

The Key Role of Public Spaces and Mobility in the Process of Urban Regeneration in Developing Metropolis

Tirana City as Case Study

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1. Introduction

The case study for this paper will be Tirana city, the capital of Albania, which hosts almost 1 million inhabitants (nearly 1/3 of the entire population of the Country). This developing metropolis underwent some very strong changes from the fall of the Wall and the authors will describe its transformation amongst this period observing the various strata that compose Tirana's palimpsest since its foundation, and will suggest interventions capable of starting a self-supplied process of urban regeneration sustaining this assumptions with the help of successful practices put in place in different parts of the world.

Tirana is taken as an example of developing metropolis in the region of South-East Europe to describe the effects of the passage from a strong dictatorship to a democratic system within a given sociocultural development. The birth of today's process of development based on unsustainable mobility will be argued to be changed by triggering a sustainable one, which would rely on a green mobility and a networked public space that penetrates and connects the whole urban texture directing fast growth toward a *people-friendly* city.

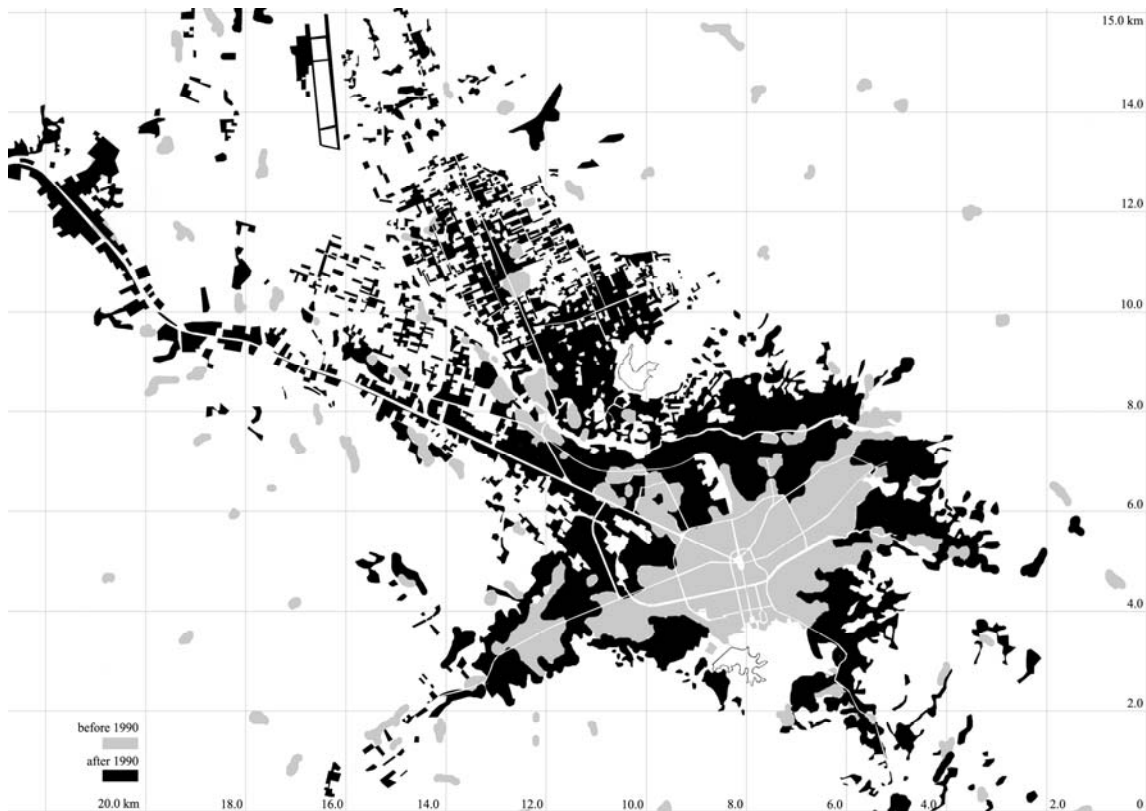


Figure 1: Tirana's extension from 1990 to today (Huta, 2011)

The analysis of different successful practices over the world in parallel with Tirana's perspective, highlights the fact that there is not a "**model**" of intervening over an urban structure in order to achieve an improvement of its physical conditions as different social contexts appropriate of an open space in different ways. Thus, the attitude of our paper is oriented toward a constructive interpretation of the "**rule**" rather than the identification / repetition of a socio-spatial "**model**", for the addressing of an urban development to a *people-friendly city* which gives the maximum of importance to the public space, the engine capable of starting a regenerative process overall urban fabric.

In order to create the "rule", when we examine successful urban interventions, a distinction should be made between *diverse* realities relying on some important factors.

The distinction between **developed or developing world** is the most important. When we study a developing city rather than a developed one, we would be forced to confront our research with a totally different use of the city. Often, in the developing world there is a constant facing, right in front of each-other, of social classes (in Mumbai you can see a luxury building in the middle of the shantytown). In the developed world a sharp distinction between social classes legible in a similar aggressive way would almost never happen.



Figure 2: *The slum and the high-rise: Image from Ricky Burdett's presentation at Urban Age Mumbai.*

This *clumping* of social classes (which is only one of the aspects that differs developed from developing world) activates a chain of reactions of the population which would be mostly demonstrated within the public space. It is also important to specify that their different characters doesn't lead to the fact that practices put in place in the developed world cannot be analyzed and re-thought in a way that they could work in the developing world too. And *vice-versa*, the developing world could release many issues that the developed world has still to confront with. This is because fast growth has the capacity to bring up problems that need immediate solutions much more faster than the developed world.

The second distinction comes out when we think of the **location**, which determines a certain urban development instead of another. Location is intended to frame the case study under sociocultural and politic development as much as climatic conditions (as different climates bring to different urban development). Historical developments determine the characteristics of urban growth and distinguish a given metropolis which is part of a region of the world from the growth of another metropolis situated in another region.

The third major factor that determine the distinction of different urban settlements is the **dimension**, which directly influence on the generation and use of public space and interpersonal relationships and use of the urban settlement. The meaning would change depending on whether we are talking about megalopolis, metropolis, cities or towns. When

we talk about dimensions we talk about distances inhabitants have to traverse, and connections between parts of the urban mosaic determine whether the metropolis can be seen as a single agglomeration or as an archipelago. Dimension brings up urban mobility, one of the most important factors for the well functioning of the city of today. Mobility links together the various pieces of the mosaic determining this way its identity values, the stronger this link is the healthier urban identity is.

2. Tirana's Palimpsest

Tirana's urban model is the result of the overlapping of Byzantine-Mediterranean and Mitteleuropean - ex-Soviet Union cultures, thus representing a current phenomenon of cultural mix. This overlap has given birth to something new in the European city. In its urban fabric are carved different influences, from the East during the Ottoman invasion lasted 5 centuries until independence in 1912, to the Austro-Hungarian and Italian during the first half of the twentieth century with the garden city and the monumental axis, until the configuration of the Communist mold.

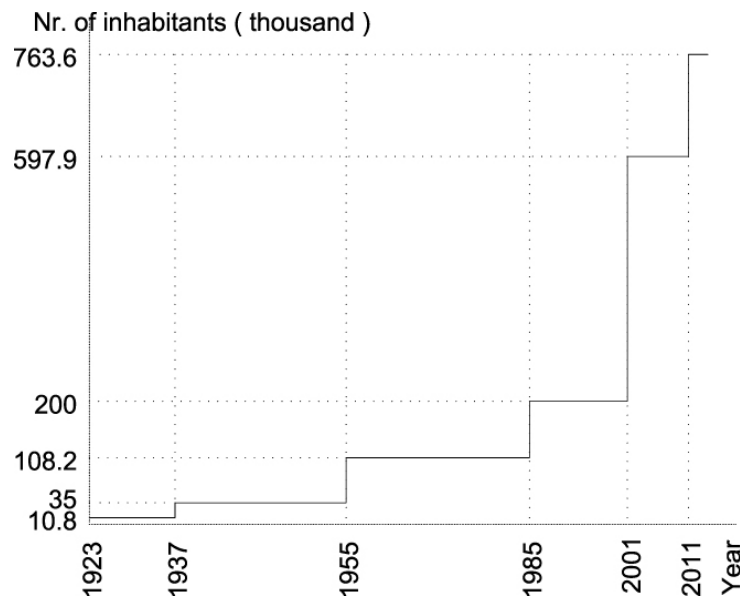


Figure 3: Graphic of Tirana's population growth, INSTAT 2011 (Mico, 2012)

We have to *spoil* Tirana's palimpsest in order to understand the actual urban process established here as a result of fast growth and to better understand the cultural influences on it (those physically deleted and those who still exist). External stimuli received by the city has been at the highest levels and the shock of the '90s have left their indelible imprints in the territory. How did the city responded to this stress? How has it changed the urban-rural relationship, which until 1990 gave total prevalence to the countryside?

Of the "three cities" before 1990; the *Oriental / Ottoman*, the *Western / Italian* and the *Eastern / Soviet city*, the latter was the dominant until 1990 not only because the city expanded and many new neighborhoods were built but also because it replaced the former Ottoman city (during the 50s the regime demolished entire blocks of typical residential buildings and traditional bazaars) with new buildings. The demolition was the result of a desire to break with the Ottoman and Italian past declaring the beginning of a new history for the Albanian state from 1945, but also an excuse to facilitate the transition from private to public ownership.

3. Highlighting the Role of Mobility and Public Space in Shaping Tirana City. Inverse Reading

The research method proposed in this chapter is that of an *inverse reading*. The analysis starts from the study of the actual city starting from today and going back until it became the capital of Albania (1920), in order to put under the spotlight the construction process as it influences more than anything else urban generative processes. It will be seen the result at first and then the intentions of planners, noting not only the change of State's role in governing urbanization, but also showing how the construction differs from proposed projects and the urban utopias during various historical periods. As written by Aldo Rossi: "*There is actually a continuous process of influences and exchanges, often of contrapositions between urban facts which materialize in cities and ideal proposals* ." (Rossi, 1978).

It is retained by the authors to present separately the studies over the public space and mobility for the only reason to facilitate the reading of the complex urban reality, as these two aspects of the city are considered as a unique network that connects various parts of the urban fabric, demonstrated in the worldwide cases below. It is unperceivable to intervene in mobility without improving public realm.

Various practices taken in developing and developed metropolis shows the strategies already applied with success. It is not our proposal for Tirana, the cases are chosen by the criteria of thinking smart, flexible, sustainable people oriented interventions.

3.1 Public space

Public space during the last 20 years, has been occupied by informal constructions saturating open spaces or by filling the spaces in-between with kiosks and garages. In some cases the municipality of Tirana has intervene creating green areas but still, the major percentage of well designed public spaces are in the center of the city. When it did created public space out of the principal ring of the city (like the 1 Km Park), the municipality let it disconnected from the network of public transport and neither did a bike path for bicycle lovers (in Tirana does not exist even a single bike path even though it is used by many).

Historically in urban planning, public space has been described as an "open space", considering streets, parks and recreation areas, plazas and all outdoor spaces of public domain. Today it needs to be understood not as a domain of the state, but rather as a space accessible to public.

In the socialist cities of Eastern Europe, most open space was public by default. For the socialist regime the shaping of urban space was an important element of political projects aimed at creating new forms of society. Dominating the public space was the most efficient way for the regime to shape the new socialist citizen.

The Regulatory Plan of 1957 adopted the Soviet system of satellite towns which would host the labor force for the new industries. According to Scott these satellite towns were well connected with public transport and pedestrian routes.



Figure 4: Blocks of flats of inhabitations in the two sides of Kavaja St. (Tirana)

“... The Soviet plans all show strong pedestrian connections between the home and civic institutions such as schools, hospitals and community centers. Additionally, the Soviet suburb is transit-oriented, with each new community designed with rail access. These suburbs were also planned for residential density, concentrating a critical mass of residents in a small area” (Scott 2009).

Comparing Tirana (a socialist city) with the capitalist one is the best way to show its unique features of its public space, such as:

- *The quantity of land in public use* - The amount of public land was greater and it consisted by the fact that all urban land was appropriated by the state.
- *The shape of public space distribution* - In Western European cities, public space typically tends to be clustered in and around the urban core, with the exception of some public parks scattered towards the urban periphery. Such public space gradient decreasing with distance from the center was not characteristic of the socialist city where large expanses of industrial, institutional, recreational, and public housing developments dispersed public uses throughout the urban fabric.

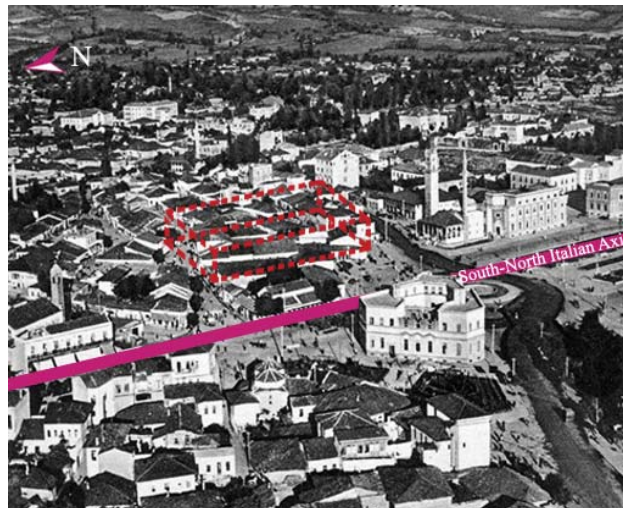


Figure 5: (Up right) near to the mosque of Ethem Bey is the old bazaar, substituted by the Palace of Culture (dashed).

- *The functional diagram of public spaces* - Private businesses did not exist in orthodox communist states. Thus the spaces for retailing and other services comprised only a small part of the city. The public space of Tirana curtailed one of the most vital functions of public space – its utility as a marketplace. The limitation of private entrepreneurship and

commercial activities to a few state-run retail centers drained from the city the energy that gave the old market. (demolished by the regime and replaced by the New Cultural Center) Despite the relentless efforts to infuse public space with ideological meaning, the socialist state could not fill in the vacuum created by the withdrawal of commerce from city streets and squares.

The balance between the public and private realms has been dynamically reshaped by a multitude of social forces and that is reflected in the physical structure of the city. The end of state-socialism has produced complex processes of urban change in East and Central Europe including the reshaping of urban identities in post socialist cities.

Before WW2 the Italian intervention didn't *disturb* the existing city adding its central axis in imperial style to represent the ignition of a new urban development for Tirana. The existing city was founded in 1614 by Sulejman Pasha with the construction of an Inn, a Turkish bath, a mosque and a bazaar, which was the social-cultural-economical center of the city until the 50s.

Case_1.Beijing: Exercise opportunities for all

The Chinese government has built upon the 'Olympic fever' created by the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games to encourage physical activity around the country. Installations of outdoor exercise equipment for public use have made physical activity more accessible and more appealing to a wide range of the Chinese population.

The outdoor gyms also afford a number of secondary social benefits. Helping to animate the urban landscape, these machines represent yet another way for people to enjoy Beijing's public spaces.



Figure 6. *Beijing's public exercise facilities resemble playgrounds (Alex Balfour, London)*

Key learning points: Beijing's public exercise facilities have been so successful in large part because a citywide educational campaign has accompanied the installation of physical infrastructure. City residents have not only received access to new equipment, but city officials have actively promoted their use and worked to create a culture of physical activity, both before and after the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. The new exercise facilities have been targeted at ordinary city residents. Gym-goers do not need to make an appointment to use the equipment, wear special apparel, or possess special skills. In this project, the municipal government has made it easy for city residents to make healthy choices. So too has the municipal government made it enjoyable to make healthy choices. Painted with bright colors, the equipment has been compared to a playground. This project proves that exercise can and should be a pleasant recreational activity.

Case 2. Copenhagen - Pocket parks, a drop of urban green.

Green cities are on the rise. Copenhagen, the capital of Denmark, is one of the cities trying to improve the urban environment and deal with the daily green needs and desires of its inhabitants. One way of doing so is pocket parks: Open green spaces at a very small scale, often created on vacant building lots or on irregular pieces of land.



Figure 7. Ravnsborggade visualisation, (City of Copenhagen/Ekstrakt)

Key learning points: Pocket parks provide drops of urban green spaces for urban residents and improve the overall urban climate, i.e. have effects on both a small and large scale. Local communities who have pocket parks within walking distance are less likely to drive to meet their green needs, thereby reducing pollution and traffic. Pocket parks in Copenhagen are part of a larger strategy that aims to create green spots and connections in the city.

3.2 Urban MPobility

Tirana was considered the most polluted capital city in Europe in 2003 because of CO₂ emissions and air pollution: "...Choked with some 300,000 cars, lorries and buses which burn fuel banned in the EU, Tirana is now seen as the most polluted capital in Europe....On an average morning the volume of PM10s is more than 10 times the World Health Organization limit. Sometimes it is much worse. Agron Deliu, an air quality expert from the health ministry, said he had calculated that 35,000 tons of air pollutants were emitted from traffic in Tirana in 2003 - that is 49kg per person..." (Brown, 2004). This was the result of a continuous self-supplied process of fast growth of Tirana which started in 1990, with the fall of the wall, when a different mode of governing of the territory was introduced.

The possibility to occupy public terrain and auto-construct houses without any planning control brought to the sudden transformation of the city from a garden city (the soviet model) to an *under construction city* and the private vehicle was one of the most proper choices to escape from the smog and pollution, which was brought up by new constructions. New private vehicles brought more pollution and *forced* other people to buy cars and so on. This vicious circle is still going on as the *myth of the car* has surpassed the mere necessity of commodity of possessing a private car becoming instead a social status.



Figure 8: Left -Tirana's traffic (Andoni, 2012), right – Informal sprawl in Tirana (Huta, 2008)

During the socialist period, instead the use of the bicycle was favored by many factors, such as: the economic impossibility to possess a private car, the urban form (Tirana was a compact city with a small extension) and by the conformation of the territory too. Thus, many citizens used bicycles to move within the city or to go to the countryside making the bicycle the most used transport vehicle. It was used by intellectuals, directors, teachers, engineers, doctors, as much as the working class etc., with a high percentage of women. But the use of the bicycle wasn't only a particularity of Tirana. In the local newspaper of the town of Shkodra "Jeta e Re"(New Life) in May 1981 the author, Agim Parruca wrote: "*It is estimated that in the main streets from 6:00 o'clock in the morning until 18: 00 p.m., in each section of road circulate around 1 000 bicycles per hour*", (Parruca, 1981).

Despite the fact that most of the publications were made for propagandistic purposes, the extract above shows the importance of the bicycle during that period.

Another testimony of the tradition of using bicycle in Albania in the past is the *Circle of Albania Cycling*, which is among the oldest in Europe, as confirmed by the International Cycling Federation. This is a significant fact, considering the high percentage of users and the tradition of cyclist races, Albania lies ahead countries like Spain, Belgium, Germany, Holland, etc.

Case1_Budapest: Cyclist numbers double.

Cycling culture is flourishing in the streets of the Hungarian capital Budapest. The city's inhabitants use bicycles as a means of transport to school and work, and the number of cyclists has doubled over the last two years. Racer, granny and carrier bikes fill the streets and emphasise Budapest's reputation as one of the most cycling-friendly cities in Eastern Europe. By means of peaceful mass demonstrations and mainstreaming initiatives, cyclists and the city council are trying to encourage more inhabitants to join the city's germinating cycling culture.

Key learning points: In the attempt to promote cycling in Budapest, several approaches and a number of different initiatives have been beneficial. Among other things, a number of changes in the law have been adopted in favour of cyclists. Example: Cyclists are allowed to ride the wrong way down one-way streets, stop in front of cars at traffic lights and they are no longer required to keep right in traffic and are allowed to ride in the middle of the road. At the same time, four speed limits have been reduced for motorists. In Budapest cycling is simultaneously being promoted and introduced as an ordinary and positive means of transport rather than as a subculture. Target-oriented promotion and a direct marketing strategy have, among other things, secured cycling a positive image. Finally, Budapest City Council has secured cyclists' potential to have more cycle tracks built, more parking spaces removed in the city centre and to have roads narrowed.



Figure 9. Left- Ravensborggade Caracas City slum (procsilas, Flickr), Right-Budapest (Mikael Colville-Andersen/Zakka, Flickr)

Case 2. Caracas: Connecting slums to the rest of the city by urban cable car.

Caracas, Venezuela, uses cable cars to connect the slums with the rest of the city. This case provides an innovative solution to often poor infrastructure in urban slum. A Think Tank in Caracas proposed this idea, and the municipality is now working on constructing it. Sustainable Cities believe the case provides a good example of the social perspectives of mobility questions.

Key learning points: Caracas demonstrates how alternative thinking can offer completely new solutions to “generally accepted solutions” when solving bad infrastructure in slum dwellings. Caracas also shows that it is possible to connect infrastructure to social and cultural functions.

Case 3. Toronto: Road diet for safer traffic.

A narrower roadway on St. George Street in Toronto in Canada has made more room for cyclists and pedestrians without impairing conditions for motorists. On the contrary, traffic flows much more easily and is much safer, with fewer accidents, more cyclists and a more open accommodating urban space in the area, which is close to the campus of Toronto University.



Figure 10. St. George Street, courtesy of Brown + Storey Architects.

Key learning points: By narrowing multi-lane roads to make more space for vulnerable road users, Toronto has made its traffic safer and more efficient. Widening the area available to pedestrians and planting trees, as well as installing benches and better street lighting has resulted in a more open, accommodating urban space near the campus. Improving conditions for cyclists encourages more people to choose the bicycle as their means of transport.

4. Conclusions

In relation to the examples above the authors sustain the ignition of a process in Tirana (and generally in developing metropolis) as only this would afford the high speed of change of these urban settlements. Think tanks and projects do not have to make an intervention thinking of it as a finished project but just as the beginning of assimilation and adaptation of the first conditions compatible with social needs. Thus, these interventions must be not expensive as much as adaptable, flexible, smart and sustainable and must aim to create livable, healthy, attractive, safe and accessible public spaces which enhances social mixture and equity. Considering that; it is transport what brought solutions and most of the problems in our cities; and that public space is what strengthen urban identity by promoting sociality and reinforcing social security, the thinking of a single framework of static and dynamic spaces would guarantee the development of a regenerative process overall urban fabric.

Every intervention must take under consideration the location and the social components and needs and it must detect all possible solutions that enhances the cooperation of inhabitants. Only after raising a series of key questions to understand the social dynamics of the site, adopting public participation strategy that involves the local interest of the groups and individuals, will be possible to make hypothesis of how to resolve and intervene.

The balance between the public and private realms has been dynamically reshaped by a multitude of social forces and duly reflected in the physical structure of the city at the last two decades. The proliferation of private initiative and commercial enterprises throughout the urban fabric has aggressively invade the public domain.

The social justice and a deep connection to an urban history that inhered in intersecting forms, habits and rights, are not meet by the proposals of globalized market, although they must be the base of the urban transformation. The past has a lot to inspire and suggest in the direction of enhancing and making socialization the key of the project as an instrument of the "Urban Machine" , starting by the bazaars of the ottoman period, well organized even in a spontaneous way, going through the socialist period with the very positive habits such as: social interactions in the public places, the massive use of bicycle by the population, the attraction for sports activities etc.

"Today, a resistant attitude can only be conceived through maintaining a physical presence in each place of intervention and allowing ourselves to be affected by the relationship between intelligible and the sensible, starting from the reading of the structure of the place, the hearing of the demands (...) and the detection of opportunities." (Jauregui 2007).

In Tirana the start of a process able to undermine the actual process of urban mobility (the myth of the private car) could generate a chain of positive transformations over the whole urban settlement.

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