Quality of Life and Welfare Spaces in Maribor's Koroška Vrata District: Mapping and Interviews

Ezgi Koyun,[1] Lucien Ozer,[2] Michal Tobola,[3]
Marco Bravo-Fabian,[4] Maria Chiara Tosi[1]

[1] IUAV University of Venice, Faculty of Architecture, Venice, Italy
e.koyun@stud.iuav.it, mariachiara.tosi@iuav.it
[2] University of Liège, Faculty of Sciences, Liège, Belgium
lucien.ozer@student.uliege.be
[3] Palacky University of Olomouc, Faculty of Science, Olomouc, Czechia
tobolamichal33@gmail.com
[4] University of Santiago de Compostela, Faculty of Economics, Santiago de Compostela, Spain
marcoantonio.bravo@rai.usc.es

This study examines the role of public or "welfare" spaces in shaping quality of life in the Koroška Vrata neighbourhood of Maribor, Slovenia. Using direct observation and twelve semi-structured interviews, it analyses residents' perceptions of mobility, safety, and social interaction. Findings indicate that compact urban design, abundant green spaces, and accessible services promote well-being and a strong sense of safety. While minor issues were raised regarding public transport, football-related disturbances, and e-bikes, residents overall considered the neighbourhood highly liveable and expressed little need for change.

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KAKOVOST ŽIVLJENJA IN PROSTORI BLAGINJE V MARIBORSKI MESTNI ČETRTI KOROŠKA VRATA: KARTIRANJE IN INTERVJUJI

EZGI KOYUN,[1] LUCIEN OZER,[2] MICHAL TOBOLA,[3] MARCO BRAVO-FABIAN,[4] MARIA CHIARA TOSI[1]

[1] Univerza IUAV v Benetkah, Fakulteta za arhitekturo, Benetke, Italija
e.koyun@stud.iuav.it, mariachiara.tosi@iuav.it
[2] Univerza v Liègu, Fakulteta za naravoslovje, Liège, Belgija
lucien.ozer@student.uliege.be
[3] Univerza Palackého v Olomoucu, Fakulteta za naravoslovje, Olomouc, Češka
tobolamichal33@gmail.com
[4] Univerza v Santiagu de Composteli, Ekonomska fakulteta, Santiago de Compostela, Španija
marcoantonio.bravo@rai.usc.es

Študija preučuje vlogo javnih oziroma prostorov "blaginje" pri oblikovanju kakovosti življenja v soseski Koroška vrata v Mariboru. Z uporabo neposrednega opazovanja in dvanajstih polstrukturiranih intervjujev analizira zaznave prebivalcev glede mobilnosti, varnosti in socialnih interakcij. Ugotovitve kažejo, da kompaktna urbana zasnova, obilje zelenih površin in dostopne storitve spodbujajo dobro počutje ter močan občutek varnosti. Čeprav so bili izpostavljeni manjši izzivi, povezani z javnim potniškim prometom, motnjami ob nogometnih tekmah in električnimi kolesi, so prebivalci sosesko na splošno ocenili kot zelo primerno za bivanje in izrazili nizko potrebo po spremembah.

Ključne besede:
prostori blaginje,
dobro počutje,
kakovost življenja,
javni prostori,
urbano blagostanje,
Koroška vrata,
Maribor,
Slovenija

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1 Introduction

"Quality of life" is a multidimensional concept that measures individuals' satisfaction with life in physical, psychological, social and environmental dimensions (Van Kamp et al., 2003). In urban planning and design, one of the key elements that impacts individuals' quality of life is public and semi-public spaces, also known as welfare spaces. These spaces include green spaces, parks, squares, and shared social spaces that support both physical and social well-being (Gehl, 2010).

According to Tosi and Munarin, the concept of "welfare space" defines the spaces built for socialisation, collective living activities, services and infrastructure in Europe in the 20th and 21st centuries; these areas not only provide comfort, health and security in the city, but also constitute the spatial manifestation of welfare state policies (Tosi & Munarin, 2010). Research has shown that such spaces of well-being have a positive impact on quality of life. For example, urban green spaces have been found to encourage physical activity, facilitate social interactions, and support psychological well-being (Maas et al., 2006; Sugiyama et al., 2008). It has also been emphasised that these areas strengthen individuals' ties with the city and increase their sense of belonging in terms of social sustainability (Dempsey et al., 2011). Therefore, there is a bidirectional relationship between quality of life and welfare spaces: While the quality of public spaces increases the quality of life, the measured quality of life confirms the importance of welfare spaces in spatial planning.

In the case of Maribor, recent studies illustrate how welfare spaces can actively shape urban well-being. Projects focusing on the rehabilitation of city streets, such as the extension of pedestrian zones, shared-space design, and the introduction of parklets, show that reimagined public spaces can enhance both environmental quality and everyday well-being (Pogačar et al., 2024). Moreover, participatory initiatives to revitalise degraded green areas in Maribor reveal that involving local communities not only increases the usability of these spaces but also strengthens social cohesion, belonging, and collective identity (Pogačar et al., 2019).

Taken together, the Maribor experience confirms the broader theoretical understanding: welfare spaces are not just physical infrastructures but essential environments for social sustainability, health, and quality of life.

1.1 Study in the Context of "Koroška Vrata" district in Maribor, Slovenia

This study explores how welfare spaces shape quality of life in the Koroška Vrata district of Maribor, Slovenia. Known for its sustainability and cultural heritage, Maribor offers a compact, walkable urban environment with parks, schools, and cycling networks that foster mobility, interaction, and place attachment (Visit Maribor, 2025). Using a participatory approach, involving local stakeholders and students collaborating as co-researchers via focus groups and observation workshops, four international students reflected on safety, accessibility, environmental quality, and belonging, providing a multidimensional view of welfare spaces and urban well-being.

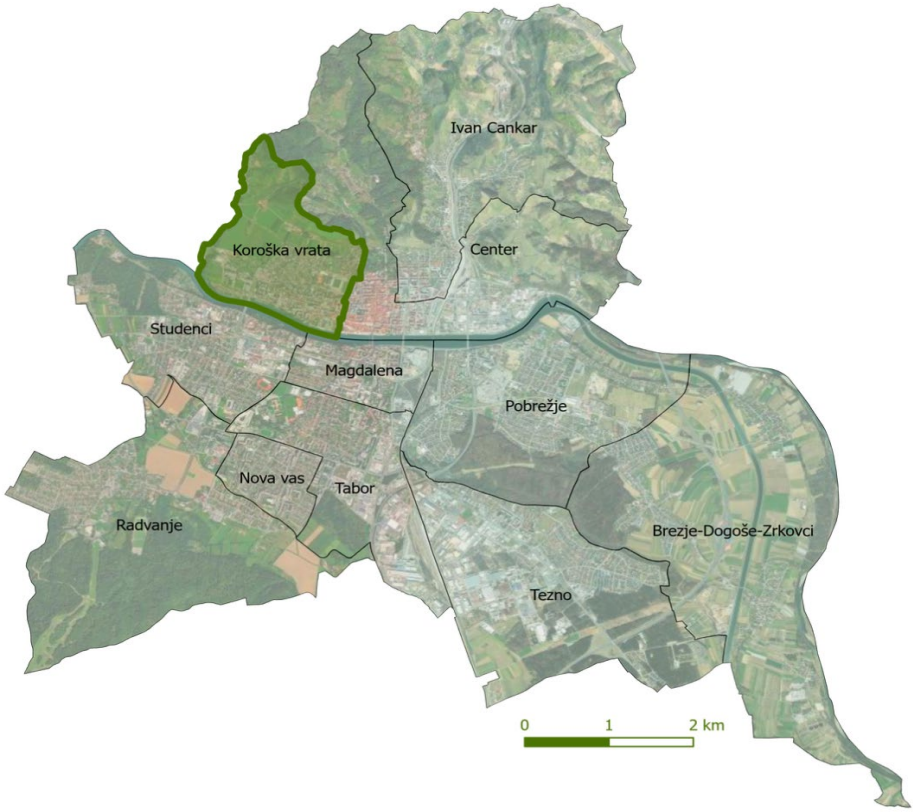

Figure 1: Map of Maribor's districts
Author: Michal Tobola, 2025
(Data source: Esri, World Imagery; GURS, 2025)

2 Methodology

This study was designed as a qualitative field investigation aimed at exploring the relationship between welfare spaces and quality of life in the Koroška Vrata neighbourhood of Maribor. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth understanding of how individuals experience and interpret their social and physical environments (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The methodology combined direct observation and semi-structured interviews, enabling triangulation between physical, social, and perceptual data. Moreover, we can notice the complementary use of ArcGIS to visualise, represent and analyse data.

2.1 Direct observation

The first method consisted of systematic field observations of public spaces, using structured forms to record physical features, accessibility, user profiles, and activity levels. Conducted at different times of day, between 26 and 29 August, from 11:00 am to 2:00 pm and 6:00 pm to 9:00 pm, these observations captured variations in use and atmosphere, offering insights into the role of welfare spaces in enabling or limiting social interaction.

2.2 Semi-structured interviews

The second method involved conducting short, semi-structured interviews with residents and users of public spaces in Koroška Vrata. These were conducted during the same observation periods, with individuals who happened to be present in the identified welfare spaces, including both local residents and visitors from other countries. This format allowed participants to share personal experiences and views on safety, mobility, connectivity, and quality of life, while leaving room for them to raise issues of particular importance. Interviews were conducted in situ, mainly in welfare spaces such as parks, schools, and sports facilities, encouraging reflections directly tied to the environment. The interview guide included core questions, such as: How do you usually get to essential facilities (shops, schools, services)? Do you think the area is well-connected to other parts of the city? Do you feel safe in this neighbourhood? What do you like most about this area? What do you dislike or what problems do you perceive? What improvements would you suggest?

In total, 12 interviews were carried out during five site visits. Participants represented a wide demographic range, from a 12-year-old boy to a 71-year-old woman, including teenagers, parents, couples, elderly residents, and international students. While the small sample does not allow for statistically representative conclusions, it provides valuable qualitative insights into local dynamics and perceptions, offering an indicative overview of the neighbourhood's main assets and challenges.

3 Findings

3.1 Spatial dynamics of accessibility, connectivity, and public life

By distinguishing residential, commercial, public, green, and vacant areas, the map highlights urban organisation and functional diversity (Figure 2). Contrasts between dense residential zones and public or green spaces reveal patterns of accessibility and potential inequalities, which are central to understanding spatial justice and the concept of "welfare space."

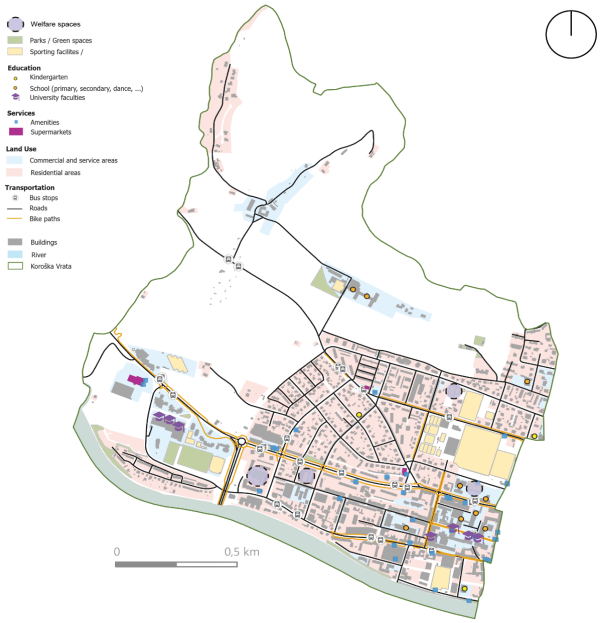

Figure 2: Urban organisation and functional diversity of Koroška Vrata
Author: Michal Tobola, 2025
(Data source: © OpenStreetMap contributors; GURS, 2025)

The map also illustrates connectivity, showing how roads, pathways, and links between areas affect residents' mobility and access to essential services. Limited or uneven connections may hinder social inclusion and equitable access. Finally, the distribution of public spaces emphasises their role in social interaction and community life. Well-placed parks and recreational areas foster cohesion and well-being, while uneven distribution can restrict opportunities for collective activities, underlining the importance of accessible welfare spaces.

3.2 Welfare Spaces

The first welfare space serves as a vibrant meeting point for people of different ages, genders, and nationalities, offering green areas for leisure, sports, and social interaction. Surrounded by housing and close to essential facilities, it is highly accessible, allowing residents to walk both within the neighbourhood and to other parts of Maribor. Interviews highlight a strong sense of safety and familiarity, with many describing the city as secure and the park as central to community life. The second welfare space, located in a primary school yard, mainly attracts families with children. Its central position and green amenities make it popular, though access is limited outside school hours. Residents value its convenience and child-friendly environment, but note that events like football matches sometimes create noise and reduce safety (Figure 3).

Welfare spaces 3 and 4 exhibit comparable spatial characteristics, as they are embedded within residential areas and green surroundings. Nevertheless, welfare space 3 incorporates a playground, which introduces a differentiated user profile and slightly diversifies patterns of use. Both spaces are located within walking distance of several essential facilities and are primarily frequented by residents of the adjacent neighbourhoods. Insights derived from interviews with local inhabitants highlighted the notions of security, familiarity, proximity, and tranquillity as key attributes shaping the perception and use of these areas (Figure 4). In contrast, welfare space 5 demonstrates a distinctive character, functioning as a landmark within the urban fabric. It operates not only as a central meeting point for local residents but also as a significant attraction for tourists, while simultaneously maintaining a strong integration of natural elements within everyday urban life. Alongside pedestrian pathways, cycling constitutes a widely adopted mode of mobility. Nonetheless, its intensity declines considerably during the midday hours in the summer season, and

uncontrolled bicycle movements occasionally pose safety risks to pedestrians. Despite these challenges, the site accommodates a highly heterogeneous user profile, encompassing individuals from diverse demographic and social backgrounds (Figure 4).

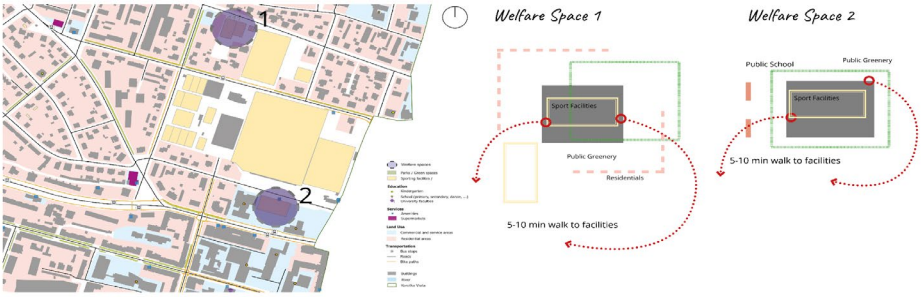

Figure 3: Welfare spaces 1 and 2 in Koroška Vrata
Authors: Michal Tobola & Ezgi Koyun, 2025
(Data source: © OpenStreetMap contributors; GURS 2025)

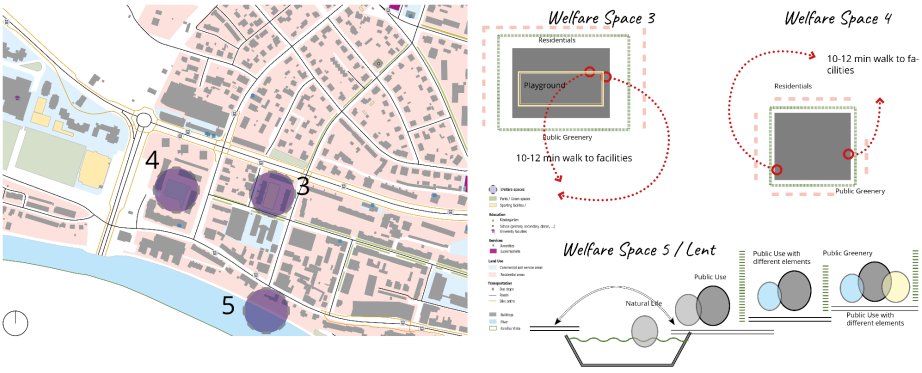

Figure 4: Welfare spaces 3, 4 and 5 in Koroška Vrata
Authors: Michal Tobola & Ezgi Koyun, 2025
(Data source: © OpenStreetMap contributors; GURS, 2025)

3.3 Interviews

Interviews revealed clear patterns in how the residents view Koroška Vrata (Tables 1 & 2). Walking and cycling were common among younger and older residents, while families relied on cars. Public transport was seen as the weakest link due to

infrequent buses. Safety was mostly positive, with disturbances during football matches and at night from poor lighting or noisy e-bikes. Residents valued accessibility, green spaces, and the child-friendly atmosphere. Negative comments focused on noise, parking shortages during matches, and traffic risks. Suggested improvements included better roads, more bike paths, traffic-calming measures, and increased police presence. Overall, satisfaction was high, with most residents highlighting the positives and only a few suggesting areas for improvement. The findings show that welfare spaces support not only mobility and safety but also a sense of belonging and quality of life.

Table 1: Interview results – Residents' perceptions of mobility, connectivity, and safety

Interview number	Age	Gender	Usual mobilities	Connected to city?	Safety?
1	~20	F	Cycling	Infrequent & slow buses	Yes
2	~40	F	Car	Yes	Yes – less during football match days
3	71	F	Walking	Yes	Yes
4	~40	F	City bike and car	Yes	Yes
5	47	F	Car and walking	Yes	Yes – less at night
6	63 & 65	F & M	Car and walking	Yes, but infrequent buses	Yes – less at night
7	12	M	Walking and cycling	Yes	Yes
8	25	M	Walking	Yes	Yes
9	19	F	/	/	Yes
10	~40	M	Walking and cycling	Yes	Yes
11	~20	M	Walking	Yes	/
12	~40 & ~60	F & M	Car	Yes	Yes

Source: data from interviews

Table 2: Interview results – Residents' perceptions of their favourite aspects, weaknesses and suggested improvement points

Interview number	Age	Gender	Favourite points	Weak points	Improvement points
1	~20	F	Accessibility, safety, children	/	More crossroads
2	~40	F	Green spaces, activities	/	/
3	71	F	Accessibility	/	/
4	~40	F	Walk, children	E-bikes – dangerous and noisy	Install road bumps
5	47	F	Green spaces, children	/	/

Interview number	Age	Gender	Favourite points	Weak points	Improvement points
6	63 & 65	F & M	Nature, walk, children	E-bikes	More police patrols
7	12	M	Park	/	/
8	25	M	/	Occasionally overcrowded	/
9	19	F	Safety	/	/
10	~40	M	Accessibility – cycling and walking	/	Quality of the roads
11	~20	M	/	Noise & parking issues on football match days	Quality of the roads
12	~40 & ~60	F & M	Quiet and positive	Parking issues on football match days	More bicycle roads

Source: data from interviews

4 Discussion and conclusion

This study highlights the crucial role of welfare spaces in shaping the quality of life in mid-sized European cities such as Maribor. Accessibility, safety, and opportunities for social interaction emerged as central dimensions through which residents evaluate their environment (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Braun & Clarke, 2007). In Koroška Vrata, compact urban design, abundant green areas, and proximity to services contribute to consistently high satisfaction. Safety was described as strong and reliable, reinforcing the literature that links inclusive public spaces to cohesion and trust (Gehl, 2010; Low et al., 2005). Disturbances such as football match noise, traffic, or drug activity in the city centre were seen as minor exceptions rather than systemic threats, suggesting resilient social and physical infrastructures. Mobility also played a key role: residents favoured walking and cycling, while public transport was considered less efficient. Concerns about e-bikes and scooters highlight the need for stricter regulation to ensure safety.

Perhaps most striking is the exceptionally high satisfaction with the neighbourhood, with many describing Maribor as "almost perfect." This contrasts with urban studies that emphasise constant demands for improvement (Innes & Booher, 2010), suggesting instead that satisfaction here is tied to the city's human scale, proximity to nature, and welfare spaces enabling daily leisure and interaction (Lewicka, 2011). Yet, practical issues–such as traffic, parking shortages, and limited bus services–remain and reflect common challenges in medium-sized cities (Pojani & Stead, 2015). Targeted improvements, such as safer crossings and better lighting, could further enhance the already high well-being levels. Overall, welfare spaces emerge not only as physical infrastructures but also as social anchors that shape belonging,

safety, and connectivity. The case of Koroška Vrata shows how walkable, green, and accessible environments can sustain strong place attachment and subjective well-being. This study examined how welfare spaces influence quality of life in Maribor's Koroška Vrata neighbourhood through observations and interviews. Results show that its walkable design supports sustainable mobility, social interaction, and a strong sense of safety and belonging. However, limited public transportation and parking shortages highlight the need for improved infrastructure. The case highlights how well-planned welfare spaces can foster physical activity, social cohesion, and place attachment, offering valuable insights for mid-sized European cities.

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