



Impact of Asphalt Art on Public Space Activation: Varna, Bulgaria

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For Bloomberg Philanthropies
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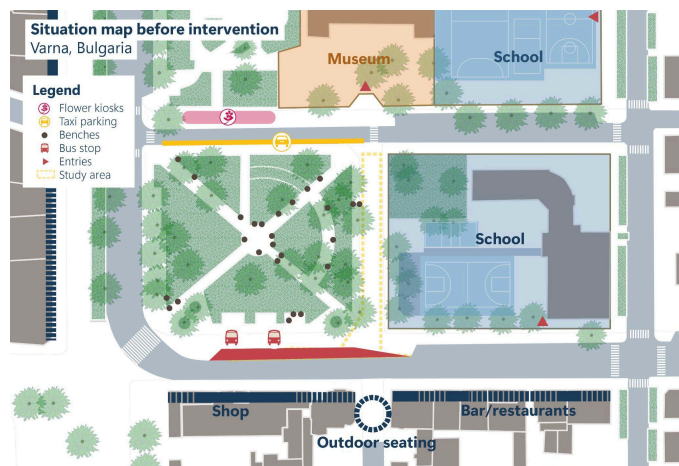
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Varna, Bulgaria¹ - Reconnecting the city centre with public art

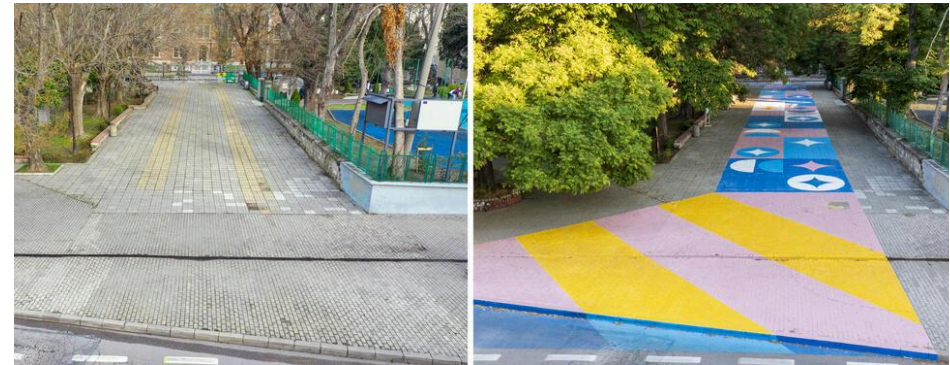
The intervention site is located near the historic center of Varna, Bulgaria. It occupies a large urban block at the Sevastopol intersection, marking the start of the city's main pedestrian and commercial zone. The project area includes four intersections around Slivnitsa Street, Bratya Miladinovi Street, and Opalchenska Street, as well as the space between the existing public garden and the Rakovski High School of Trade.

This urban block is highly active: the south side has several shops, two schools face the area, public transit stops are nearby, and the Art Gallery, flower kiosks, and the public garden draw steady foot traffic. The garden is an important historic gathering place for the Varna community and is popular throughout the day across all age groups, even though its only amenities are seating and shade.

Our analysis focuses on the space between the garden and the Rakovski High School of Trade, where the project has the greatest impact on public space. Although this section was pedestrianized and strategically located on an axis between the Art Museum to the north and the commercial district to the south, it remained underused.



¹ <https://asphaltart.bloomberg.org/projects/varna-bulgaria-reconnecting-the-city-center-with-public-art/>



Project aim

The overall aim of the project is to reduce traffic volume and speed at key locations and create a safer, more attractive public space in central Varna. By enhancing four pedestrian crossings and part of the park with asphalt art, the project seeks to reconnect Varna's main public space with the rest of the city center.

Community engagement

The project included a strong community engagement process: more than 300 residents and 20 institutional partners participated, and over 11,000 people voted on the artistic designs. Outreach campaigns at nearby schools reached more than 500 students. The project also featured a community event for collective coloring and several neighborhood celebrations, with especially high participation from children.

Organisations involved:

Department for Architecture and Urban Development (AGUP), Lead City Agency
Department for Engineering Infrastructure and Landscaping (IIB), Government Agency with jurisdiction over city streets
Association VarnaSpaces
KALKAN Agency, Artist

Area size: 1,000 M2

Intervention date: 1 - 4 June 2023

Artwork

The artwork—created by Kalkan Agency, the winner of an open call—uses sea-inspired colors and motifs with the title “Color the Sea.” It reflects Varna’s coastal identity and strengthens the visual connection to the sea. The intervention is limited to asphalt art only and does not include street furniture or other activation elements.

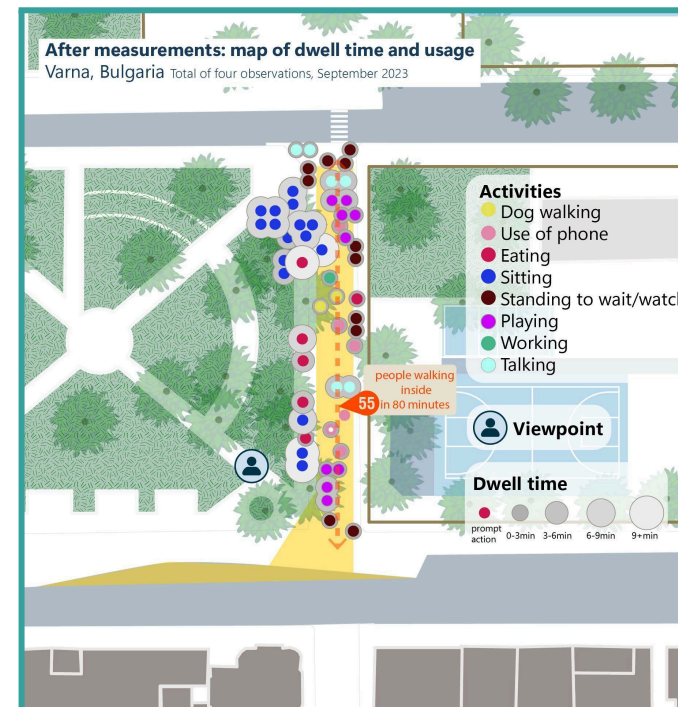
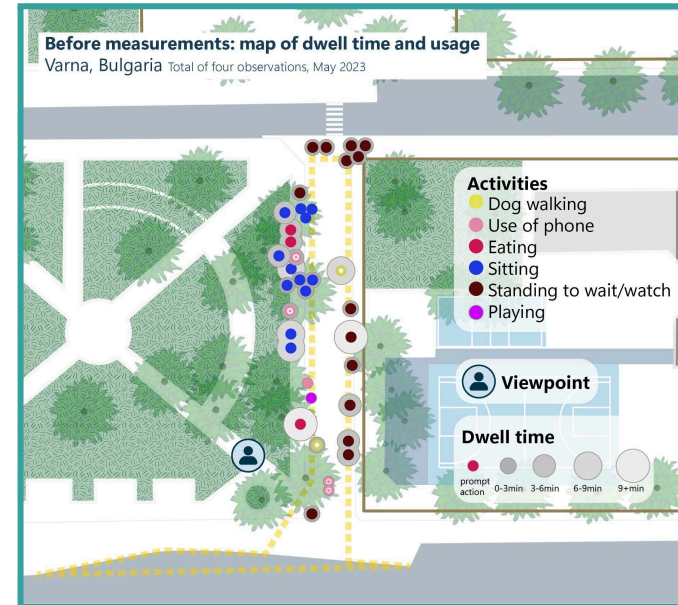
The measurements

Measurements were conducted on weekdays at the start of school hours and during the afternoon break, when children and teenagers are the area’s primary users. Baseline measurements took place in mid-May 2023, and follow-up measurements in mid-September 2023, approximately three months after implementation. Conditions were dry on all days. In May an end of year school party took place, which impacted the number of people in the area. The maps summarize conditions before and after the asphalt art intervention, and detailed tables on the number of people, activities, group sizes, and dwell time are provided below.

	Date	Counting times	Observation Times	Weather
Before	15.05.2023	12.44-12.59	13.03-13.23	Sunny, 17°
		17.23-17.38	17.45-18.05	Cloudy, 16°
	17.05.2023	12.25-12.40	13.15-13.35	Cloudy, 18°
		17.11-17.26	17.45-18.05	Cloudy windy, 18°
	User survey responses			25
After	20.09.2023	12.25-12.50	13.00-13.20	Cloudy, 26°
		17.33-17.48	17.53-18.13	Cloudy, 23°
	21.09.2023	12.42-12.57	13.00-13.20	Sunny, 26°
		17.45-18.00	18.00-18.20	Sunny, 23°
	User survey responses			19

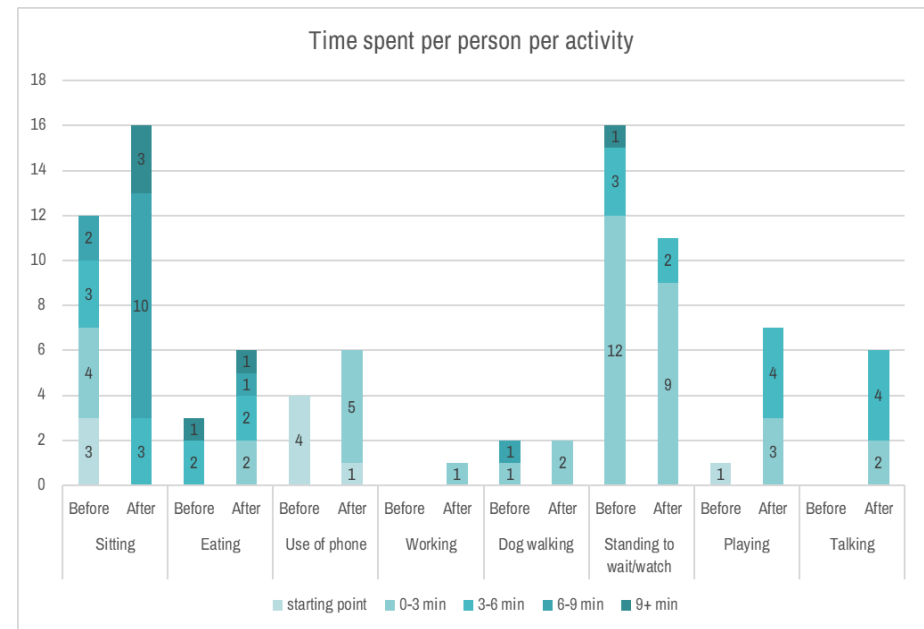
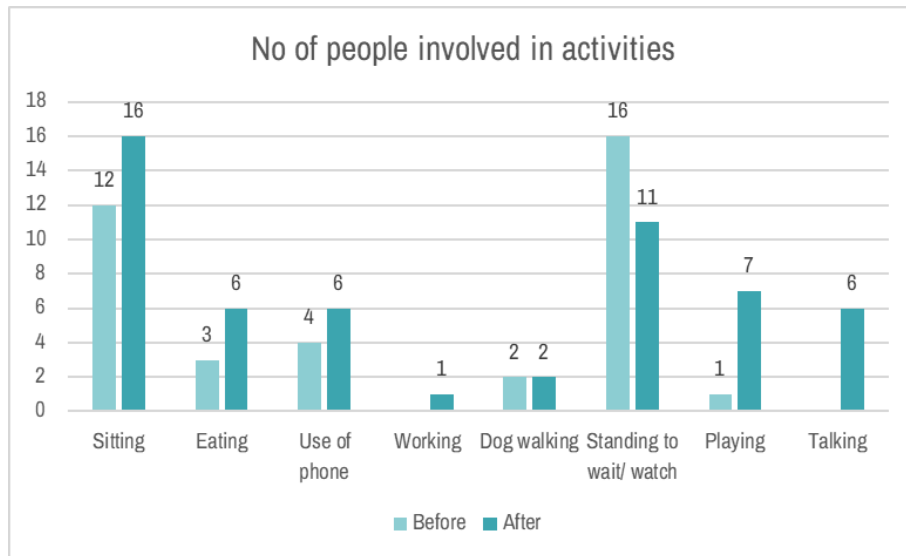
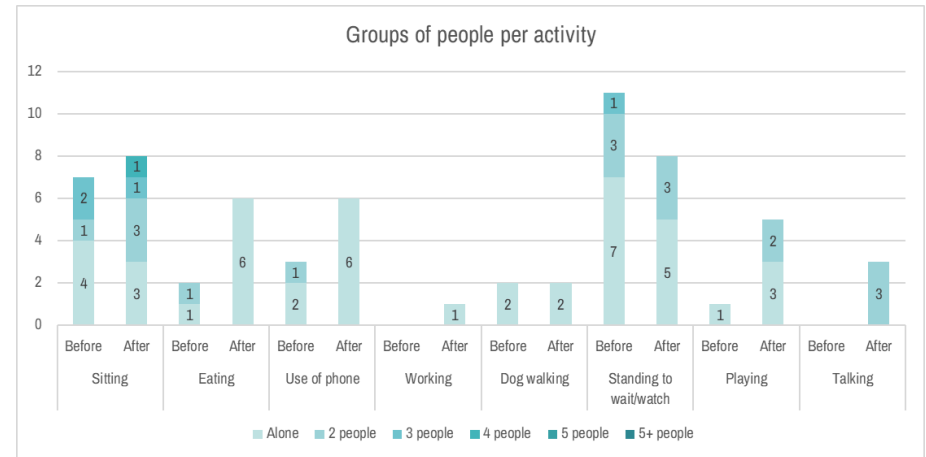
Before Implementation

Before the asphalt art intervention, we found a number of people sitting on the two existing benches along the north side of the area. These were mainly school staff on break. Four people sat alone and 6 in small groups of 2 - 3 people, with an average dwell time of 3 min. Other people in the area stood to watch the end-of-year school party, 7 alone and 9 in small groups of 2 - 3 people. Other activities that we observed were eating, being busy on the phone and walking the dog. Even though the surrounding streets were busy with foot traffic, very few people entered or moved through this specific area, leaving it noticeably underused and lacking energy. Social interaction and activity was minimal.



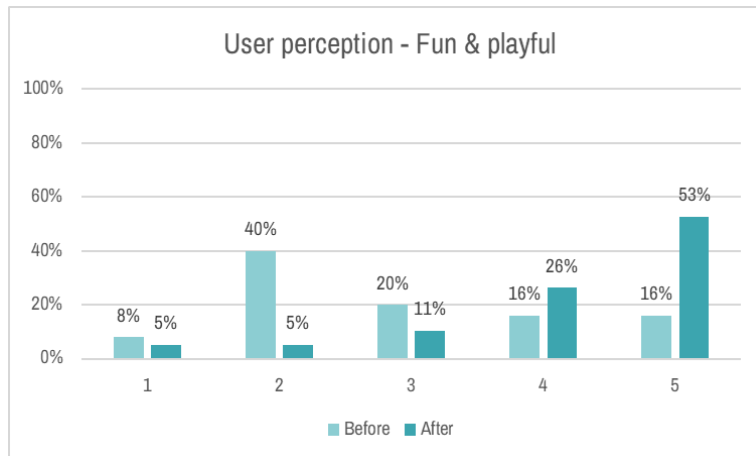
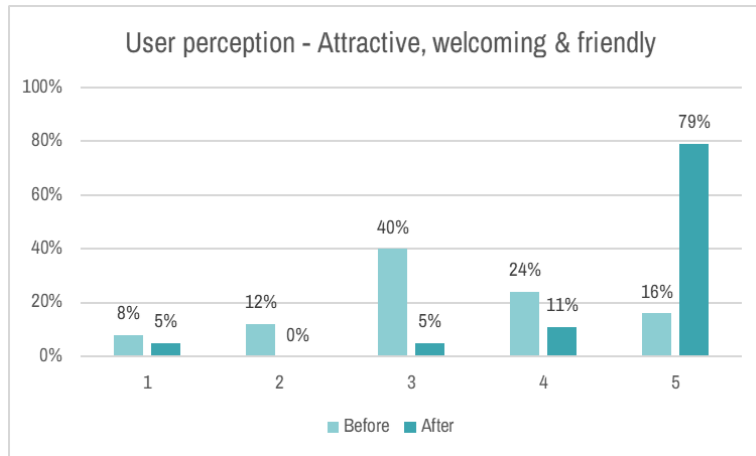
After Implementation

After the intervention, the space became noticeably more vibrant. More people passed through the area, and the number of individuals engaging in different activities increased. New activities appeared, such as playing and talking. In addition, people tended to spend more time there, and children interacted with the colorful ground design, running around and exploring freely. We also saw more groups lingering to eat, play, and talk (from 9 → 13), and these groups were slightly larger. People now stopped to look at the artwork itself rather than focusing on events elsewhere. The artwork transformed the area into a lively, interactive hub.



People's perception

The user survey reinforces this shift. The share of people who rated the area as “attractive, welcoming, and friendly” rose to 79%, up from just 16% before the intervention. Perceptions of playfulness also improved: prior to the project, 48% rated the area as below average, whereas afterward 79% rated it above average.



Final assessment Varna

Without adding programmed activities or additional seating, the intervention in Varna successfully helped to activate the public space. The area was already accessible and well-situated before the intervention, but it was noticeably underused. The asphalt art was key in drawing people in. Key effects are:

1. A dramatic increase from 0 to 55 people passing through the intervention area (+5400%).
2. A significant increase in the number of children playing and people talking and socialising. (+45%)
3. A rise in average dwell time after the artwork was implemented (+40%), with people spending more time sitting (from 3.1 min → 7.2 min), playing (from 1 → 3.2 min) and talking (from 0 → 3.5 min)