

TIRANA | CHILD-FRIENDLY DESIGN

A City Young and Free

The once-reclusive former Communist capital was on a path of chaotic development until it adopted a child-centric urban design that fostered socially inclusive values. Today, this unorthodox approach has helped Tirana bloom into a lively city with a strong sense of civic engagement.



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Streets in Tirana used to be overcrowded, polluted and unsafe for children.
Image: Wamodo / Alamy Stock Photo

The Challenge

After decades of isolation under a repressive regime, Tirana threw open its doors to democracy, free-market capitalism and freedom of movement after dictator Enver Hoxha died in 1985, welcoming hundreds and thousands of migrants into the city. Within a few years, unsanctioned buildings became common, as informal dwellings and businesses sprang up in the Albanian capital.

Public spaces and residential neighbourhoods were overrun with kiosks that doubled as stores, restaurants and offices, many of which were illegally built. There were few shared spaces for children and parents spent as much as a quarter of their monthly disposable income to access play spaces attached to cafes and bars.

Low-income families living on the city's periphery especially struggled with the costs of such amenities.

In 2015, Tirana was among Europe's most polluted capitals, mostly due to heavy traffic congestion. With an average population age of 27, Tirana's informal settlements and low quality of life threw into relief its city's ability to tend to the youngest and most vulnerable. To make matters worse, urban sprawl and pollution drove many young upwardly mobile families to emigrate.

Nearly 5,000 of its 800,000 residents were younger than six years old—and meeting their needs would principally determine the welfare and future of the city.



What used to be a 40,000 m² roundabout dedicated to cars is currently Tirana's biggest car-free area and a playground where children can enjoy cleaner air.



The Solution

Tirana's chaotic image was soon overturned when Erion Veliaj became mayor and centred the city's urban design around a grand vision of a child-friendly city. As many of the city's public nurseries and kindergartens were neglected and falling into disrepair, Veliaj saw the chance to shape a new civic-minded generation and design a city with the youngest and most vulnerable citizens at the forefront.

The mayor pledged to renovate all 32 of the city's kindergartens before the school year started, after he took office in July 2015. With the support of private enterprises, public kindergartens were transformed into safe and conducive spaces for learning. In 2018, the city also made lunch and snack menus healthier for children,

switching from pizza and soda to choices like vegetables, hummus, yogurt and muesli.

After gaining more political and public support, the Veliaj administration's new municipal agency of parks and recreation undertook the primary task of turning Tirana's long-neglected 1.05 km² Grand Park into Eastern Europe's biggest playground. The Grand Park playground opened in June 2016, and featured climbing frames, swings and crawl spaces. Encouraged by this success, the administration renovated 48 more playgrounds as part of an initiative called Play Tirana.

To make Tirana more sustainable and less car-dependent, the Veliaj administration restored public



Children and parents gathering on the streets on one of Tirana's car-free days.
Image: Municipality of Tirana



Skanderbeg Square is now a permanently car-free zone.
Image: Leeturtle / Wikimedia Commons



Hundreds of young volunteers in Tirana's children city council share their views on how their city could be run.
Image: Municipality of Tirana



Mayor Veliaj planting "birthday trees" with children.
Image: Municipality of Tirana



Children playing in the Grand Park playground.
Image: Municipality of Tirana

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spaces that were occupied with kiosks, like Skanderbeg Square. "What used to be a 40,000 m² of roundabout road dedicated to cars is currently Tirana's biggest car-free area and a playground where children can enjoy at any time in much cleaner air," Mayor Veliaj shared with *Urban Solutions* on the pedestrianisation of Skanderbeg Square since 2016.

Children came with their bicycles and rollerblades, and even cyclists as young as three years joined in convoys. The children enjoyed the revamped space so much that they were able to sway some of their parents who were initially wary of the pedestrianisation initiative. Car-free days soon became monthly affairs, and the square became a permanently car-free zone.

This initiative was aligned with Tirana 2030, a city plan Veliaj had inherited from former Tirana mayor and current Prime Minister of Albania Edi Rama to solve urban sprawl while including biodiversity as a focus.

The plan envisioned a metropolis ringed with an orbital forest, a two-million tree belt where people could walk and cycle, and fewer social housing built on the outskirts. The Veliaj administration welcomed families to co-create this forest by planting "birthday trees" for their children.

Tirana 2030 also included plans for 17 additional schools to be sited in underserved urban and rural peripheries. Through private-public partnerships, the construction of the new schools will be accelerated, without raising new taxes. Besides serving children, the schools will function as community centres and venues for non-profit programmes.

The Outcome

Today, the once-isolated Tirana has overcome its turbulent past and embraced its status as a soulful, cosmopolitan cultural capital of the Balkans.

In the space of four years, the city has renovated over 100 nurseries and kindergartens, and constructed five schools. The government-subsidised kindergartens have become so popular that, from having excess capacity, they are now unable to cope with massive enrolment demand.

The city has earned international plaudits for its regenerative efforts. The renovation of Skanderbeg Square was awarded the European Prize for Urban Public Space in 2018. In 2019, Tirana was named the European Youth Capital for the European Youth Forum in 2022. The city is now preparing a programme of cultural and social activities to address the needs of the young.

"Advocating for child-friendly infrastructure in a city that is experiencing rapid urban expansion and population growth under tight budget constraints required a lot of innovative and creative thinking to push forward," says Mayor Veliaj. "My ambition is to leave children and youth a city where they can grow to become healthier, more energetic, and competent to thrive as adults who will carry on the transformation of Tirana for the next 100 years."

By focusing on children's needs and turning Tirana into a "big playground", the city has transformed into a place full of life, filled with young people hungry for change. 🌱