

Sport, Public Space and Adolescents: Insights from the Re-Gen Network on Urban Regeneration, Health and Shared Governance

In contemporary urban societies, the decline of physical activity and the erosion of social connectedness among young people have become critical public issues. Cities today are not only centres of innovation and culture but also environments where sedentary lifestyles, spatial inequalities, and fragmented communities pose growing threats to public health and civic cohesion. According to the *World Health Organization* (WHO, 2023), more than 80% of adolescents worldwide fail to meet the recommended levels of *Health-Enhancing Physical Activity* (HEPA), while the *Active Healthy Kids Global Alliance* reports that only one in four European children achieves even the minimum daily target of moderate exercise. This lack of movement is not a marginal lifestyle issue: it undermines both physical and mental well-being and increases the risk of future chronic diseases and social exclusion.

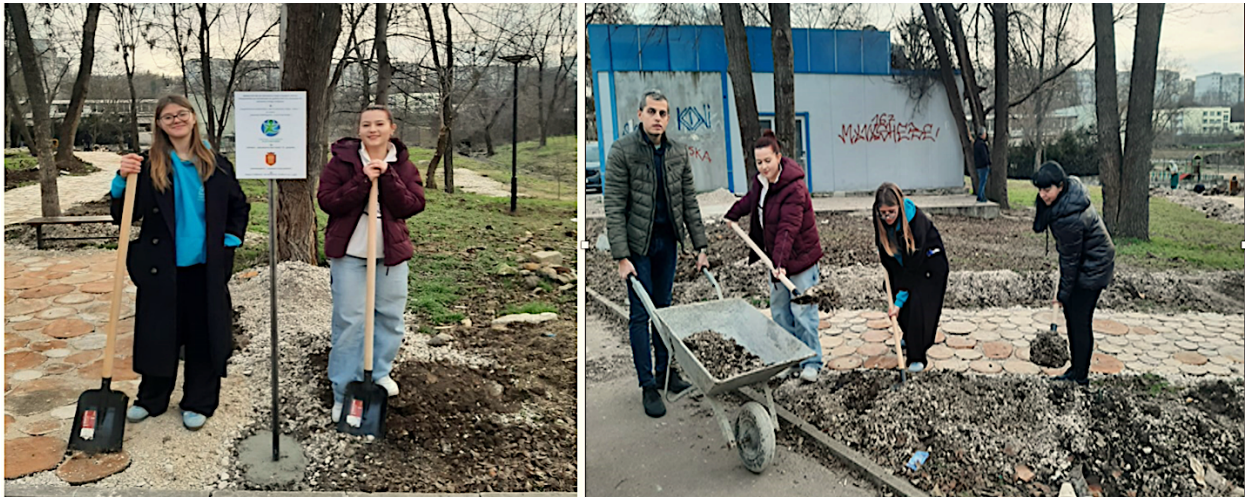
The Re-Gen Project



The *Re-Gen* project (2022–2025), supported by the URBACT IV programme, emerged as a response to these intertwined challenges. It explored how sport, street sport, and participatory co-design can regenerate public spaces, promote health, and strengthen social inclusion. Over two and a half years, nine European cities — Verona (Lead Partner), Milan, Albacete, Daugavpils, Dobrich, Pula, Corfu, Vila do Conde, and Lezha — worked together to test innovative actions engaging with adolescents and local communities. These actions turned sport and physical activity into catalysts for urban regeneration, engaging more than 900 young people, 300 stakeholders, and 150 local organisations. The *Re-Gen* network drew upon established European policy frameworks — including the *Healthy Cities Movement* (WHO, 1986), the *SHARE2 Communities of Practice* (European Commission, 2023), and the *New European Bauhaus* — to articulate a collective vision of public space as an environment that promotes health, creativity, and civic participation. Its integrated

approach showed that urban well-being depends as much on social interaction, cultural expression, and collaborative governance as on physical infrastructure. Through local experimentation, *Re-Gen* demonstrated how cities can cultivate inclusion, beauty, and sustainability by regenerating spaces that encourage movement, dialogue, and shared responsibility among citizens.

Conceptual Foundations: From Public Space to Common Space



Public space has long been recognized as a determinant of health and a driver of civic life. The *Healthy Cities* perspective regards urban space as a social ecosystem — a setting where physical form, social practices, and governance arrangements interact to shape well-being. When public spaces are designed and managed inclusively, they enhance safety, social cohesion, and a sense of belonging; when they are neglected or inaccessible, they generate alienation and inequality. The *Re-Gen* experience contributes to a growing body of literature that reframes *public space as common space*: not only a site of collective use but also of collective responsibility and co-production. Building on *Ostrom's (2015)* theory of the commons, the network experimented with shared governance between municipalities, schools, sport associations, cultural actors, and youth. In doing so, it connected the physical regeneration of space with the social regeneration of trust and participation. Common spaces are particularly vital for adolescents. Studies show that young people experience public spaces as arenas for autonomy, identity, and peer interaction (Wheeler et al., 2015). Inclusive and well-designed environments can reduce perceived risk, strengthen mental health, and encourage civic engagement. The *Re-Gen* network thus approached sport both as a recreational activity and as an *urban policy instrument* capable of addressing health inequalities, promoting intergenerational dialogue, and nurturing civic pride.

Methodology: Learning by Doing, Acting by Learning



URBACT's integrated action-planning method provided the operational framework for *Re-Gen*, combining transnational exchange with local experimentation. Each partner city implemented one or more testing

actions — small-scale, time-bound experiments conceived as laboratories for innovation. These actions included community sport festivals, tactical urbanism, street art initiatives, digital mapping campaigns, and participatory design workshops. Their outcomes informed the final Integrated Action Plans, which define strategies for sustainable, inclusive urban sport hubs. Over two years and a half, the network held eleven transnational meetings and more than sixty local workshops. This process produced both tangible and intangible results: new or renewed public spaces; strengthened stakeholder coalitions; and enhanced local capacities for participatory governance. In the words of one youth participant from Verona, “we were not asked to fill in a survey, we were asked to draw the city we want.” Such statements encapsulate the epistemic innovation of Re-Gen — shifting from consultation to *co-production*.

Urban Regeneration Through Sport and Participation



The testing actions revealed the multidimensional potential of sport for urban transformation. In **Daugavpils (Latvia)**, a series of *Youth Summer Festivals* converted peripheral squares into vibrant spaces of interaction. Streetball, floorball, and music performances drew hundreds of adolescents, proving that sport can re-activate underused areas and build new social geographies of belonging. In **Dobrich (Bulgaria)**, the regeneration of an abandoned sports ground into *Green Apple Park* illustrated how *Nature-Based Solutions (NBS)* can integrate environmental and social objectives, promoting both physical activity and ecological awareness. In **Albacete (Spain)**, digital tools engaged adolescents as urban explorers. The *#ReGenAlbacete* Instagram campaign encouraged them to map their favourite urban voids and propose ideas for reuse. More than 120 proposals were collected, many related to climbing, street basketball, and social events. This exercise provided spatial data and civic imagination for the forthcoming Integrated Action Plan.

Verona (Italy) and **Milan (Italy)** placed co-creation at the centre of their methodology. Through workshops, hackathons, and urban walks, hundreds of students contributed to rethinking playgrounds, underpasses, and courtyards as multifunctional “urban arenas.” Milan’s *SUN Siro* event merged basketball, music, and street food, transforming a school courtyard into a symbol of social inclusion and multicultural dialogue. In **Pula (Croatia)**, tactical urbanism combined street art and street sport in the Rojc Community Centre, where young people painted and co-designed sport facilities. **Vila do Conde (Portugal)** focused on the Dálias neighbourhood, where residents and youth groups co-planned the renewal of a damaged sports rink in a social housing area, demonstrating that sport can foster both physical activity and civic empowerment. Finally, **Lezha (Albania)** adapted an abandoned gymnasium into a Youth Centre, linking sport with education, creativity, and environmental care.

Each of these initiatives demonstrates that small-scale interventions can trigger structural change. They improved access to sport, generated trust among institutions and citizens, and turned neglected areas into places of beauty, identity, and safety.

Street Culture, Inclusion and the Aesthetics of Belonging



Beyond health metrics, the Re-Gen actions highlight the symbolic and cultural dimensions of sport. Street sport and street art share a democratic ethos: they require minimal infrastructure, encourage creativity, and value self-expression. When incorporated into public space, they democratize aesthetics and produce what scholars call *the everyday beauty of participation*. In Re-Gen cities, artistic practices — graffiti, murals, music performances — accompanied sport activities. This integration revealed how *the aesthetic and the ethical* dimensions of regeneration are mutually reinforcing. Public art not only beautifies but also legitimizes youth presence in the city, countering stereotypes that associate adolescents with disorder or risk. The perceived beauty of space influences behaviour, attachment, and community trust. Clean, well-designed, and vibrant places invite care; degraded spaces often reinforce neglect. From a public health perspective, such environments support what WHO defines as *social determinants of health*: safety, belonging, and perceived control. Active and attractive common spaces contribute to physical activity, mental resilience, and civic pride — all key indicators of *urban well-being*. Street sport fosters inclusion across gender, culture, and ability. As informal, low-threshold practices, activities like parkour, 3x3 basketball, or skateboarding appeal to diverse groups, bridging cultural differences and reducing social isolation. They provide a non-competitive, cooperative form of physical engagement that reflects the pluralism of contemporary European cities.

Common Space as Infrastructure for Health, Security and Sustainable Development



Re-Gen’s results support the argument that accessible, co-managed public spaces act as critical infrastructure for urban resilience. When public areas become *common spaces* — co-owned by communities and governments — they generate multiple co-benefits. From a health perspective, they encourage movement and reduce sedentary behaviour. From a social perspective, they foster trust and collective efficacy. From an economic perspective, they create local opportunities in sport, culture, and creative industries.

The WHO’s *Active Healthy Cities* framework emphasizes that urban environments designed for active living reduce healthcare costs, enhance safety, and strengthen social capital. Similarly, the *European Green Deal* and *New European Bauhaus* advocate for “beautiful, sustainable, and inclusive” places that integrate health, ecology, and culture. Re-Gen operationalized these principles by linking small-scale experimentation with strategic planning. Empirical data collected through the project show tangible impacts. After 2.5 years, nine cities produced and peer-reviewed Integrated Action Plans; twenty public spaces were regenerated or re-designed; and more than 1,000 local participants engaged in sport, cultural, or design activities. Surveys revealed that 87% of young participants felt more attached to their neighbourhoods, while local administrations reported stronger collaboration between departments of youth, sport, environment, and urban planning.

The legacy of Re-Gen thus extends beyond physical transformations. It lies in the institutional learning that occurred through peer exchange: cities now possess tested methodologies for participatory sport-based regeneration and are committed to scaling them.

Towards a Movement of Movements



What began as a network of cities testing small-scale actions has evolved into a *translocal movement* — a network of people, ideas, and practices that travel across borders. Re-Gen demonstrated that urban transformation can start from modest, playful interventions that reconnect citizens with their bodies, communities, and environments. The network’s peer learning activities — study visits, masterclasses, and online exchanges — strengthened mutual trust and fostered friendships that outlive the project. Participants often describe the experience not as a policy exercise but as a *community of practice* where mayors, youth

workers, and teenagers shared a vision of the “active city” as a city of care, beauty, and solidarity. The Re-Gen journey ultimately redefines the meaning of movement in urban policy. Movement is not limited to physical activity; it is also the movement of ideas, resources, and governance cultures. When cities move together — physically, socially, and politically — they generate momentum for healthier, more inclusive, and more sustainable futures.

Reflections for Future Policy and Practice



The lessons of Re-Gen suggest that sport-based urban regeneration can become a structural component of sustainable urban development strategies. Future policies should integrate *urban health promotion* with *participatory design* and *shared governance*. Investment in community sport infrastructure must go hand in hand with mechanisms for co-management and capacity building among youth organisations. Evaluation frameworks should capture the multidimensional impact of common spaces — on health, safety, aesthetics, and economic opportunity. Perceived beauty and belonging are not superficial indicators; they correlate with behavioural change, civic responsibility, and resilience. In times of social fragmentation and climate uncertainty, the creation of inclusive, active, and beautiful public spaces emerges as a form of *preventive urbanism*: preventing illness through movement, preventing exclusion through participation, and preventing decay through shared care. The Re-Gen network’s legacy thus goes beyond its nine Integrated Action Plans. It offers a methodological and ethical compass for European cities: a reminder that when adolescents are invited to co-design their environments, they do not merely regenerate spaces — they regenerate the city itself.

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