

GOOD PRACTICES OF CIVIC ACTIVISM IN BUILDING RESILIENCE FOR SUSTAINABLE URBAN FUTURES: LEARNING FROM SKOPJE

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ABSTRACT

The Industrial Revolution, which began in the nineteenth century, marked a significant turning point in human urban history. It led to the replacement of agriculture and handicrafts with factories and mechanized production. These processes of industrialization, which started over two hundred years ago and continue today, are significantly increasing pressure on both natural ecosystems and urban environments. The concentration of heavy industry in economically prosperous cities caused many displaced peasants to migrate to urban areas unprepared for such rapid population growth. This influx resulted in poor living conditions, socioeconomic inequality, and environmental degradation.

Among the first to address these negative urban conditions were social reformers such as William and Catherine Booth in London and Jane Addams in Chicago, who laid the groundwork for urban missions. This legacy of social reform that began with pioneers advocating for social justice has evolved into contemporary movements. For instance, Jane Jacobs inspired citizen-led urbanism, while grassroots movements have emerged to advocate for mobility justice, such as Amsterdam's Stop de Kindermoord and Detroit's Slow Roll. Additionally, advocates for environmental justice have initiated projects like Guerrilla Gardening, Portland's Depaving, and Medellín's Green Corridors.

In the development of resilient and sustainable urban ecosystems, civic participation has emerged as a powerful force that often fills the gaps left by institutions and governments. One notable example is Skopje's ongoing efforts to promote city greening and citizen-led urbanism. These initiatives illustrate how urban activism can energize and improve the effectiveness of existing institutions in the quest for a better city. Ultimately, it is clear that civic action has transformed urban spaces by promoting social justice, green infrastructure, equitable mobility, and participatory urbanism. This paper examines effective practices from these movements and key figures, analyzing their impact on sustainable urban resilience and drawing lessons for the future of cities.

Keywords: civic activism, participatory urbanism, green infrastructure, equitable mobility, sustainable city

INTRODUCTION

Cities are always on the front lines of environmental crises and are fertile ground for their resolution. While municipal governments and private sector actors focus on the urban economy, civic movements, local community projects, and citizen advocacy are emerging as vital forces in building urban resilience to climate change and balanced urban development. This paper presents successful real-world examples of resilient settlements shaped by civic action, followed by an analysis of good practices that promote urban sustainability and a bottom-up approach.

The world's cities now house more than half of the global human population. This rapid urban expansion introduces complex spatial, environmental, and social challenges, including rising greenhouse gas emissions, resource depletion, and environmental injustices. Traditional top-down governance approaches often fail to adequately tackle these interconnected challenges, resulting in citizen actions and community-led interventions aimed at fostering sustainable urban transformation. This paper explores the theoretical foundations and exemplary practices that highlight the transformative potential of citizen actions for sustainable urban development.

Methodologically, this paper uses a comparative qualitative approach that combines historical analysis with a review of contemporary urban policy. Data sources include archival documents, scholarly literature, urban plans, and reports on community initiatives. The analysis is organized thematically, drawing lessons from similar experiences in global cities to understand Skopje's unique path of civic activism and resilience. This mixed-methods framework enables an examination of grassroots mobilization across different times and places, highlighting best practices and lessons transferable to other urban settings aiming for sustainability.

THE PROGRESSIVE CITY OF THE LATE 19TH CENTURY

During the late 19th century, many cities experienced significant changes due to rapid industrialization and urbanization. European immigration and domestic migration from rural areas led to explosive growth in American cities like New York and Chicago. The working class often lived in overcrowded homes with inadequate sanitation, which allowed diseases such as cholera and typhus to thrive in these unhygienic conditions. One of the early attempts to improve urban living conditions was the installation of sewage systems; however, many homes still lacked indoor plumbing, which facilitated the spread of disease. Additionally, the reliance on coal as a primary energy source resulted in considerable air pollution. During this time, the problems of inequality and environmental degradation stood in sharp contrast to the vision of innovation and progress. Consequently, the initial reform initiatives emerged as social reformers sought to address the challenges faced by distressed cities.

LONDON'S SOCIAL MAPPING

At the end of the 19th century, London was a metropolis marked by striking contrasts and facing significant social, economic, and environmental challenges. Wealth disparities were a defining feature of the city, with affluent areas like the City of London and Westminster standing in contrast to impoverished neighbourhoods such as the East End and St. Giles. Due to immigration from Eastern Europe and Ireland, the East End endured significant overcrowding, which made poverty and other social problems worse. There was limited access to clean water and adequate sanitation, and many labourers lived in cramped, filthy conditions. The Thames River was frequently treated as a sewer, which resulted in recurrent outbreaks of cholera, and the city also suffered from extreme pollution.

In this socio-spatial context, Charles Booth emerged as a significant figure. He conducted extensive surveys between 1886 and 1903, mapping London's streets based on social class (Figure 1). His maps utilized colour codes to illustrate the economic conditions of each area, highlighting the contrasts between wealth and poverty. By visually documenting poverty, Booth's maps raised public awareness of the scale and complexity of social inequality in Victorian London. They challenged prevailing perceptions and sparked debates about social reform. Booth's work influenced the development of social policies and the welfare state. His findings supported the introduction of state interventions, such as old-age pensions and free school meals for the poorest children. He advocated for improved housing conditions, slum clearance, and better urban planning. His recommendations led to projects like the Boundary Estate, which became the first state-built social housing in the UK. His maps were public documents that engaged the broader community in discussions about poverty and social justice, ultimately supporting social reform. Charles Booth's social mapping is a pioneering example of civil action through data-driven advocacy. By documenting and visualizing poverty, his work significantly raised awareness, informed policy, and drove social reform in Victorian London. Even today, his legacy continues to influence contemporary urban planning and social initiatives, underscoring the power of data and mapping in promoting sustainable and equitable urban development.

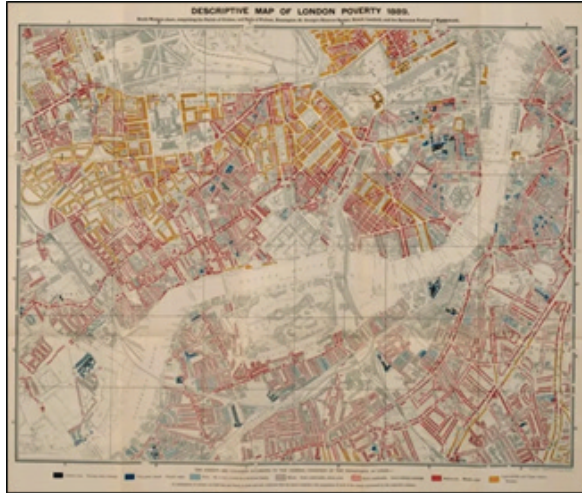


Figure 1: Descriptive Map of London Poverty (1889), taken from: <https://www.londonmuseum.org.uk/collections/london-stories/how-charles-booth-mapped-london-poverty/>

CHICAGO'S REDEMPTION

According to the Census Bureau, Chicago's population in 1840 was fewer than 5,000 residents, but by 1870, it had grown to 300,000. The devastating Great Fire of 1871 destroyed much of the original city layout, paving the way for its reconstruction in what is now known as Chicago's "commercial style." In 1893, the city hosted the International Columbian Exposition, commissioned by the Chicago Commercial Club and designed by Daniel Burnham and Frederick Law Olmsted. The peak of these developments came in 1909 with Burnham's City Beautiful Plan for Chicago. Between the American Civil War and World War I (1865-1918), the city's population exploded, surpassing two million. In contrast to the "Grand Manner" displays of wealth that overlooked everyday concerns, Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr established Hull House in 1889, which directly addressed issues of poverty and disenfranchisement. Addams' concept of "civic housekeeping" gradually redefined public health, leading to significant reforms in sanitation and garbage collection. As noted, "Men build Chicago's skyline; women redeem the city."

Another Hull House resident, Florence Kelley, utilized surveys (Figure 3) to map out wages, employment, and living conditions in Chicago neighbourhoods. Kelley's groundbreaking work in data-driven advocacy exposed the dire conditions of sweatshops, contributing to Illinois' 1893 labour legislation that prohibited child labour. Hull House's model of community-oriented activism inspired the establishment of over 500 settlement houses across America by 1920. Its focus on participatory governance, improved housing, labour laws, and public sanitation effectively linked social justice with urban reform, ultimately shaping modern urban planning.

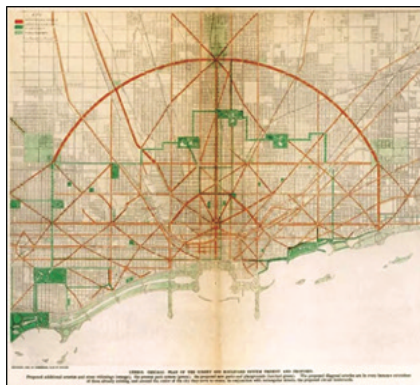


Figure 2: Chicago plan of the streets and boulevard systems (1909), taken from: <https://www.architecture.org/online-resources/architecture-encyclopedia/1909-plan-of-chicago>

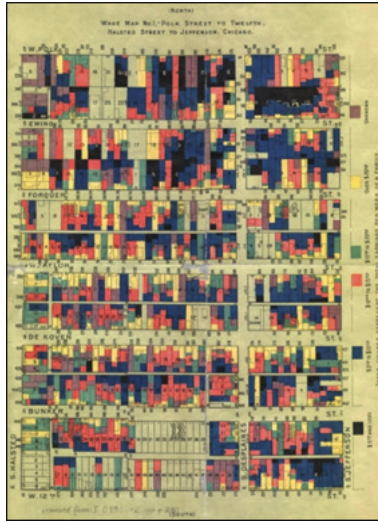


Figure 3: Chicago Wage Map (1985), taken from: <https://dcc.newberry.org/?p=17805>

STRUGGLE FOR THE 20TH CENTURY CITY

The struggle for 20th-century cities can be described as the clash between two fundamentally different approaches to urban development. The top-down approach was a car-centric urban renewal, and grassroots movements fought for human-scale, liveable cities. The two most influential examples are Jane Jacobs' battle for New York and Amsterdam's Stop de Kindermoord campaign. Both of them represent how grassroots civic activism can fundamentally reshape urban futures. They challenged the prevailing anti-urban, car-dominated planning paradigms of the 20th century. They showed that cities should be designed for people, not just for vehicles or economic efficiency.

BATTLE FOR NEW YORK

1956 was the year the Federal-Aid Highway Act was established to create the Interstate Highway System in the United States. The U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT), as the executive department of the U.S. Federal Government, was tasked with highway construction. The project was funded by the Highway Trust Fund and supported by federal gas taxes. It received 90% of its financing from federal sources, while the states contributed the remaining 10% and oversaw local implementation. As a result, over 66,000 kilometres of highways were constructed, making it the largest public works initiative in U.S. history.

In the context of mid-20th-century American urban development, New York's so-called "Master Builder," Robert Moses, epitomized the era's top-down approach to city planning. His vision prioritized highways, high-rises, and slum clearance—most infamously exemplified by the Cross-Bronx Expressway project, which displaced residents and fragmented longstanding Bronx neighbourhoods. Challenging this paradigm of large-scale urban restructuring was Jane Jacobs, a journalist and Greenwich Village resident, who emerged as a formidable critic of Moses' technocratic planning ideology.

The first major confrontation between these two figures occurred in 1952 over Washington Square Park. Moses sought to extend Fifth Avenue through the park, a proposal Jacobs vehemently opposed. Leading the "Joint Emergency Committee to Close Washington Square Park to Traffic," she mobilized grassroots resistance. After a protracted seven-year battle, Jacobs and her allies prevailed in 1959, securing the park's preservation as a pedestrian-only space. The next and even more contentious clash arose over the Lower Manhattan Expressway (LOMEX). Initially proposed in the 1930s and revived in the early 1960s, this ten-lane highway was intended to link New Jersey to Brooklyn by cutting through Lower Manhattan. Proponents framed it as a solution to traffic congestion. The project would have required demolishing over 400 buildings, displacing more than 2,000 families, and shuttering 800 businesses in Greenwich Village, SoHo, and Little Italy. Jacobs and local activists decried LOMEX as an existential threat to community life, organizing protests, petitions, and media campaigns. Their opposition reached a climax in 1968 when Jacobs was arrested during a volatile public hearing, accused of inciting a riot. Ultimately, after nearly a decade of resistance, the project was abandoned in 1969, sparing the historic neighbourhoods from destruction.



Figure 4: Aerial photo of Washington Square Park (1950s), taken from: <https://www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=138949>

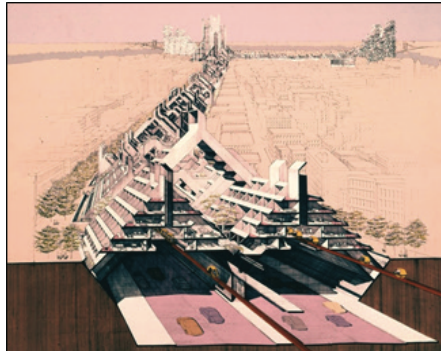


Figure 5: Paul Rudolph proposal for Lower Manhattan Expressway (1967), taken from: <https://archive.curbed.com/2016/5/4/11505214/-jane-jacobs-robert-moses-lomex>

Often dismissed as merely a "housewife," Jacobs offered a powerful counter-narrative to the grand visions of technocratic planners like Moses. Her activism challenged the prevailing belief in scientific rationality as the sole guiding principle for urban development. Rejecting the dogma that "new" inherently meant "better," she advocated for the preservation of organic, mixed-use neighbourhoods and the intricate social fabric they sustained. Her seminal question—"Why have cities not, long since, been identified, understood, and treated as problems of organized complexity?"—encapsulated her critique at a time when urban complexity was seen as an obstacle rather than an asset. Jacobs' legacy lies in her ability to reframe the discourse, demonstrating that cities thrive not through monolithic planning but through adaptive, community-centered stewardship.

2.2. Amsterdam's Stop de Kindermoord

By the 1960s, cars and traffic were commonplace in Amsterdam. After experiencing rapid expansion in the post-war era, the city encountered many of the same issues common to its contemporaries. In that context, Robert Moses was transforming New York City, and the 1967 Vancouver urban plan, which sought to demolish inner-city districts to link with the Trans-Canada Highway, was presented. In line with world trends in 1967, the Amsterdam solution was introduced as the "Jokinen Plan," financed by the powerful automobile lobby. This initiative sought to improve vehicular access within the city. Ironically named "Give the City a Chance" (Geef de stad een kans), it suggested the burial of the city's renowned canals to increase roadway capacity and the demolition of multiple neighbourhoods to accommodate a six-lane highway intended to enhance access for downtown commuters. This car-centric planning has led to unsafe streets, rising pedestrian and cyclist deaths, and declining public space quality. The frequent traffic accidents resulted in the deaths of children and sparked public outcry. The movement against deaths by cars started with the death of a journalist's child in a road accident. Journalist Vic Langenhoff was the first one to use the term "stop the child murder" (stop de kindermoord), publishing an article with this headline in 1972. This slogan was a powerful message. Parents, school groups, and community members' occupied streets, blocked traffic, and demanded safer infrastructure for cyclists and pedestrians. Demonstrations occupied accident black spots and closed streets to allow children to play safely. One of the most remarkable protest, which is still used today as an example, took place outside the Rijksmuseum, where the participants were lying down on their bicycles pretending to be dead.

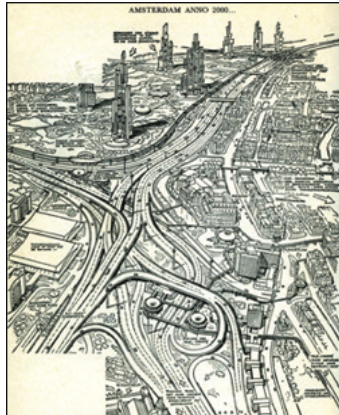


Figure 6: Jokinen Plan - proposal for the inner city of Amsterdam (1967), taken from: <https://viewpointvancouver.ca/2019/10/27/the-1960s-when-the-dutch-imported-american-planners/>



Figure 7: Participants lay down with their bicycles besides pretending to be dead, outside Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum (mid-1970s), taken from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XuBdf9jYj7o>

Fortunately, Amsterdam's "Jokinen Plan" was never completed (except for a few viaducts), and "Stop de kindermoord" received Dutch government funding, set up its office, and created concepts for safer urban design. These gave rise to a new type of people-friendly streets known as "streets for living" (Woonerfs), a shared space designed for pedestrians, bicycles, and low-speed motor vehicles. Usually without sidewalks or curbs, these streets slow traffic by putting in planters, trees, parking spaces, and other obstacles. The "Stop de Kindermoord" campaign transformed Amsterdam and the Netherlands' approaches to urban planning, traffic safety, and public space. Its significance is still felt today, affecting worldwide city planning and sustainable transportation regulations. What began as a grassroots movement has evolved into a global model for sustainable, people-centred city design.



Figure 8: Woonerf (Street for living), taken from: <https://naturespath.com/blogs/posts/woonerf-the-dutch-solution-to-city-planning>

GREEN CITY OF 21ST CENTURY

The idea of a Green City focuses on integrating nature with urban environments, not just for leisure or recreation but as a core strategy for rebuilding the city. Two leading examples—Portland's Depaving and Medellin's Green Corridors—demonstrate how cities can transform their landscapes and address the challenges of climate change and excessive urbanization. Both examples illuminate a new paradigm for the 21st-century city—one where green infrastructure is not an add-on or luxury but a foundation. These initiatives show that by reimagining how we use urban land, cities can be cooled, storm water can be managed, biodiversity can be restored, and the city can become healthier and more sustainable.

PORTLAND'S DEPAVING

Portland's Depave movement started in 2008 as a non-profit organization that promotes the removal of unnecessary pavement from urban areas to create community green spaces and mitigate storm water runoff. The idea emerged from a simple act of reclaiming a backyard parking lot and from there spread through the city, then across the state, and even between continents.

According to Portland Depavers, there are three main principles explaining why the city needs to be depaved:

The pavement gets hot. Pavement raises temperatures during the summer, creating a "heat island effect" that can cause urban areas to be up to 5 degrees Celsius warmer than nearby rural areas. Since 2008, a group in Portland has removed over 33,000 square meters of asphalt from the city (Figure 10).

Pavement is impermeable. Paved surfaces prevent rainwater from seeping into the soil, directing it instead toward the sewer system (Figure 11). By depaving these areas, we can reduce the risk of flooding and create alternative drainage solutions for stormwater. This process also allows for the revegetation of land with trees and plants. It is estimated that Portland Depave's gardens divert over 13 million liters of storm water annually, significantly reducing pressure on its sewage systems and mitigating the chance of flooding.

The pavement is not green. Revegetating depaved areas with native plants and trees enhances urban ecosystems, supports local wildlife, and improves air quality. Additionally, transforming previously paved spaces into farming land can provide food and nutrition for the local community. Urban green spaces help regulate temperatures for homes and workplaces by blocking excessive sunlight, offering cooling through evapotranspiration from plants, acting as windbreaks, and reducing traffic noise



Figure 9: Depave network logos, taken from: <https://www.depave.org/>

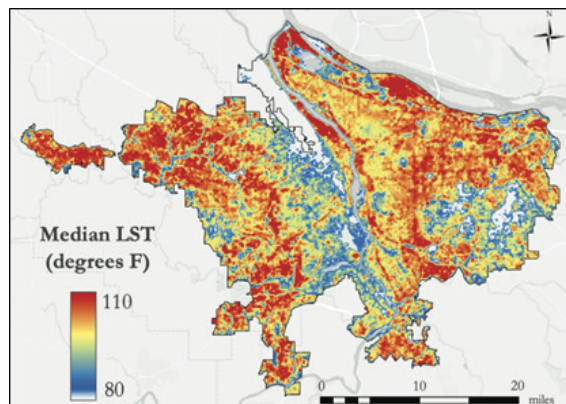


Figure 10: Heat map of Portland, taken from: <https://www.depave.org/>

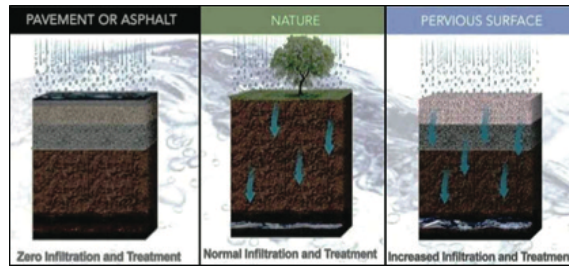


Figure 11: Pavement is impermeable, taken from: <https://www.depave.org/whydepave>

MEDELLIN'S GREEN CORRIDORS

During the late 20th century, similar to many cities in Latin America, Medellín (Colombia) experienced uncontrolled growth. That led to the creation of vast informal settlements, traffic congestion, and pollution. The city became infamous for drug-related violence. Rapid urbanization gained concrete infrastructure and lost green spaces; the temperature had risen significantly, and some areas were up to 6°C hotter than surrounding rural zones (the heat island effect).

At the turn of the new millennium, the city introduced the concept of social urbanism, which uses urban design to promote equity and sustainability. Under the leadership of newly elected Mayor Federico Gutiérrez, who prioritized sustainability, the Green Corridors project (Corredores Verdes) launched in 2016. The city collaborated with local colleges, environmental organizations, and community groups to develop the Green Corridors. The initiative transformed 18 highways and 12 streams into connected green corridors. More than 8,800 trees and 350,000 bushes were planted, focusing on native species that benefit local wildlife (Figure 12). The vegetation was carefully arranged to provide shade, lower temperatures, and absorb CO₂, while green pavements were built to absorb rainwater and help prevent flooding. The corridors helped lower urban heat by 2-3°C in some areas, making the city more liveable. Trees and plants filtered pollutants, reducing respiratory illnesses, and birds, butterflies, and pollinators returned to the city. The Green Corridors are part of Medellín's broader "Medellín Futuro" plan, which includes green roofs and vertical gardens, expanding bike lanes and pedestrian-friendly spaces, and further integrating nature into urban planning. In 2019, Medellín won the Ashden Award for Cooling by Nature and became a model for sustainable urbanism. Medellín's Green Corridors has shown us how cities can use nature-based solutions to tackle climate change, inequality, and urban decay. By combining environmental restoration, community engagement, and smart design, the project has become a global example for sustainable urban transformation.



Figure 12: A map of Medellín's Green Corridors, taken from: <https://www.archdaily.com/1019444/environmental-urbanism-and-urban-geographies-medellin-2024-2027-urban-plan>

SKOPJE, 60 YEARS OF FRAGMENTED DEVELOPMENT

The trajectory of Skopje's urban growth was forever changed at 5:17 a.m. on July 26, 1963, when a devastating earthquake—lasting only 17 seconds—claimed 1,070 lives, injured 3,700, and left 200,000 residents homeless. The disaster destroyed 75% of residential buildings and 80% of public structures, nearly wiping out much of the city's built environment. In response, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) led the rebuilding efforts, appointing Polish architect Adolf Ciborowski to oversee an international team of planners. Major contributors included:

PolSERVICE (Poland)—Responsible for the Regional and Master Plans.

Doxiadis Associates (Greece)—Carried out surveys of the built environment, housing programs, and infrastructure studies.

Wilbur Smith and Associates (USA)—Handled traffic engineering and transportation planning.

Kenzo Tange Team (Japan)—Won the international competition to redesign the city center.

This unique collaboration exemplifies a top-down approach that resulted in the Skopje Regional Plan, Master Plan, and City Centre Plan (Figure 13), which guided the city's redevelopment for the next forty years.



Figure 13: Skopje Regional Plan, Master Plan and City Centre Model, taken from: UNDP. (1970) Skopje Resurgent: The Story of a United Nations Special Fund Town Planning Project. New York: United Nations.

A PIVOTAL YEAR FOR URBAN POLICIES

The year 2012 marked a key turning point in Skopje's planning history. A Friendship and Cooperation Agreement was signed with Torino, Italy, encouraging collaboration across sectors such as public services, tourism, cultural heritage, and—most importantly—urban planning. A significant result was the joint research study "The Southern Boulevard of Skopje: A New Axis for the Development of the City," (Figure 14) produced by Skopje's Faculty of Architecture and Politecnico di Torino. This study examined infrastructure systems and strategies for urban transformation along the east-west axis of the city.

Later that year, the General Urban Plan for Skopje (2012–2022) was adopted with optimism for organized growth (Figure 15). However, its implementation in the following years was ineffective, failing to produce meaningful improvements to space or infrastructure.



Figure 14: Urban Centre in Skopje, The Masterplan for Southern Boulevard, taken from: https://www.to.camcom.it/sites/default/files/export-interna/14524_CCIAAT0_2552012.pdf



Figure 15: General Urban Plan of the City of Skopje 2012-2022, taken from: <https://skopje.gov.mk/mk/gup-na-gradot/>

In 2017, the City of Skopje Innovation Centre (SkopjeLab) was launched as a UNDP-supported pilot project—the Balkans' first public-sector innovation lab. Its goal was to develop innovative solutions to urban challenges. Notable initiatives included "Redesigning Public Spaces in Skopje" (Figure 16)—aimed at revitalizing underused green areas to promote social interaction and recreation. The most recent effort to enhance Skopje's resilience is the project titled "Green Corridor for Skopje" (2025, ongoing)—a 12-kilometer east-west linear park covering four of ten municipalities, designed to reduce urban heat, improve air quality, and cut traffic fatalities along Partizanski Odredi Boulevard (Figure 17 and 18), with key objectives:

Environmental Resilience:

Connecting city greenery into a cohesive network.

Reducing excessive heating, air pollution, and flood risks.

Expanding permeable surfaces through urban forestry (trees, shrubs).

Mobility and Safety:

Lowering traffic speeds and boosting flow by replacing signalized intersections with turbo roundabouts (spaced 250–300 meters apart).

Improving public transportation by adding dedicated lanes.

Widening sidewalks and bike paths to prioritize pedestrian safety.



Figure 16: Six redesigns of existing public spaces in the City of Skopje, taken from: <https://skopjelaab.mk/redizajnskopje/redizajn-1-0/>



Figure 17: Planned route for the Green Corridor, drawing: by author.

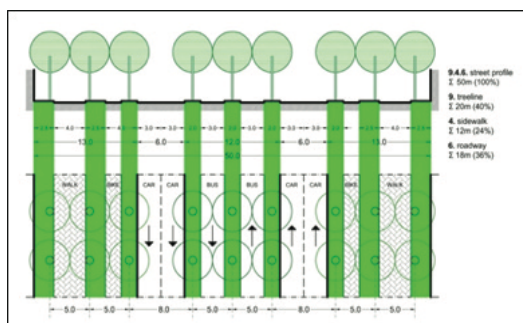


Figure 18: Characteristic cross section of the new boulevard, drawing: by author.

CONCLUSIONS

The history of civic movements in urban contexts demonstrates that resilient communities can be shaped by the tireless efforts of concerned individuals and local groups, rather than being the product of top-down design or technological innovation. Civic movements have consistently challenged long-established paradigms and reoriented the course of urban development towards equity, safety, and livability. From Charles Booth's social mapping in Victorian London and Jane Addams's groundbreaking community work at Hull House in Chicago to Jane Jacobs's struggle in mid-20th-century New York City and the Stop the Kindermurder movement in Amsterdam.

The 21st-century vision of the Green City, exemplified by initiatives such as Depaving in Portland and Green Corridors in Medellín, demonstrates how community-led projects can address contemporary challenges, including climate change, biodiversity loss, and public health crises. These efforts also show us that integrating green infrastructure, promoting equitable mobility, and fostering participatory urbanism are essential for building livable cities.

Skopje's experience, characterized by the aftermath of a devastating earthquake, decades of fragmented development, and recent emergent civic engagement, underscores the potential of bottom-up activism in revitalizing urban spaces and influencing policy. Projects such as "Redesigning Public Spaces in Skopje" or "Green Corridor for Skopje" exemplify how community involvement can integrate environmental restoration, mobility improvements, and public safety in a holistic resilience strategy. The city's evolving governance landscape, supported by international cooperation and innovation labs, further highlights the importance of multi-level collaboration in responding to complex urban challenges.

This brings us to the concept of the "Right to the City" in urban theory, first articulated by the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre in 1968. It argues that all urban dwellers—not just elites or property owners—should have a central role in shaping, accessing, and enjoying the city. This right is as much individual as it is collective, emphasizing the need for unhindered access not only to urban resources but also for sharing the power to participate in decision-making and co-create the spaces where everyday life takes place. In short, the right to the city is both a "call and a demand": a response to exclusion and inequality and a call for collective power to create cities that are sustainable and just for all.

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