


SPACE PROJECT

NEIGHBOURHOOD INTERVENTION ACTION PLAN VAU I DEJËS, Albania

YOUTH AND PUBLIC SPACES
Participatory Placemaking in Peri-Urban and Rural Communities



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Background

The purpose of this action plan is to transform the unused public spaces in the Municipality of Vau i Dejës, converting them into functional, inclusive and sustainable environments that serve the local community. The specific area proposed for intervention has been identified in the General Local Plan (GLP) as a structural unit with the function of SHA – Social Activities and Entertainment. It is positioned on the bank of the Drin River, in direct proximity to residential areas and the urban road network proposed by the GLP.

Despite its official classification as a zone with social and recreational functions, the space currently remains unused and without any spatial organization. This contrast between the potential recognized by the planning instrument and the actual conditions on the ground constitutes the central argument for choosing it as an intervention area and the starting point of the entire process.

The choice of this area is not coincidental. Its strategic position, at the dividing line between the city's urban structure and the natural space of the river, makes it a key point for connecting the community with the natural environment.

Through the 3-day activity, young people from the area were directly engaged in analyzing the existing situation, identifying needs, and co-creating concrete proposals. The proposals developed cover recreational, cultural, ecological and economic functions, leveraging both the area's favorable position near the river and its connection to the urban road network proposed by the GLP.

The plan aims to address this gap through a participatory approach, directly involving the area's youth in the drafting of proposals for the transformation of the space. The document reflects the results of this process and aims to serve as a reference base for the municipality, partner institutions and the community, with the goal of implementing sustainable and long-term impact interventions.

Context and Intervention Are

Location

Vau i Dejës is a municipality located in northwestern Albania, in the Shkodër region. It consists of a small urban center and a number of surrounding rural administrative units, forming a territory with a mixed semi-urban and semi-rural character.

According to approximate demographic data, the municipality has a population estimated at approximately 20,000 to 25,000 inhabitants. In recent years, a slight downward population trend has been observed, mainly as a result of economic emigration and internal movement towards larger cities such as Shkodra and Tirana, as well as abroad.

In the urban center of the city there are several small public spaces, mainly in the form of squares and open areas near administrative institutions. These spaces serve as gathering points for residents and are used for community activities, local events and daily social functions. However, they are limited in size and do not present themselves as proper urban parks.

Sports and school spaces also play an important role in public life. School sports fields and simple football pitches are widely used by youth and the local community, constituting one of the main forms of organized spaces for physical activity.

In general, the public space system in Vau i Dejës is characterized by a dominance of natural and functional spaces, while well-structured urban spaces are limited, reflecting the semi-rural nature and historical development of the city around energy infrastructure.

Reasons for Area Selection

Initially, the organization of local activities was planned to take place in the Municipality of Kamëz, where activities had also been carried out in the early phases of the project. During the first phase of work, a lack of cooperation from local institutions was identified, and the decision was made to change the study area, in order to ensure more suitable conditions for the implementation of activities. Vau i Dejës was selected as the new study area. The choice was made based on better opportunities for field access, as well as a smaller and more legible urban structure, which facilitates the identification of problems at the neighborhood level. The area is characterized by a combination of urban and rural space, historically shaped around the development of the hydroelectric plant.

Existing Problems

In the territory of Vau i Dejës, a number of urban, social and environmental problems are identified that affect the quality of life and the functioning of public space.

One of the main problems is the lack of well-structured and functional public spaces. Despite the presence of natural elements such as the area around Lake Vau i Dejës, urban spaces such as parks, squares and recreational areas are limited and often do not meet the needs of the community, especially for young people.

Another important issue is related to the fragmentation of the urban structure and poor connectivity between neighborhoods. The city has developed functionally around the energy infrastructure of the hydroelectric plant on the Drin River, but this has created a dispersed spatial organization where some areas remain less integrated with the urban center.

Additionally, the area faces emigration and a decline in the active population, especially among young people, which affects the reduction of social and economic activity at the local level, as well as the weakening of community life in some neighborhoods.

Vision

The vision of this intervention is the transformation of unused public spaces into vibrant, inclusive and sustainable environments, which serve as important centers of community, social and cultural life. This transformation aims to restore the functionality and identity of these spaces, turning them into accessible, safe and attractive places for all residents.

An essential component of this vision is the empowerment of youth as active actors in the urban planning and decision-making process. Through their involvement in proposing and drafting plans and interventions, the aim is to stimulate creativity, civic responsibility and the co-creation of spaces that reflect the real needs of the community.

Strategic Objectives

The strategic objectives of the intervention focus on the transformation of unused public spaces, as well as the activation and inclusion of youth in the planning and decision-making process for these spaces, through the proposal and drafting of urban plans and interventions. The main objectives include:

- Improving the quality of public spaces to make them more functional, safe and attractive
- Expanding green spaces and creating new parks
- Increasing connectivity and access for pedestrians and cyclists
- Strengthening local and cultural identity in urban design
- Increasing safety and social inclusion for all community groups
- Involving the community and youth in the planning and management of spaces

Existing Conditions

The area selected for transformation is identified in the General Local Plan as a space with the function of social activities and entertainment (SHA), representing significant potential for the development of community life and public activities.

Current use of the area remains limited and unorganized, while its potential for the development of social, cultural and recreational activities is high due to its positioning and connection to the surrounding urban structure. Additionally, there is an identified need for the creation of more inclusive, accessible and multifunctional spaces that can be used throughout the year by the local community.

The proposed transformation aims to revitalize this public space through:

- Creating environments for social interaction and community activities
- Improving the aesthetic and functional quality of the area
- Adding greenery and recreational elements

- Creating spaces for youth and cultural/entertainment activities
- Promoting an active, safe and accessible public space for all users

Plani i Përgjithshëm Vendor



Figure 1 Study area

Methodology

The methodology followed for drafting the Neighborhood Intervention Action Plan was based on a participatory and community-oriented approach, with special focus on the active inclusion of young people in the process of identifying needs and developing intervention proposals. In this framework, a 3-day activity was conducted in the Municipality of Vau i Dejës (Bushat Administrative Unit) with the participation of local youth, with the aim of identifying local problems and potential for transforming unused public spaces. During the activity, interactive and consultative methods were applied, including group discussions, community needs analyses and co-creation sessions, which enabled the collection of concrete ideas and recommendations from participants.

3-Day Activity with Youth

Day 1 – Identifying Needs and Analyzing Public Spaces

The first day of the 3-day activity began with informative sessions and open discussions with the participating youth, with the aim of creating a shared understanding of the importance of public spaces and their role in social and community development. During this day, participants identified the main problems of the area, analyzing the current state of unused public spaces, the lack of recreational infrastructure and the priority needs of the local community. Through group discussions, problem mapping and analysis of community perceptions, spaces with intervention potential were identified and qualitative data was collected on how these environments can be utilized for the benefit of youth and the community. During this day, the participating youth, divided into 3 groups, conducted the SWOT analysis for the area proposed by the municipality for intervention

STRENGTHS	OPPORTUNITIES
High development of Hydropower Plants Favorable climate Proximity of the project area to the city center Direct access of the area to the riverbank High intervention potential due to vacant/unused spaces	Center with high tourism potential Further development of economy and transport logistics Presence of archaeological sites as tourism potential
WEAKNESSES	THREATS
Limited public spaces Weak rural economy Deteriorated infrastructure Poor waste management Lack of agricultural markets Limited funding opportunities	High emigration Lack of economic development High seasonality of tourism Area exposed to natural disasters Low road safety rates Declining biodiversity Area with negative impact from hydropower infrastructure

Table 1 SWOT Analysis

Day 2 – Developing Ideas and Co-creating Proposals for Neighborhood Transformation

During the second day, activities focused on the co-creation process and the development of concrete ideas for transforming the identified public spaces. Participants engaged in group work and interactive sessions, where they discussed possible models and forms of interventions that could be implemented in the neighborhood. The youth proposed ideas for creating recreational spaces, social corners, green areas and multifunctional environments that could be used by the community. Also during this day, there was discussion about the sustainability of interventions, the need for community involvement in maintaining spaces and the importance of creating safe and inclusive environments for young people. The co-creation process enabled the development of structured ideas and the prioritization of the most feasible and impactful proposals for the area.



Day 3 – Presentation of Proposals



The third day of the activity was dedicated to the presentation and discussion of ideas developed by the working groups. Each group presented its intervention proposals, arguing the need, expected impact and benefits that transforming public spaces would bring to the local community. The presentations were followed by joint discussions and comments from participants and local representatives, with the aim of improving and consolidating the proposed ideas.



Intervention Proposals

The 3-day activity for transforming public spaces generated important results, which reflect the capacity of young people to contribute to local planning and decision-making processes. Divided into three working groups, the youth conducted the SWOT analysis of the area proposed by the municipality and drafted detailed intervention plans. Their proposals cover a wide spectrum of functions – recreational,

cultural, ecological, economic and infrastructural – reflecting a deep understanding of the complexity of public spaces and their role in community development.

GROUP 1 – Multifunctional and Ecological Space

Group 1 developed a broad vision for transforming the area proposed by the municipality, giving priority to the integration of sports, cultural, ecological and recreational functions in an inclusive public space.

Proposals:

- Sports fields
- Pier for water activities
- Cabins for artisanal products
- Alpine wall climbing area
- Small amphitheater
- Elevated walkways
- Energy park miniature
- Botanical Garden
- Green spaces
- Cycling track
- Benches, sheds and wooden elements
- Playground

Vision:

Group 1 envisions the area as "a sustainable urban ecosystem" where nature coexists with human activity. Their vision includes:

- A green belt surrounding the entire area, creating freshness and a natural environment
- Youth spaces (sports fields, alpine wall, cycling track) integrated with quiet and reflective areas (botanical garden, walkways)
- Cultural and economic elements such as artisan cabins and an amphitheater, giving life to the space throughout the day
- Energy sustainability through the energy park miniature, as a symbol of innovation and environmental awareness

Visual Plan

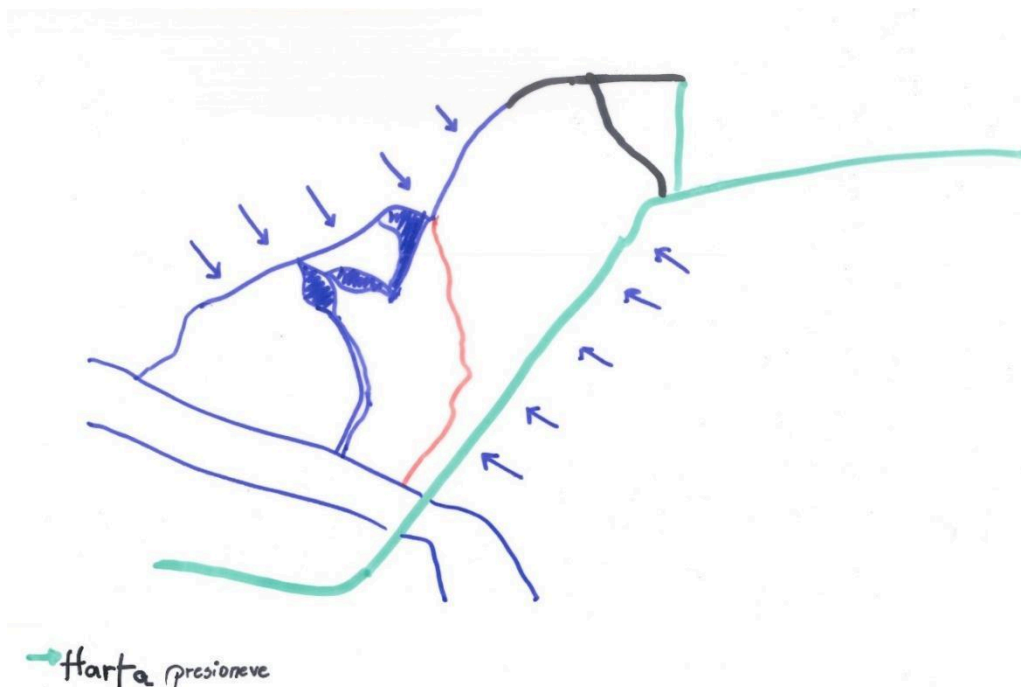


Figure 4 Pressure map for the study area

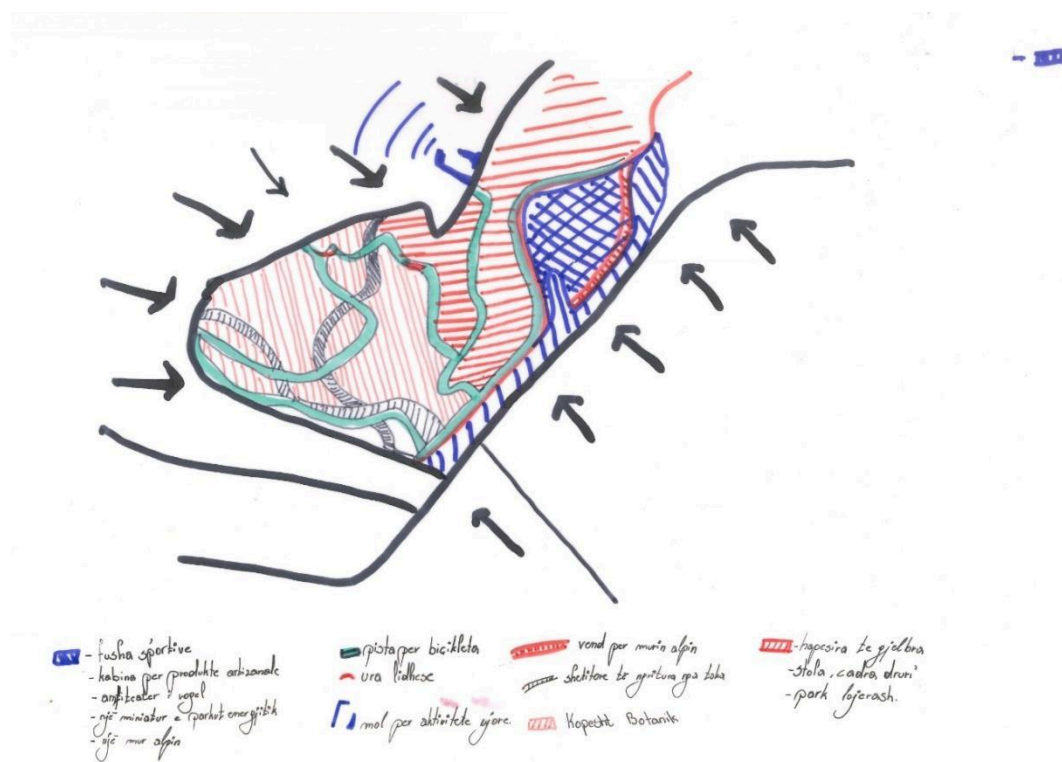


Figure 5 Proposed visual plan for the transformation of the area, G1

Expected Impacts

Beneficiary Groups	Youth, families, tourists and the local community
Main Functions	Sports, cultural, ecological, recreational, economic
Sustainability	High – diversity of functions ensures year-round use
Distinguishing Element	Integration of water elements and the Botanical Garden as a unique attraction

Table 2 Expected Impacts, G1

GROUP 2 – Recreational, Tourist and Commercial Parks

Group 2 built a dynamic vision based on diversifying the functions of public space, giving equal importance to recreation, tourism and local economic activity. Their proposal is clearly divided into functional zones connected by roads and walkways.

- Main promenade
- Camping area
- Promenade with rest benches
- Pedestrian zone
- Area with sports facilities
- Cycling space
- Open cinema
- Open market
- Park with games and benches
- Zoological garden
- Aquapark

Vision:

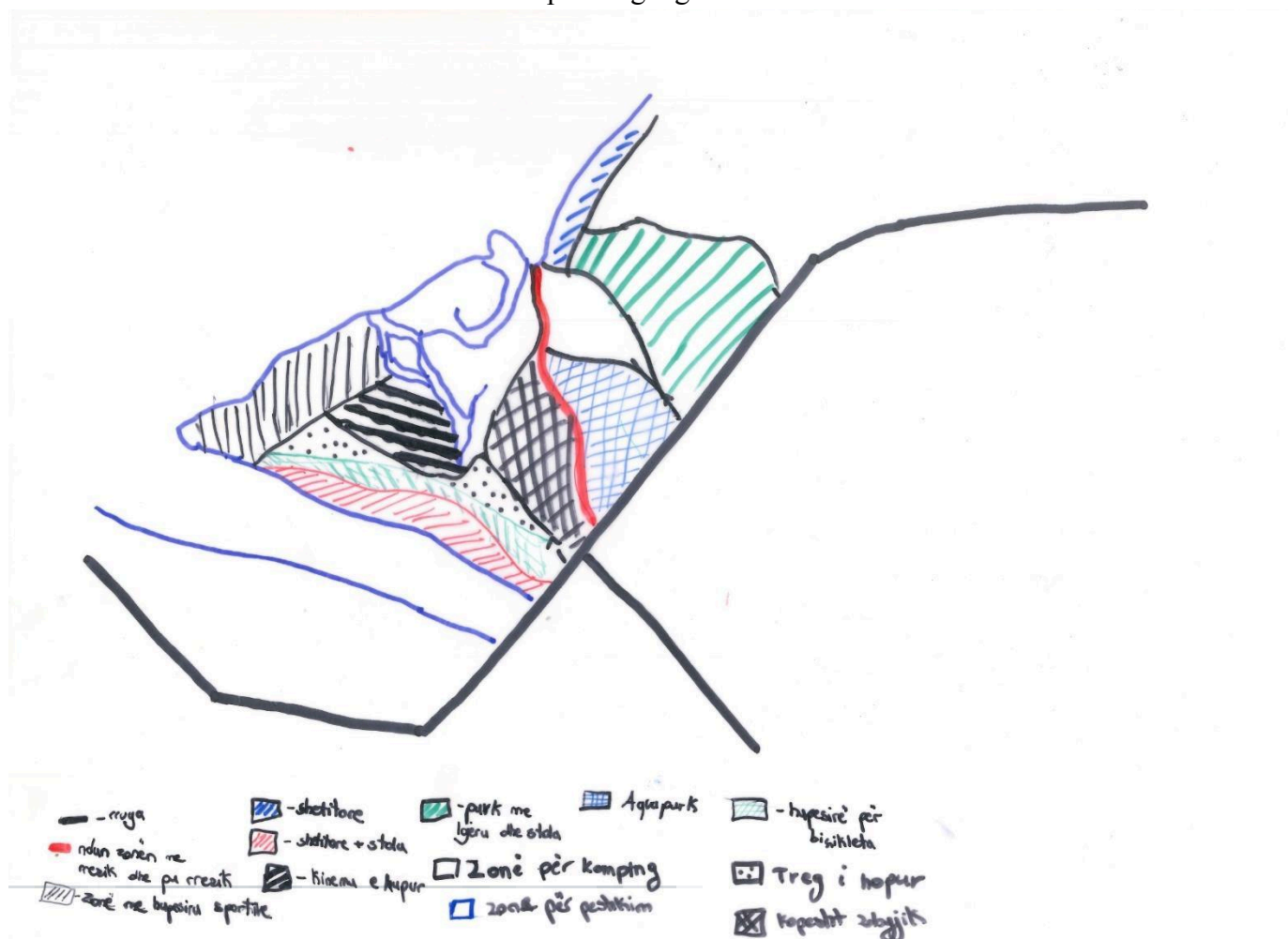
Group 2 envisions the area as "a multifunctional center of urban life", a space where every age group finds something for themselves, from children and families to tourists and young people. Their vision is based on three pillars:

- Movement and accessibility: The network of promenades, cycling tracks and pedestrian zones creates a mobile and safe space where people can move freely without vehicles
- Entertainment and culture: The open cinema, playground and Aquapark offer entertainment and relaxation opportunities for all ages, turning the area into an active cultural center

- Local economy and tourism: The open market and zoological garden attract visitors and support local traders and artisans, creating sustainable economic sources

Visual Plan

Below is the sketch drawn up by Group 2, which shows the spatial organization with different areas marked with colors and the corresponding legends.



Expected Impacts

Beneficiary Groups	Children, families, tourists, local traders, youth
Main Functions	Recreational, tourist, commercial, sports, cultural

Sustainability	High – combination of tourism and local economy ensures longevity
Distinguishing Element	Aquapark and Zoological Garden as major tourist attractions

Table 3 Expected impacts, G2

GROUP 3 – Urban Infrastructure, Identity and Economic Development

Group 3 presented the most ambitious and structural vision of the three groups, treating the transformation of public spaces not only as a recreational project, but as an opportunity to redefine the urban identity of the city. Their proposals combine physical infrastructure with economic and social functions.

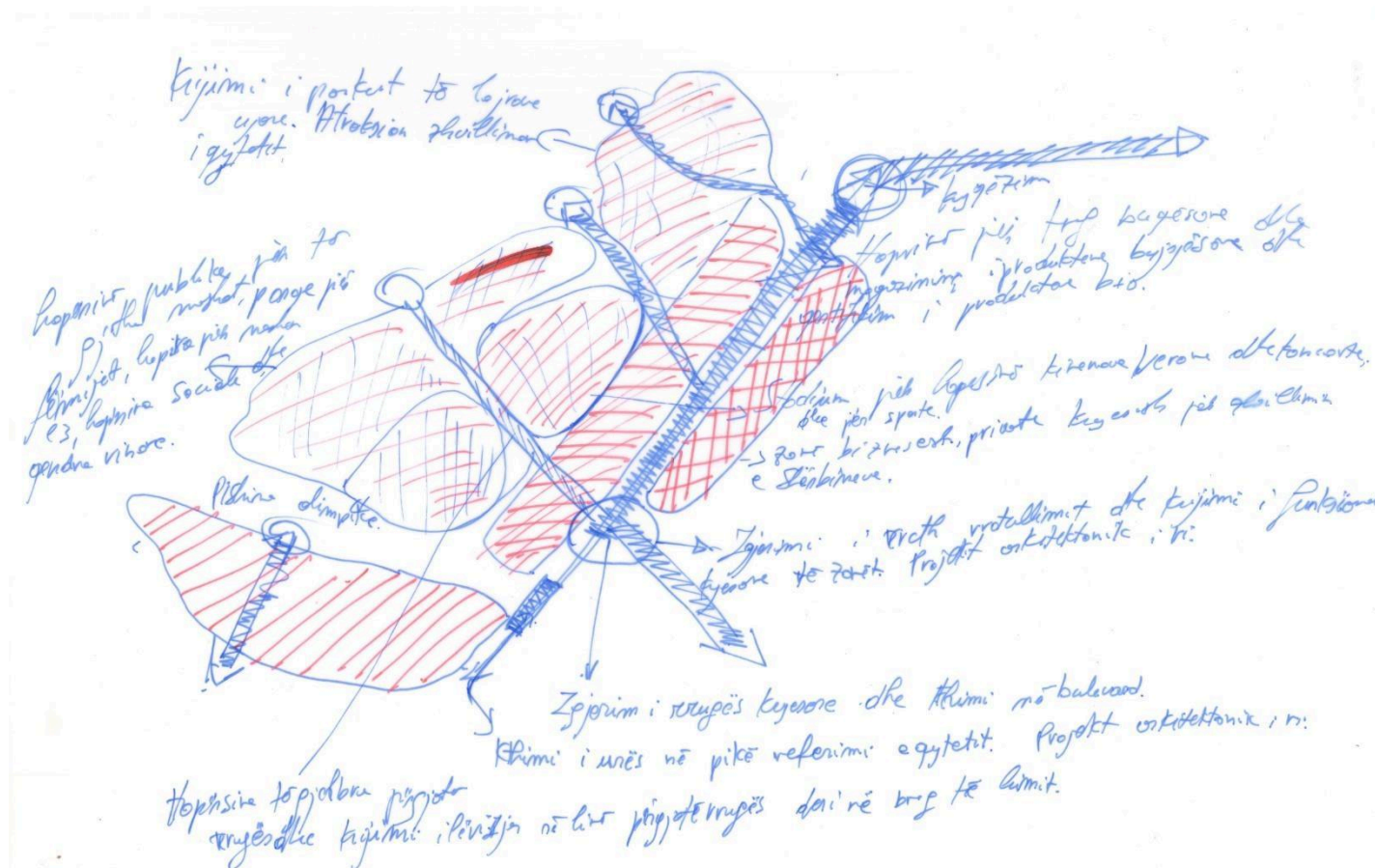
Proposals:

- Playground, a developmental attraction for the city
- Agricultural and organic products market
- Inclusive public space for all ages
- Sale of local products
- Social spaces and summer center
- Widening of the main road and conversion into a boulevard
- Olympic swimming pool
- Bridge as an architectural landmark of the city
- Green spaces along the river

Vision:

Group 3 conceives the area as "a reference point for sustainable urban development", a space that not only serves the local community but becomes a symbol of the city and a regional attraction. The vision is divided into four dimensions:

- Identity and urban image: The bridge as an iconic architectural project and carefully designed spaces will become a reference point of the city, giving the area a distinctive and distinguishable character
- Social inclusion: Public spaces are conceived as meeting places for all ages and social groups – from children to the elderly – promoting community cohesion
- Green and local economy: The agricultural and organic products market, combined with private businesses, creates an economic ecosystem that supports local farmers, artisans and entrepreneurs
- Connection with nature and the river: Green spaces extending to the riverbank create a natural corridor that integrates the city with the environment, offering unique freshness and a recreational environment



Visual Plan

Expected Impacts

Beneficiary Groups	The entire community, local businesses, farmers, tourists
Main Functions	Urban, economic, social, ecological, architectural
Sustainability	Very high – support of local economy ensures long-term self-financing
Distinguishing Element	Iconic bridge and organic market as a new symbol of the city's identity

Table 4 Expected Impacts, G3

Conclusions

The 3-day activity for transforming public spaces was implemented through a participatory and structured methodology, which aimed at the active inclusion of youth in local urban planning processes. Participants were organized into three working groups, with the aim of ensuring diversity of perspectives and an interdisciplinary approach to the identified problems.

The work of the groups was developed in three interconnected phases: in the first phase, the analysis of the existing situation was carried out through SWOT analysis and mapping of community needs; in the second phase, the co-creation process was undertaken, where the groups developed concrete proposals and spatial visualizations; and in the third phase, the presentation of results and their discussion with local representatives took place. This process ensured a gradual transition from analysis to action, giving youth the tools and necessary space to articulate their visions in a structured manner.

The proposals drafted by the working groups cover a wide spectrum of functions – recreational, cultural, ecological, economic and infrastructural – reflecting a deep understanding of the complexity of public spaces and their role in community development. Each group presented a distinctive and well-argued vision, accompanied by spatial plans and concrete feasible proposals.

This process has clearly demonstrated that the youth of Vau i Dejës possess the capacity and motivation to actively contribute to the urban development of their community. Their participation has not been merely symbolic, but has generated concrete, well-thought-out and feasible proposals, which reflect a deep knowledge of local needs. The empowerment of youth as active actors in urban planning remains a fundamental principle that should guide every future intervention.

The implementation of the drafted proposals requires close cooperation between the municipality, the local community, youth and other relevant actors. The next important step is the integration of these proposals into official territorial planning documents and securing the necessary financial and institutional resources for their implementation. Only through a sustainable and inclusive commitment can the transformation of public spaces in Vau i Dejës into the vibrant and functional environments that the community deserves be realized.