“Festa N’ Rrugë” is a pop-up school street party hosted periodically by QM and the Municipality of Tirana. Open streets take the public beyond imagining and into the direct experience of a better street.

"From playgrounds to everyday freedoms: one should be able to play anywhere, easily, loosely, and not forced into a playground or a park."

Excerpts from *Urban Playground* by Tim Gill

School streets are “playgrounds turned inside out.”

Tirana is building a network of protected walking routes at schools by removing on-street parking.

Extending sidewalks restricts traffic and errant parking, making walking and rolling more comfortable. That change also reduces the exhaust, road dust, and harmful noise vehicles impose on our children. De-paving and planting in parts of the school streets adds pockets of shade and green, and helps absorb stormwater.

School streets organize the chaos of the drop-off pick-up periods, assigning school bus waiting areas, and give caregivers a deep buffer of space while they wait outside the school gate.

School streets add new play spaces into the neighborhood—for everyone. Caregivers whose children aren’t yet of school age also have a new space to spend time just outside their door. They’re more likely to use it every day if they don’t have to plan to get to a park.

The first function of a school street is to create or enlarge the space reserved for pedestrians, and protect it from encroachment by vehicles.
Parking removal and de-paving are quick, low-cost, and high-impact tactics for transforming streets to address the health and wellbeing of children and caregivers in neighborhoods.

School streets are buffers of safe, comfortable, green, and playable space around schools.

What happens when urban planning goes wrong for children?

- Traffic danger
  Accidents with vehicles are the leading cause of death among people aged 15-29, and the second leading cause for ages 5-14.
  The threat from traffic is greatest in low-middle income countries.

- Obesity and inactivity
  Globally over 80% of children are less active than they should be.
  In 1975 less than one child in a hundred was obese globally. In 2020, 16.6% of children age 0-5 are overweight.

- Air pollution
  Children are more susceptible to air pollution than adults. Air pollution is linked to life-changing health conditions: cancers, stunted lung and brain development, airways inflammation and premature death. In 2019 20% of diabetes deaths were attributed to air pollution, 26% of stroke deaths, and 20% of neonatal deaths.

- Noise pollution
  Road traffic is the dominant source of noise pollution in urban areas. An estimated 500 million people in Europe alone are affected by harmful levels. Stress reactions to high noise levels can cause cardiovascular disease and cognitive impairment. It is also a discouragement to spending time outdoors.

- Mental health
  A growing body of evidence strongly suggests that access to green space has a direct impact on mental health and school performance among children. Covid-19 restrictions exaggerated mental health and obesity and inactivity problems among school-aged children.

Neighborhood mobility and convenience

Caregivers with young kids have a uniquely complicated way of moving through the city because they make so many stops! The goal of neighborhood planning that centers their needs is to make sure all those stops exist inside a small range.

We know that 52% of people in Tirana don’t have access to a car. We also know that drivers are more often men, with greater wealth. Female caregivers, especially those less well-off, more often walk or take the bus to get around. The ability to walk safely in a city is a gender and economic equity issue.

Schools have an important role to play in creating and maintaining walkers. Since 2021 the city of Tirana no longer permits students to enroll at a school outside their administrative unit (borough). The re-design of streets will help this new policy succeed.

The afternoon pickup period at Avni Rustemi school in Tirana. There is very little buffer between children and moving vehicles, their exhaust nor their noise.

A new buffer of protected walking space painted with games at the “Streets for Kids” intervention at Gjon Buzuku School in Tirana.

The “baby park” at Gjon Buzuku School with its new mature shade trees, sand play space, shade structure, seating, and lighting.

Removing strips of asphalt at Gjon Buzuku school transformed a former parking lot into a natural playscape. Neighborhood level stormwater projects are a crucial part of climate adaption in cities.

A toddler plays safely in the street, and without worried parents when traffic is temporarily prohibited.

A toddler plays safely in the street, and without worried parents when traffic is temporarily prohibited.
Evaluation and monitoring

Over the next year, we will track six indicators at twenty schools: ten pilot schools, and ten comparable schools nearby where no changes will be made. The insights from this data will unlock the next phases of the project for the city: to better plan capital construction and to communicate the benefits to stakeholders.

- Student travel mode
- Project approval survey
- Noise levels
- PM2.5, PM10, NO2

Co-creation: imagine, play, design, and build

The atmosphere of the school street is co-created with kids and neighbors. While safety features come from city engineers, the character of the street is elaborated by those who live and work there. Co-creation invites collective imagination about the potentials of a street, and then ushers them into reality.