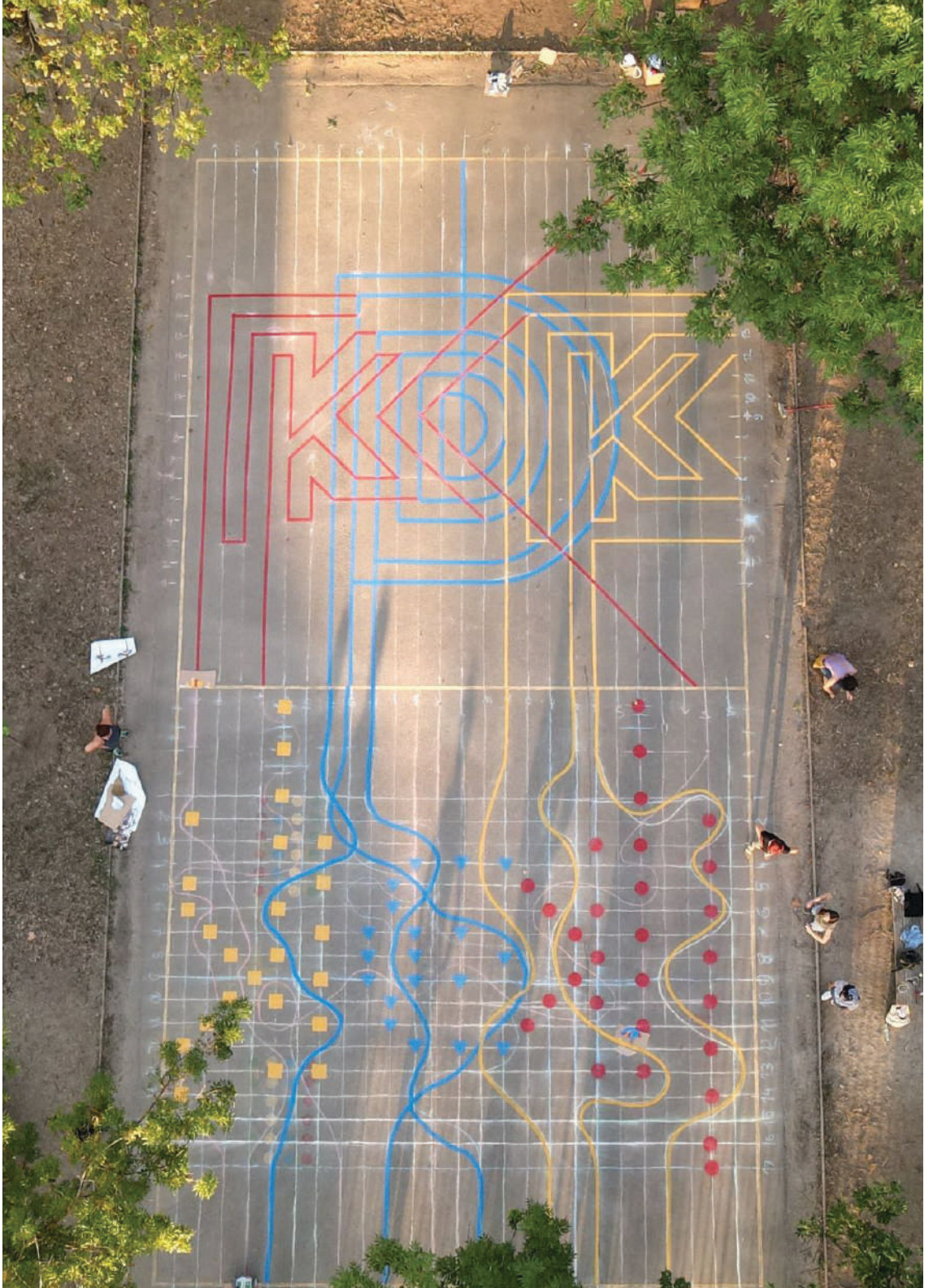
"We would like more plants and flowers and the lawn to be mowed less frequently so it can become a flowering meadow."

More than 60 kids, parents, and teachers showed up for the greening workshop. The plant selection process was meticulous, focusing on species that would withstand the frequent use and at the same time provide opportunities for play.



"We could have a treehouse right up that tree!"

A willow house was constructed to match the children's concept of a treehouse. This green play element incorporates growing branches from a willow tree, transforming with each season. It serves as a hideaway, providing a natural shelter from the bustling outside world.





"I want a maze with many paths to follow."

The painting of one of the sports fields resulted in a playful design that incorporated the school's name initials – KDK, serving as a backdrop for improvised and imaginative games.





Activities such as reading, chatting, doing homework, or simply sitting and observing other children and nature served as inspiration for the development of these multifunctional elements. Concrete sewage pipes, ranging from 60 to 120 cm in diameter, were used as the foundation for the construction, which was then covered with wooden lining to enhance the usability and aesthetic appeal. The use of prefabricated concrete pipes offers several advantages. It facilitates simple replication, reduces production costs, eliminates the requirement for a foundation (thereby minimizing the risk of tree root damage), and safeguards against vandalism and theft by preventing their displacement.







"Somewhere that I could sit and chat with my friends and no one would see me."

Most of the children missed and desired spaces and equipment to simply hang out outdoors, even when not participating in sports activities.

Sensory Wonderland, Zagreb



Kreativni krajobrazi

Location: Elementary School Rapska, Zagreb, Croatia

Participants: school kids aged 7–13

Keywords: sensory garden, biological diversity, co-design, greening, sustainability

Being a part of the RE:PLAY project over the past three years has been an extraordinary journey and thanks to the engaging workshops with the students of Rapska Elementary School in Zagreb, we have embarked on a collective journey of imagination, design, and implementation to bring their sensory garden to life.

At the project's outset, we gathered relevant data using surveys, interviews, and even a thermal map to understand



how the children felt in different areas of the schoolyard and observed their play patterns. Their valuable insights helped us prepare for architectural workshops where we collaboratively crafted a 3D model of their envisioned playground.

Then we began constructing a willow house and planting the sensory garden with care, with plants specifically chosen to engage and stimulate all of the senses, creating a rich sensory experience while

promoting biodiversity. Through hands-on activities, such as constructing bird feeders and bug hotels, we aimed to instill a sense of environmental stewardship in the young participants. In order to add an auditory dimension to our sensory garden, we manufactured musical elements from tree stumps and metal bars, providing not only seating areas for relaxation but also inspiring spaces for musical experimentation. The project's sustainability and longevity

lie in the hands of the children and teachers, who will dutifully maintain and cherish our mutual achievement.

The RE:PLAY project stands as a testament to the positive impact that can be achieved when communities come together to reimagine and enhance their shared spaces. By empowering children and involving them in the design and

maintenance processes, we have fostered a sense of ownership, pride, and responsibility in creating a vibrant and sustainable environment within their school grounds.



“I like the meadow the most and would like flowers to be planted on it.”

Over the course of two captivating school days, children from various classes came together to participate in the planting activity, shaping the foundation of a future sensory garden. Together, we planted a carefully selected assortment of 400 perennials and ornamental plants specifically selected to engage and stimulate all of the senses while promoting biodiversity. By incorporating a wide variety of plant species, we aimed to create an ecosystem that attracts pollinators, supports local wildlife, and showcases the beauty of nature’s diversity.



“The old birdhouse just fell down from the tree. We really need a new one.”

As a complement to the sensory garden, we also need to take care of the birds. We recognized the importance of nurturing our feathered friends and together with the children, we have designed, painted, and assembled birdhouses to raise awareness among kids about the importance of caring for the animals around us while fostering a deeper connection with nature.



Children actively explore and engage with their environment through sensory stimulation, i.e. by using their senses of sight, hearing, smell, touch, and taste. Plants, in their diverse textures, colors, scents, and sounds, offer an immersive sensory experience that awakens our connection to the natural world.



"I would like to have a treehouse and also a play house."

In a frequently overlooked corner of the schoolyard, near the bustling intersection of two roads, we built a protective house made of willow twigs. Together, we collected willow branches by the river, after which children learned the art of weaving by shaping the branches into a sturdy structure. The willow house quickly transformed into a cherished space where the children now gather daily to play, have picnics, and even rehearse singing performances. To enhance their future picnics, we planted a shrub of berry fruit nearby, adding a touch to their sensory senses in outdoor experiences.



"There were bees in the forest a few months ago and we made them houses, a little room, a small bed. We made a pool for bees with water."

Inspired by the children's passion for studying and caring for insects through play, we designed and assembled two insect hotels. Children, along with their parents and siblings, collected pinecones, sticks, and various natural materials over the weekend to construct a cozy, captivating hotel filled with the scents of the forest.



"There used to be wooden stumps here, but they were removed. I would like them back."


In this part of the sensory garden, we have crafted musical elements from tree stumps and metal bars, creating not only comfortable places to sit at and relax in the shade of old plane trees but also inspiring spots for children to explore and create their own music. By interacting with these unique musical features, children have the opportunity to experiment, discover different sounds, and compose their own melodies, adding an extra layer of engagement to their sensory garden experience.



“Maybe if there were more actions to clean the school environment. I would participate if I could.”

The newly created sensory garden requires regular care and maintenance. Since the children were actively involved in every step of creating the garden, they have taken on the important task of watering the plants, especially during the summer months. To ensure the garden’s well-being, a maintenance plan will be shared with the students and school staff, allowing them to continue learning about the responsibility they hold towards their environment.





We human beings are driven by our senses. We rely on our sensory impressions for everything we do. Our senses are our gate to the world.

Kukuk

Dream Path, Belgrade



Association Škograd

Location: Elementary School Vlada Obradović
Kameni, Ledine, Belgrade, Serbia

Participants: school kids aged 3–12, attending
the local elementary school or not going to school

Key words: dreams, circle, togetherness, nature,
marginalization, hope

Over the past seven years, our collective has utilized a summer school program format to establish a central gathering point within the open schoolyard of an elementary school situated in the suburban neighborhood of Ledine in Belgrade. This schoolyard serves as the sole public space for the local inhabitants, where multiple generations, religions, cultures, and languages intersect. It represents a space where marginalized individuals and diverse life experiences



converge. Through a meticulous three-year process of collaboration with children, we have established a framework known as the Collective Dream Path. This master plan aims to further develop the schoolyard as an imaginative and secure space primarily catering to children and youth, but ultimately accessible to all.

Play happens when we show up

During the entire process, particularly in the first year, our primary focus revolved around the subject of play and establishing conducive environments for its occurrence. We hold a strong belief that presence is a fundamental aspect of play; without participants, play cannot take place. By actively involving children in exploratory and embodied play, we not only gained valuable insights into their ideas and qualitatively

explored the current play environment, but also fostered a shared vision for collective transformation.

My dream spot – Our Dream Path

The second most important thing to us was to go from the 1:1 scale to the 1:50 scale and from individual towards collective dreams. This is how we curated ideas and final design proposals.

Dream Path is coming true!

Finally, we embarked on manifesting our dreams together, by inviting and engaging everyone interested in the neighborhood into making that happen, but also maintaining it. As a result, a 'green' wave initiative was launched among empowered parents who have seen what is possible and more greening and cleaning actions of the schoolyard followed.



PLAY PODIUM, performative playscape

As a result of the first summer school together with the children, we have re:imagined the existing infrastructure our collective has co-created with the community in the years prior to this project. Following the children's initiative we have re:ainted the so-called Circle. But this was not just any visual exercise. As most kids cannot afford going to the seaside, or going to the nearby aquapark that is too expensive for them, the children said the following during the imagination exercise: Imagine a sea at Ledine! And this is how the sea emerged among us. We learned about sea creatures, painted them, but also embodied them in a performative play for everyone who came to our celebration event.

In the second year it was obvious that the re:painting must occur. This time we curated it as an embodied exercise of remembering what was mapped as a good spot in the schoolyard in the first year, but we also found new ones during this walkthrough. Mapping them out with chalk on the courtyard and connecting them, together with children we embodied and created a unique play that was passed on to the circle and finally became our podium of play with its specific set of rules and acts.



BUSH PLAYLAND, tactile playscape

This intervention emerges from a combination of ideas and dreams communicated through active play with children, who enjoy games like hide and seek. By analyzing their small-scale models, which incorporate sensory and balance elements, we were able to merge various bushes with sensory and visual characteristics, along with aromatic plants and tree trunks. This approach enabled us to think in a modular way, designing and positioning the plants and elements on-site, in collaboration with children and caregivers.

It is important to emphasize that none of the trees were cut down for the purpose of our project. We have learned that numerous trees are often felled by city maintenance and private investors, without exploring alternative uses such as selling, utilizing them as fuel, or repurposing them. This realization has led us to envision significant potential for implementing additional spatial interventions in various schoolyards, fostering circular economies.





Dreaming of the VOICES OF PERUN, audio-visual playscape

Play makes us tired and when we rest, we like to dream. Thus, from the very first year, we recognized the importance of including a dream net between these three trees, extending into a magnificent dream/voice catcher installation. Music holds a crucial place in the lives of the residents in this neighborhood, as it explores the power of sound and its musical potential. Collaborating with the children, we embarked on creating this intervention as a significant part of our journey. We used different materials to create 3 separate tree installations making this a magical forest.



STARGAZING HUT, gathering playscape

Nestled among five pine trees, we found joy in simply lying on the ground and gazing up into the branches, where sunlight filtered through like twinkling stars. This is also a spot where we learned to play tic-tac-toe (x-o), the mill game, and other algorithmic board games. We simply installed a solar light chain here and made it easy for everyone to come and experience it as well. We have been told that for some students this is a new favorite after-school spot for dreaming and telling secrets.



Power of nature, circular playscape

The spring and summer of 2023 were quite challenging, bringing a lot of rainy days and unexpectedly low and then high temperatures, leading to supercell storms. Such weather conditions led to our cities being covered with leaves, branches, and fallen and uprooted trees.

The branch of our precious golden rain tree, around which our climbing net was placed, did not hold to the power of storms. Looking at the fallen branch we could not but admire its geometry. Minutes later children arrived and started to explore, climb and conquer the fallen branch. With the intention to slow down this action and transform it into a more careful but not restricted exploration, a new game emerged: Play branch. Our bodies became frozen like branches too.

Together with children we decided we need to secure the branch, so we placed supporting tree trunks. Each branch got its perfect fit firmly fixed with long nails.

With the intention of claiming it as our sculpture and play object, children added color giving it new value and hopefully protecting it from becoming firewood material in the winter for those in need.



VOLCANO ISLAND, perspective playscape

Through a series of walks and learning from children about the specificities of the schoolyard, we came across a pile of burned down coal, forming a hill. Despite its potential safety concerns, we discovered that the children loved to climb it. Fortunately, the pile disappeared soon after, coinciding with the installation of a clean heating system for the school. The site of Ledine and the meaning of its name is “flat land”, so it was not surprising that the children created a hill-like site while envisioning dream spots. As a result, our once flat schoolyard experienced its first eruption, and a volcanic island re:appeared! The children led the way in the traditional singing and dancing “kolo” plays, contributing to the creative process. Everyone brought their own tools for the planting action along the hill. Similarly to the bush playland, we positioned three logs, symbolizing an open school bus, which was envisioned by the children when creating architectural models for dream spots. Also, there is a lilac bush near the hill, with a beaten path we discovered last winter that was not visible in the summer. We cut the branches to clear the path and we discovered a pebble path passing through it. Days later children told us that this is a jungle and that lava (a mulch path) appears leading to a volcano after they run through it. Inventing never stops!





LEARN & PLAY, seasonal playscape

During the COVID-19 pandemic it became more and more obvious that outdoor class is the way to go. Our circle in those days served as a perfect spot, but we needed more than just one circle. In our exchanges with the school staff an emphasis was made that it would be of great importance if the future interventions were able to support the outdoor classes. And so the Volcanic island was placed in front of the daycare area, fitting perfectly into their activities, and the circle now has more sitting and play area. But we also designed a special play – a picnic blanket becoming an instant classroom on the grass, but also a tool for exercise, as well as a costume! Also, together with the children and the school team, we remembered through our collective planting action that collective care of the schoolyard greenery was a big part of the school and community everydayness in the past, and a matter of pride and honor to do it, and we remembered that there was also an orchard there. So as our final intervention an orchard with a 4x4 grid of 15 fruit trees with autochthonous fruits (cherries, plums, apples, pears, quinces and more) will be planted in November. This play and learn-scape will offer practical nature classes for chemistry, biology and storytelling, and most importantly play! It will offer the transformative power of seasons and it will award us in the future. Until then the rectangular grid in which the trees will be planted will offer new spatial quality yet to be explored, and new games are to emerge for sure, because as we have seen every step of the way, play happens when children appear!



Mihal Grameno Green Schoolyard Pilot, Tirana



Qendra Marrëdhënie

Location: Elementary School Mihal Grameno, Tirana, Albania

Participants: kids aged 5–15, parent council, school staff, municipal workers and department leaders

Key words: green schoolyard, public park, de-paving, public space

Schoolyards are the last large patches of public space in Tirana; they just happen to be locked behind a gate most of the time. At 1.2 m² per person, Tirana is currently far below the WHO recommended standard of 9 m² of public green space. Schoolyards are evenly distributed in neighborhoods and have enormous potential to provide new park space close to where people live.

“Greening” schoolyards, or in other words replacing vast areas of hardscape



with softer, absorptive, natural materials improves learning, the work of teaching, and can have a neighborhood-scale benefits to the ecosystem. Green schoolyards act as sponges absorbing and filtering rainwater, reducing pressure on the city storm drains during winter flooding. They provide oases of shade, thick buffers of clean air, and offer respite from the high levels of road noise. By adding trees and wildflowers we can offer new homes to populations of birds and in-

sects whose work is essential for the functioning of local ecosystems.

The reasons why we should retrofit Tirana's schoolyards are clear. But RE:PLAY offered the chance to pilot a green schoolyard retrofit project in Tirana, as an experiment on the how. We have created a long-term, deeply collaborative process which can be used to make design decisions at Mihal Grameno.

In collaboration with six classes from the school ranging from ages 8–14 and over a period of twelve months, we evaluated how the spaces of schoolyards worked in order to make a collaborative map that would be the basis of future design projects.

That mapping was carried out live on the spot: by acting it out, building new forts, creating right then and there, and then talking about the values of each location. Our experiment was to show not tell,

act not predict, and as much as possible, experience the future schoolyard physically through temporary projects.

We held neighborhood parties by opening up the school gates on weekends and used tents and umbrellas as make-believe trees, to create a different understanding of how the space could work and what could happen there. It felt like collective imagining, but one we were all witnessing first-hand.



BEFORE

On this project we joined forces with the Municipality of Tirana, Directory of Public Buildings, to deliver a new concept for the sports fields in the back of the schoolyard.

In other settings we asked the teachers some serious questions having more to do with their work: how could the outdoor space of the schoolyard be shaped to better fit your day and even open up new opportunities for teaching? Simply: what would you change here to make it more helpful? The same questions were put to the security guards and the maintenance staff. For all the benefits a green schoolyard offers, it creates many new challenges too, that need to be addressed collectively.



AFTER

Besides the new fields, we proposed to remove the “cage-like” structure surrounding the fields and create a more open and welcoming area. This doesn’t only create a huge impact visually, but it actually gives the space that was initially fenced or unmaintained back to the schoolyard.



Depaving

A big part of the project was depaving a huge part of the schoolyard, creating a green zone which is suitable for trees and plants, but also hanging out. Here we planted trees and shrubs, and even though the trees are young, the area is already very popular with kids.



New seating and lighting

We added some picnic-style sitting on this new depaved area to fulfill the kids need for more social sitting. To make the area cosy also in the afternoon and evening we installed string lights in the schoolyard.



The track

We designed a track that goes all around the school. This was highly requested by students, teachers and parents as it serves many purposes. This track is a good route for parents with strollers to go around the schoolyard, kids can use it to go for a walk during their breaks and it also serves as a track for sprints as part of the physical education program.



The track goes through the depaved area as well.

Cubes (Kockice), Bar



NGO Gradionica

Location: Niko Rolović High School, Bar, Montenegro

Participants: children and highschoolers aged 12–19

Key words: multifunctional platform, co-design, schoolyard, community, play elements, immersive space

Although Bar doesn't have problems with the quantity of green areas, as can be the case in larger cities, under the influence of intensive urbanization in favor of uncontrolled tourism growth and the weakening correlation of planning documents with the needs of communities, every plot in the city is a potential source of profit. Although not directly, the large green areas planned around public institutions during the socialist era are a huge challenge, especially



in light of the decreasing number of quality planned plots for construction. Thus, the courtyard belonging to a high school also became a target, which in 2019 was devastated by the construction of a kindergarten, leading to community protests. The courtyard suffered significant damage, and the RE:PLAY project is one way to bring back some of its functionalities.

Through this pilot project, in collaboration and co-design process with

children, a solution was reached for several burning problems highlighted by the children in the analytical phase – the lack of shade to protect them from the hot Mediterranean climate, a space with developed green infrastructure that they don't have to wait for years to grow, a space near the school where they can spend short and long breaks without having to go to nearby cafés, a small outdoor classroom as a fundamental instrument for most school curricula. Also, a

small stage for performances and celebrations that were canceled by the demolition of the amphitheater in the previous courtyard, depriving children of the opportunity to celebrate the end of the school year in the school's vicinity. In short, the main place for extracurricular socializing, play, and entertainment, or in one word – "CUBES".

The co-design phase was present in the imprinting phase of the project, starting with the analysis, throughout the phase of project proposals and gathering students' suggestions, all the way until the last moment where children got the opportunity to work directly on building up their own schoolyard equipment, the Cubes (Kockice).



Using various coloring methods offers the opportunity to teach children multiple techniques, create smaller groups, distribute the workload, and engage more children in the process.



Preparation is key for a successful and organized workshop with children. While explaining details and using checklists are important, the most crucial element in co-creating with children is to have fun during the process and keep them engaged.





Encouraging exploration opens the door for children to become more comfortable with trying new coloring techniques. Shy participants often fear making mistakes, but they can be reassured that there are no mistakes in the creative process—it's all part of the adventure.



It's important to recognize that each participant brings their unique strengths to the table. Some individuals may have a knack for drawing, while others could excel in capturing moments through photography. Some might shine when it comes to organizing materials or tasks, while others are adept at facilitating communication within the group.

GOOD TO KNOW

The design process and place-making involve creativity and they are influenced by various unpredictable factors. These challenges are further amplified when multiple stakeholders are involved and new approaches are being tested. During the transition from design to implementation, numerous unforeseen events may arise, including:

Unfavorable weather conditions

Imagine the intention of creating a hill from soil, or planting new greenery, but experiencing continuous rainfall for over a month, resulting in your site turning into a muddy mess. To mitigate this risk, carefully select the appropriate season for outdoor work and allocate sufficient time for implementation. This way, you can afford to wait for favorable weather conditions before starting with the activity.

Contractors and deadlines

Originally, the plan was for the carpenter to finish constructing the play elements by late spring, allowing children to use them before the summer break. An evaluation would then follow. However, due to a significant delay, the installation of the elements was postponed until late June, after the school term had ended. It is crucial for children to be present when introducing the equipment they have co-designed to foster a sense of ownership. Without their presence, they may not fully embrace the equipment as their own.

Safety certificates

When constructing new non-standard play equipment for public spaces, safety should be the top priority. It is crucial to conduct safety inspections and assessments, including a-series tests, to ensure that the equipment meets the required safety standards. Obtaining certification further validates compliance with safety requirements. Allocating funds in advance to cover the costs of safety testing and certification demonstrates a commitment to providing a secure play environment. Not all installations and interventions suitable for play require certification. Therefore, before finalizing your design, familiarize yourself with the regulations in your city and make an informed design proposal.

Changes to the school management

Changes in school management can disrupt ongoing initiatives, as new administrators often bring their own vision and priorities. This can potentially alter the direction and impact of the previously supported initiatives. The new management may reassess projects, adjust resources, or introduce new strategies. To navigate these situations, open communication is key. Be prepared to initiate communication once again, foster collaborative relationships with the new management, and remain flexible in adjusting project plans and approaches to accommodate any shifts in the school's focus. Creating a cooperative agreement and an information sharing system at the beginning of a project establishes a solid foundation for all new stakeholders to rely on, enabling them to understand the collaborative strategy that has been developed and the progress that has already been made.

Unexpected guests

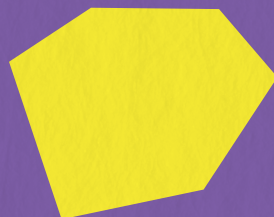
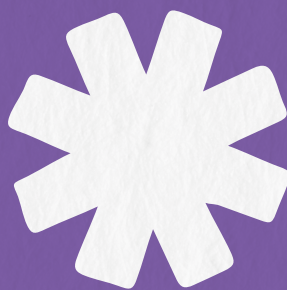
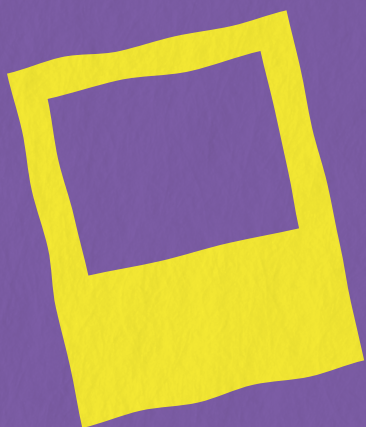
Depending on your site and the diversity of users in the space of your intervention, it is important to expect the unexpected. This could include unexpected occurrences such as moles roaming through a freshly planted garden, incidents of vandalism by local residents, individuals picking flowers, or even local groups damaging the protective fence and walking on the growing grass too early. All of these situations may arise in a shared world, but they should not be seen as the end of your work and progress. Instead, they serve as a reminder to consider how to invite more people to be on the same page and collaborate with you.

Joining forces with other initiatives

Our plan was to join forces with other existing initiatives to achieve greater synergies. In our efforts to collaborate with the existing initiatives, we encountered challenges arising from unfamiliarity on the part of school management and the municipal administration. This lack of trust led to their decline in providing support. To ensure successful collaborations, it is crucial to proactively plan and assess the background, reputation, and alignment of the initiatives you wish to associate with. Additionally, communicating joint actions well in advance can help garner support and foster smoother collaborations.



05
SHARE





RETHINKING THE APPROACH

We advocate and promote the concept of urban living in integrated playscapes, where towns, cities, and metropolises become dynamic environments for constant rethinking, recreating, reimagining, rediscovering, and redesigning – in one word, for RE:PLAY.

As we were working on this handbook, our aim was to engage as many of you who share our vision as possible. While our primary focus is on children, we invite teachers, parents, colleagues from the CCI, caregivers, decision-makers, and anyone interested in co-creation and participatory design to join us. With this handbook we seek to convey the notion that play comes in different shapes and forms, and while standards are necessary in many aspects of life, children's playgrounds can benefit from a more flexible and adaptable approach.

Our intention is to share the insights and knowledge gained through the RE:PLAY experience. Through ongoing dialogue and reflection, we have challenged our previous understanding and practices, prompting a

reconsideration of our approach to designing play spaces in the Western Balkans. The following section highlights key themes, lessons learned, and defining characteristics of our approach. We invite everyone involved to reflect upon and utilize these findings as an inspiration and tools to enhance design and improve the quality of life.

Beyond traditional playgrounds

Playgrounds have been designated as places for play in the urbanized environment that is too dangerous for incidental and improvised play. Playscapes go beyond traditional playgrounds, creating immersive environments that foster imagination, creativity, and problem-solving skills. Unlike fixed structures found in traditional playgrounds, playscapes offer flexible and customizable spaces for free, unstructured and open-ended play, allowing children to shape their own experiences and explore their boundaries.

These dynamic spaces often incorporate natural elements, such as trees, shrubs, rocks, mounds and water features, giving children opportunities to connect with the environment. Sensory-rich materials, texture and interactive features engage their senses, promoting cognitive development, sensory integration, and motor skills.

Playscapes embrace inclusivity, accommodating children of all abilities. By incorporating accessible equipment, sensory-rich elements, and inclusive play zones, playscapes promote social integration, empathy, and understanding among children. This inclusive environment nurtures friendships, breaks down barriers, and cultivates a sense of acceptance and belonging.

As planners, designers, educators, and decision-makers, we should strive to provide conditions that support play for all children in urban environments. This means extending the freedom to play beyond designated playgrounds by designing safe streets, generating creative public spaces and incorporating intriguing urban elements throughout the urban landscape. Playscapes serve as powerful tools for holistic development, helping to shape well-rounded individuals in an ever-changing world.

Nature as a playground

Nature serves as the ultimate playground, offering endless opportunities for play and exploration without extravagant structures or investments. Natural play spaces bring numerous benefits to children and communities alike. From climbing trees to building forts and splashing in streams, engaging in natural play encourages learning, creativity, physical activity, and imagination. It fosters a deep connection with the environment, nurturing appreciation, responsible use of resources, and environmental awareness. By incorporating natural elements into design, we can create captivating play experiences. This can be established with small local interventions, such as building a treehouse, planting bush plots, constructing a pump track in the woods, or creating nature trails. Natural play spaces also have the power to bring communities together.

Greening of urban playgrounds plays a crucial role in adaptation to climate change. Vegetation creates microclimates, offering shade and cooling effects that make outdoor activities more comfortable during hot summers. By integrating nature into playground design, we promote environmental sustainability and prepare children for a changing climate.



Our presence and ability to support play by using simple means is of key relevance for children.



Unstructured play with loose natural materials encourages imagination, creativity and cooperation.

Furthermore, the inclusion of natural elements in playgrounds supports biodiversity. By incorporating native plants, creating habitats for wildlife, and promoting ecological balance, natural play spaces help to preserve local flora and fauna. This fosters understanding and respect for the interconnectedness of all living things, encouraging children to become guardians of biodiversity.

Community-centered design and practice

Community-centered design and place-making play essential roles in promoting togetherness and improving the quality of life in neighborhoods. By prioritizing the creation of vibrant and inclusive spaces for children, we simultaneously provide opportunities for community members to gather, connect, and foster a sense of belonging. Schools, situated within neighborhoods and easily accessible to residents, serve as vital community hubs.

Transforming schoolyards into community spaces by opening them to the public outside of school hours can create lively gathering places that offer play equipment, sports facilities, and green spaces for people of all ages to enjoy. Implementing school streets, where traffic is limited or restricted during certain times, establishes safe, pedestrian-friendly zones that encourage active mobility, social interaction and play.

Community-centered design cultivates a sense of pride, ownership, and belonging among citizens, strengthening the bonds within the neighborhood. It ensures that the spaces reflect the specific needs and aspirations of the local community, fostering a sense of connection and creating environments that truly serve the community's well-being.



Community engagement in action: discussing schoolyard renovation in a fun-filled atmosphere.

Big gains, small investments

In the developing countries of the Western Balkans, the belief that playgrounds and educational infrastructure can only be developed with more financial resources often hinders progress. However, we challenge this notion by demonstrating that the quality of play spaces is not solely determined by money. It is the design process, the involvement of end users, and the smart use of limited resources that truly make a difference in creating impactful and engaging play spaces.

By tapping into the expertise of skilled designers and actively involving users, remarkable results can be achieved despite financial constraints. Incorporating natural elements such as vegetation and topographic relief not only reduces costs but also enhances aesthetics and functionality. Engaging the community in the design and construction phases not only minimizes expenses but also fosters a sense of ownership, community pride, and responsibility,

ultimately reducing maintenance costs.

Our approach emphasizes co-design, user involvement, and efficient resource allocation. With this mindset, we can create impactful playscapes that make a difference, even with limited investments.

Empowering voices

Building trust is crucial in participatory processes, establishing the groundwork for collaborative and inclusive decision-making. When people's voices are heard, respected, and considered, people are more likely to engage and contribute their ideas. Trust creates a safe and supportive environment, enabling individuals to express their opinions, share experiences, and challenge norms. It fosters transparency, open dialogue, and mutual understanding, leading to sustainable solutions. Prioritizing trust-building cultivates stronger relationships, empowers marginalized voices, and fosters a sense of shared ownership and responsibility, strengthening the fabric of our communities.

In playground design, participation is of the utmost importance. Engaging key stakeholders in children's lives ensures that the resulting spaces meet their needs, aspirations, and developmental well-being. While parents have traditionally been influential, teachers also play a significant role

in a child's growth and learning. Their input brings a comprehensive understanding of children's needs, preferences, and safety concerns, fostering truly inclusive and engaging play spaces.

Maintaining safe, functional, and inviting playgrounds requires the involvement of other school staff members, such as janitors and cleaners. Their participation is crucial as they contribute practical insights into day-to-day maintenance during the design process. Collaborating with them from the early stages instills a sense of ownership and pride, empowering them to actively contribute to the well-being of the children.

Co-creating with children, for children

Designing inclusive playscapes requires an approach where designers and children become collaborators. By recognizing children as "play experts" and actively involving them in the design process, we create spaces that are tailored to their needs. With their involvement, we not only get to know their wishes and address specific problems they may face, but we can also tap into their unique insights about playgrounds and urban equipment. They possess a deep understanding of how they interact with these spaces, offering valuable feedback that design professionals may overlook.



I see you, I feel you: letting our voices be playful and authentic.



Children's dreams take flight: an interactive outdoor exhibition of children's illustrations in a park.

For example, children have pointed out the unsuitability of adult benches in playgrounds due to excessive space between the seat and backrest. They have showcased their creative adaptations of structures, such as basketball hoop stands for climbing, and expressed the need for variety and updates in the play environment. These firsthand accounts highlight the invaluable knowledge children bring to the design process.

Active participation in design and decision-making empowers children, fostering a sense of pride, ownership, and responsibility within their community. Involving them in the construction and maintenance of the playground further develops their skills and teaches important life lessons.

By doing it together, we create inclusive and engaging play spaces that reflect the desires and aspirations of the children, while also empowering them to become active contributors in shaping their own environment.



Celebrating the realization of our Dream Path!

"If you want to go fast, go alone.
If you want to go far, go together."

African proverb





What comes next?

With the project's completion, we embark on an exciting journey to establish a network of regional organizations dedicated to participative design of play spaces in the Western Balkans. Our collaborative efforts have showcased the potential for creating inclusive playscapes that reflect children's voices and needs while implementing cost-effective designs. We have learned that schools are at the forefront of making neighborhoods more playful, diverse, green and connected, thereby transforming our cities.

Looking ahead, we hope to nurture collaboration and knowledge sharing among play experts. We envision taking the next step by developing an online hub that connects professionals from various disciplines, facilitating networking, collaboration, and resource sharing. Our intention is to bridge the gap between theory and practice, spatial and social sciences, incorporating the latest

research and cultural context of the Western Balkans. We aspire to make it a valuable repository of knowledge, resources, case studies, and innovative ideas to empower practitioners and inspire decision-makers.

Our network of organizations advocates for participative design principles, prioritizing the importance of play in children's lives.

We warmly invite all social and spatial play experts in the Western Balkans to join us on this journey, actively shaping the future of playscape design. By seeking partnerships with regional and international organizations, we aspire to expand our knowledge and amplify our impact. Together, let us work towards the creation of inclusive and captivating city playscapes that ignite children's imagination, foster their development, and enhance their well-being throughout the region.



Do you want to play together?

Join us in creating playful playscapes! Feel free to reach out and collaborate with us in designing and reshaping our environment.

Here are the Western Balkan region's playscape experts:



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SHARE: 85 bottom right Luka Vidic, Pazi!park; 86 top right Luka Vidic, Pazi!park; 87 bottom right Luka Vidic, Pazi!park; 89-90 Antun Cerovečki; 91 bottom center Kaja Šprljan Bušić

Colophon

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Printed in Tirana, October 2023

*This publication has been produced with the assistance of the European Union.
The content of this publication is the sole responsibility of the RE:PLAY project
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**Quality play will help children
develop into healthier,
smarter and emotionally
intelligent adults**

