

# Case Studies

MALTA // SPAIN // ROMANIA // BULGARIA //



# Malta

## CASE STUDY

In the case of Malta, the biggest barrier to habitual physical activity like walking and cycling is the lack of open spaces and supportive infrastructure that allows users to lead an active lifestyle. The rapid urbanisation that the country has gone through over the past decades has significantly changed the landscape of the island and while smarter cities, taller buildings and wider roads were being constructed, physical activity was pushed out of daily lives.

Malta has become a concrete jungle, with public spaces favourable for physical activity, and transportation infrastructure including segregated walking and bicycle paths being noticeably absent from the country's agenda. Instead, millions of euros are continuously invested in transportation infrastructure to

accommodate the large number of cars on the island which is growing faster than the demographic growth.

As a result, the urban environment has become significantly hostile and incompatible with outdoor exercise and/or habitual physical activity. Local cities and villages have become car centric, posing serious danger to pedestrians and cyclists, hence discouraging the community to opt for active mobility. This is of serious concern given that Malta boasts the highest rate of obesity in children in the European Union and a third of the Maltese population is estimated to be obese by 2030. Additionally, recent studies indicate that over 500 Maltese lives are shortened annually due to air pollution.



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Despite the increasing awareness on the adverse effects of inactivity, to date most local approaches have focused mainly on eating behaviours while the link between the built environment, physical activity and wellbeing has received little attention. Moreover, solutions drafted by city makers to meet these challenges are not created or consulted with future users and this often results in inadequate design that does not facilitate habitual physical activity. For instance—heavy use of concrete and lack of vegetation in public spaces are not adequate for Malta's Mediterranean weather, which is, in turn, giving rise to a number of adverse climatic conditions. Many recent projects exhibit these negative characteristics, and some also even lack basic thinking about users of public space and transportation infrastructure -- in

these examples, they prioritise cars over people. However, there are positive examples. Take the Skate Park - Bugibba, this public space has been restored to good condition by the local community through citizen engagement. Because of the clear local interest in transforming space to place—where a community can connect around. In contrast, a similar skate park was constructed by the local Government, but despite the lovely weather in winter, it is unusable due to heavy floods that makes the space unsafe for users.

This could have been easily avoided if the Government consulted with the users/community, who are knowledgeable and have experience in building skateparks—they would have certainly given their input on the design and how to avoid the place getting flooded.

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In the case of Malta, it is important to emphasise the role of the local community in the placemaking process. Given the substantial economic burden caused by lack of habitual physical activity, environmental and ecological issues like heat islands, lacking vegetation and the pressing climate change issues, interventions that encourage people to get and stay active may be attractive options from a cost-benefit perspective.



## Interview Insights

*From our talks with the Maltese team, here are some common findings of the context, public realm, and how the population uses their public space for activity in recent years.*

- 1** Use the more known term 'Open Streets Movement' instead of placemaking to get both bureaucrats and the community on board with interventions.
- 2** Fitness spaces/parks do aim to be inclusive, but fall short.
- 3** Since Covid, more participation amongst 'abstainers, for example, walking the promenade is popular.
- 4** Attention is needed to restore poor paths.
- 5** Stakeholder groups to target include: elderly, migrants, and children.



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# Spain

## CASE STUDY

In Spain, a tradition of children and young people playing in the streets has now greatly disappeared due to increasing urbanisation and occupation of space by vehicles. The 1992 Olympic Games brought renewed attention to sport and to the need for sports venues and facilities. The most popular places for physical activity are parks, public gardens, public courts, and streets if they are closed to traffic.

In the case of children and youth, group play and sports, often practised after school, are the most popular; some adult men also engage in team sports. In contrast, individual sports such as running or walking are generally more prevalent among adults and older people. Recently (before the pandemic) mass top-down running events have become very popular. Outdoor gymnastics facilities

have also been installed in many places, but these are not often used and are deteriorating.

In general, there are a large number of initiatives adapting public spaces for sport and physical activity (especially in the Basque Country and Catalonia), some cities already have such spaces and others are starting to develop them. There are several good local authority initiatives in Spain that have proven to be sustainable and supportive of physical activity. The most notable is Turia Park, which has changed the behaviour of local residents - many people have started walking, cycling, playing, running and using it as a route to work. A similar case is Madrid Río, a riverfront restoration project where cultural and entertainment facilities are available in addition to physical activity.





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Barcelona, on the other hand, was greatly influenced in a positive way by the 1992 Summer Olympics, which led to the construction of many sports facilities, some of which were financed by private investors, but also contributed to the restoration of public spaces such as the beaches from Barceloneta to La Mar Bella. In Zaragoza, on the other hand, Estonoesunsolar was initiated, a private-public urban puncture project involving the temporary use of public space with a long-term impact on improving its quality.

take into account its important element - community engagement.

In Spain, successful projects have taken into account climatic conditions (lots of greenery) and have used major events as accelerators for bringing forgotten spaces back into use. When it comes to placemaking, there are some trends similar to it, but which do not

# Spain

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## Interview Insights

*From our talks with the Spanish team, here are some common findings of the context, public realm, and how the population uses their public space for activity in recent years.*

- 1** It is recommended to have a variety of activities, with each activity oriented towards a specific target group.
- 2** The term placemaking is not known; rather using healthy city or smart city are well received.
- 3** The leaders in Basque Country and Cataluña support city wide sport campaigns.
- 4** The Olympics have impacted both the physical nature of the city -typologies - as well as the focus.
- 5** Now, waterways with parks should be reappropriated.



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# Bulgaria

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25 Bulgaria started to work on the topic of sport in the city to bring it in line with EU standards, however due to the lack of well-functioning institutions, these plans remain on paper. Moreover, there is a lack of initiative in local communities and lack of awareness on the possible options to engage in and as a consequence a dependence on local authorities to organise activities and to provide facilities. Moreover, there is an absence of cooperation between sectors. In recent years there have been many state-funded sports and recreation projects. There are several placemaking organisations in Bulgaria.

Projects funded by the state and local authorities include playgrounds, sports and recreation spaces or cycle paths. In some cases, there is insufficient public consultation, resulting in main-

tenance problems or poor quality of construction. On the other hand, Most initiatives organised by NGOs include public participation. An interesting example is the approach of the Active Society Association in Vidin, which involves the public in the process through a competition (the so-called “Neighbourhood Wars”).

Tourist associations and informal youth groups are also associated with the marking of routes to encourage physical activity and nature exploration. In Bulgaria, local businesses are taking the opportunity to promote themselves by creating sports and recreational facilities, such as a fitness alley in Varna, a rope park in Blagoevgrad, and fitness facilities on beaches in Kiten and Primorsko.

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city in an attempt to bring it in line with EU standards. However due to the lack of well-functioning institutions, these plans remain mostly on paper. Moreover, there is a lack of initiative in local communities and lack of awareness on the possible options to engage in and as a consequence a dependence on local authorities to organise activities and to provide facilities. Moreover, there is an absence of co-operation between sectors. In recent years there have been many state-funded sports and recreation projects.

Projects funded by the state and local authorities include playgrounds, sports and recreation spaces or cycle paths. In some cases, there is insufficient public consultation, resulting in maintenance problems or poor quality of construction. An example of this bad

construction being the bike paths installed in Varna. On the other hand, most initiatives organised by NGOs include and foster public participation, since they usually work in partnership with neighbourhood associations. An interesting example is the approach of the Active Society Association in Vidin, which involves the public in the process through a competition (the so-called “Neighbourhood Wars”).

In regards to placemaking, there are several active organisations, such as: BG Be Active, Power Jump, the Public Centre for Environment and Sustainable Development, Live Active Association. The most active is indeed BG Be Active, with its programme \_Spot Bulgaria. Their aim is to renovate and revitalise formerly neglected areas together with communities of

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est and neighbourhood associations, with the purpose of bringing local sports facilities and fostering community engagement.

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## Interview Insights

*From our talks with the Bulgarian team, here are some common findings of the context, public realm, and how the population uses their public space for activity in recent years.*

- 1** While there has been quite some work to support physical activity in public space - such as laws - there has not been much impact, relatively speaking.
- 2** The work done to promote physical activity in public space is mainly focused on cities. Villages receive little infrastructure, support, or activities.
- 3** Over half population is not satisfied with the sport options. Looking to create more variety in the options.
- 4** It is recommended to tap into innovative infrastructures.

# Romania

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After Romania's communist régime fell, an interest in the creation of public space sprang together with an enthusiasm for policies aimed at using the public space for physical activity at a neighbourhood-scale.

This greater awareness towards the importance of public space is mirrored in the latest judicial reforms, in which a legal basis for urban plans to include as many publicly accessible green spaces as possible, has been set up. In this regard, a governmental coalition between various ministries and programmes has been arranged in order to safeguard citizens' access and recreation in public spaces.

Nonetheless, there is a generalised lack of recognition of the value and implications in regards to placemaking in Romania.

Notwithstanding this, even if initiatives are mostly deliberated by public authorities, they are becoming mostly appreciated on a more local, community-level. This trend is observable from the projects Adopt a Park! Suceava is moving! and Promenada de sub Tâmpa - Tiberiu Brediceanu Park which proved successful in safeguarding and ameliorating pedestrian and green areas by relying on both local and European funds. Nevertheless, a common challenge was to form a legal basis to protect the areas from cars and bikers from damaging the newly installed leisure facilities. Apart from this, these initiatives proved overall sustainable due to the inclusive and diverse outdoor facilities installed, allowing different users to access the space.





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Another project aimed for children is The Kid friendly park initiative in Bucharest, which was concurrently developed between civil society and local authorities. The project was monitored by GOKID as a way to enhance the safety of parks for children and parents. Nevertheless, this initiative did not prove entirely as successful for the reason that it did not meet European quality requirements. Lastly, another more recent and successful project is the PUMP TRACK Oradea. Specifically designed to address the needs of young people who use skateboards and BMX bikes, addressing, in this way, the lack of proper sports facilities.

# Romania

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## Interview Insights

*From our talks with the Romanian team, here are some common findings of the context, public realm, and how the population uses their public space for activity in recent years.*

- 1** The term placemaking is reluctant to catch with the public.
- 2** Without mandate, the concept to gather or go jogging in public space is considered taboo.
- 3** Historically, from the Middle Ages in this culture, it is hard to engage the public to participate.
- 4** The pedestrian pathways are in poor condition or heavily blocked by parked vehicles and traffic.

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