

REFLECTION ON THE TRANSFORMATION OF TIRANA'S ARCHITECTURAL SPACES

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ABSTRACT

The architectural spaces that form the function of the main squares and bazaars are often considered the best place to understand the history of the city due to their many layers of construction. These areas, as the first urban core of the city, represented a meeting place for people, a place of recreation, and a place where people could discuss politics. This research presents the transformation of two of Tirana's public spaces that have had interventions, as illustrated by the cases of Skenderbeg Square and Tirana-Old Bazaar, which is significant and almost prophetic for the understanding of a country such as Albania. The goal of this study is "participatory architecture," which regenerates infrastructure and public space. These interactions have recently been facilitated by the use of physical and digital planning production through analysis. This method stimulates innovative design, economic growth, cultural heritage activity, and greater tourist coherence.

Keywords: architectural square, bazaar, participatory architecture, digital-realistic models, community voice.

Historical city background

Every political regime tried to leave their mark on each city, often by constructing a building and often by destroying one from a previous regime in the process. Tirana started as an organic settlement at the beginning of the seventeenth century (Frashëri 2004, p. 17), at which time this part of the Balkan territory was dominated by the Ottoman Empire. The beginning of the construction of modern Tirana started in the 1920s, when it became the capital of Albania. It remained a small and insignificant centre until 1920. Historians and other scholars agree that the first urban nucleus in the Tirana valley emerged close to the Lana River, at the intersection of the commercial routes emanating from the more important regional centres of the time (Fig. 1).

During the seventeenth century and until 1912, the urban structure of Tirana was underpinned by Muslim propaganda. Tirana's predominant ideology and culture were dictated by the Ottoman Empire, which sought to expand its territory on the Balkan Peninsula and beyond. Over time, the sociological units, or community clusters, merged into a dense urban core centred on the most important public buildings of the time: the Old Mosque and the Old Bazaar.



Fig.1 The city of Tirana, at the beginning of the 1920s. Source: National Technical Archive



Fig.2 Street of Durres and Kavaja, New boulevard of Zogu i Pare. Tirana, 1920.
Source: National Technical Archive

King Zog prepared the first projects of European-style urban design and architecture for the city centre, including a big new boulevard. The new square was symbolic and functioned as a conciliation space between the inherited organic city and the new modern Tirana. (Fig.2). The most significant project was the ceremonial complex of the ministry square and the central axis of the new boulevard, first designed by the Italian architect Armando Brasini in 1925. This project was highlighted as the most important element and the symmetric axis of Tirana in both the regulatory plan of 1929 formulated under King Zog and the regulatory plan of 1939–1943 formulated during the Italian Fascist occupation. After the Second World War, Tirana underwent the simultaneous clash and intertwining of drastically different cultures, as reflected in many aspects of daily life, where the anthropology of space represented at once or separately the Ottoman and Western civilizations. However, between 1944, when the Communist dictatorship was installed in Albania, and 1991, other important changes occurred in the structure of the city. Architecture and urban planning became ideological instruments for the so-called progressive transformation of the country and the creation of a new physical and social reality. Despite the isolation that dominated this period, Albania followed a similar track to other Eastern Bloc

countries in terms of architecture and urbanism, albeit within the framework of a struggling economy, a lack of technology and know-how, and aggressive ideological pressure and dogmatic irrationalities.

The architectural heritage of Albanian cities today is mostly composed of a long tradition of Ottoman buildings, a short but impressive period of Italian and fascist constructions, four decades of socialist planning, and newly incorporated post-socialist and post-modernist structures. If somebody visits Albania today, they can inspect some elements very similar to those of the former Soviet countries; others can be very similar to Turkish traditions; and the overall impression is an organised urban chaos of the post-Soviet cities, which is also reflected in their daily lives.

Understanding the transformation of two public spaces in Tirana city

This research presents the transformation of two of Tirana's public spaces that have had interventions and promoted new forms and functions of cultural and environmental tourism, as illustrated by the cases of Skenderbeg Square and Tirana-Old Bazaar, which is significant and almost prophetic for the understanding of a country such as Albania, whose destiny is suspended between East and West: "two circles, one with Tirana at its centre and a radius equal to the distance between Rome and Tirana, and another with the same radius yet with Istanbul at the centre, which meet at the eastern border of Albania."

The city squares were the first to be subjected to democratic changes, although they were constructed for different purposes. Their initial construction was for public manifestations supporting the regimes. Regularly organised demonstrations backing the system, meetings, gatherings, and marches created demand for spacious streets and squares, which were very important modes or axes of spatial organisation in socialist cities and were distinguishable and particularly visible in large and small cities. (Fig. 3)

The transformation of Tirana's central square (Skenderbeg Square) in nearly a century demonstrates the main ideological purposes of two different totalitarian regimes, fascism and communism, as well as the post-Soviet urban developments. After communists came into power, the idea of city and public space didn't change so much. Totalitarian regimes all meet in relation to questions that have to do with monumentality and huge urban scale. Both fascists and communists agreed on the form, size, and use of public space. In Albania, officially, the main idea was to use them for manifestations and grand marches of workers and military officials

During the years of socialism from the 1960s to the 1970s, further interventions were implemented to permanently define the shape and size of the main square. These interventions consisted of the demolition of the Old Bazaar in order to build a huge Palace of Culture that was inaugurated in 1966. During the years of socialism from the 1960s to the 1970s, further interventions were implemented to permanently define the shape and size of the main square. These interventions consisted of the demolition of the Old Bazaar in order to build a huge Palace of Culture that was inaugurated in 1966. (Fig. 4)



Fig.4
city of

The
Tirana,

Skanderbeg Square during 30s
Source: National Technical Archiv

The formation of Skanderbeg Square is in itself a product of an imposed ideological process, mostly created by authoritarian regimes, although that method is rarely a linear one. We seem intermittently aware of the layering of history that the city represents, with its manifestation of political conflicts and changes. This happened until the great protests of the 1990s against the communist regime, when plazas and Grand Boulevard became fighting areas.

Fortunately, there are still some places in Tirana that show a degree of identity continuity, and these are not the squares any more. The main heritages of Tirana from the Ottoman Empire period were the Old Mosque, the Mosque of Ethem Bey, the Tirana clock tower, the old bazaar, et cetera. The first and last of this list were destroyed by the communist regime soon after it was raised into power, while the Mosque of Ethem Bey and the clock tower still remain today the most iconic buildings of the city.(Fig. 5)

After the fall of communism, the square became the arena of people's free will and expression, the symbol of change, and the space where the voice of everyone could be heard. At no other time, like in the 1990s, has the Scanderbeg Square served its purpose as a "positive space".

Before 2003, Tirana's central square was a relatively simple transit open space and had never been a place for people to meet; it was rather a place for traffic regulation and



Fig.5 Old Bazaar The city of Tirana,
1930 Source: National Technical Archive

authorised political meetings and/or protests. (Aliaj et al., 2003) A city's main square can be understood as a type of urban landscape, and this can be understood not only as the built morphology of the city—its urban tissue, outlook, and layout—but also as a complex set of meanings, representations, and values. Places, such as urban squares and bazaars, have no inherent identity. Identity is a mental quality; it is constructed by human behaviour in reaction to places. It is a reciprocal relationship—people produce places, and they derive identities from them. Identity may be given to a place by a government, but whether this identity is embraced by the people is a different matter. Places are both material and social in the sense that they provide space people use for all kinds of activities. Celebrating the victory of a team, organising an urban protest, a president speaking to a crowd, etc., all signify the identity activities of groups, between groups, and institutions like government.

Theoretical background: Understanding Participatory Architecture Approach

During the 1970s and 1980s, political agendas in Europe also promoted participatory planning and community-led architecture [Luck, 2018, p.144]. Yet in the 1990s this support disappeared alongside funding and PA turned into a minority practice. However, from the mid-2000s onwards, a revival of PA emerged from practices such as Aravena's Elemental on affordable homes in 1994-; atelier d'architecture autogérée (2001); "The sooner the community becomes involved in the planning process the better—ideally before any planning has been done," as Kathy Madden and Fred Kent emphasis in the book *How to Turn A Place Around*. "And people should be encouraged to stay involved throughout the improvement effort so that they become owners or stewards of the place as it evolves."

The voice of the community should be taken more seriously since any decision could affect their lives. The public has the right to know on what is happening in the surrounding environment and the right to get involve in decision-making process which particularly affect them in places where they live and work.

Participatory architecture. Methodology and projects review.

The research is focused on questions related to the context, methodology, engagement method, processes of participation, and the successes within their projects. All two projects operate at diverse scales of intervention, which represents the new wave of PA practices in Tirana after 2000s. This analysis was guided by the notions of strategies and tactics, and observations from field visits in some of the locations where the projects were taking place.

Fig.6 Tirana Old Bazaar 1920



Fig 7 Tirana New Bazaar 2017



Source: Municipality of Tirana

Case study Tirana New Bazaar

The New Bazaar was built, in 1931 at the same place where the historic Old Bazaar were built, the latter extending up to present day Skanderbeg Square. It is located east of the central boulevard. It forms part of the Old Town of Tirana and is one of the oldest areas of the city. However in 2017, the bazaar were renovated and reconstructed. (Fig. 5,6)

The project was effective in giving architects an opportunity to appreciate the importance of considering traditional architectural solutions in their future designs. The real model introduces the application of approaches representing various dimensions of revitalizing architectural design studios and learning with the aid of information and communication technologies. This scheme has been facilitated by the use of engineering techniques, as scanning and surveying technologies, simulation purposes in symmetry, building facades, colours, space, and meditation in the interior in the urban landscape of New Bazaar in Tirana. Knowledge is retrieved both from the model as well as from its examination and analysis. An example of undirected production is the modelling process that supported the design of the New Bazaar in Tirana.

The project is designed to get continuous feedback from stakeholders throughout this process. Across the administrative areas, which have been part of the journey from the very beginning, have developed a series of public hearings from citizens, architects, engineers and MT's [Tirana Municipality] planners. It is to be appreciated that some of the proposals and suggestions of

stakeholders have enriched the project and contributed to refining and implementing the idea on the detailed design. The project was effective in giving architects an opportunity to appreciate the importance of traditional architecture. Preserving shapes of vernacular house. Considering the traditional solution. Integration of historical Tirana to a Modern City. Testify spiritual and Traditional effect. Transforming a Memory place to a Livable Space.

The PA tactics consisted of (a) visiting residents separately; (b) developing a personalized inventory to understand the residents' lifestyles and needs, and to consider the work and renewals that had already been carried out; (c) setting up a community hub. The objective was to reconnect the residents with new area, markets, buildings, and then invite them to go outside and take care of immediate surroundings.

They prepared a participatory community process, through developing series of public hearings with citizens, informal meetings between different groups; architects, engineers and MT's urban planners; several round table discussions, by spreading information in the media, by advisory committees and coordination bodies.

Case study: Tirana's Skanderbeg Square

In 2003, an international design competition organised by the Municipality of Tirana resulted in a winning design by 51N4E architecture studio, Belgium, but it was only in 2017 before it was implemented.

This phase of intervention proposals has a more ideological approach. It consists of a constant search for the dematerialization of the true nature of the original square and somehow its decomposition. Now the dominant transformation factor is not an economic one but a social one. The citizen is placed in the centre of the idea of the square. So much is evaluated about the role of a single citizen, and only one can perceive the square at a time, as the pyramidal square arises from the ground. Even with this proposal, the space is "controlled," but in this case, the centre of the control system is not the totalitarian ideology nor the market economy, but the citizen. Symbolically and as a modern open society approach, the proposition has many positive aspects in relation to finding a way to represent the new Albanian society as free and in control of itself, but at the same time fails in relation to staying true to the context. (Fig. 7,8)

A new main square, in fact an empty space, has been given integrative symbolism. It has a focus on the future. The national symbol, the statue of the national hero Skanderbeg (a warrior on a horse as a defender of Christianity and Europe), is no longer the focal point of the square; it has become peripheral. The emptiness of the square and the topography of a low pyramidal shape oppose the monumentality of existing classic and modernist architecture.

The proposed change was radical, and mass opinion and civil society never fully supported the winning propositions of both phases. It showed that the projects did not achieve reconciliation with the social approach and the memory that society had for the square. Protestors point at legal and procedural mistakes, lack of involvement, participatory architecture, and the destruction of urban heritage, all for the sake of modernization, which is at the cost of democracy and respect for the rule of law. The new square is a multisensory experience; next to the visual experience and pyramidal topography (a three-sense symbol for Albanians because of the 'Pyramid', a mausoleum structure in honour of the past dictator), there are fountains with light arrangements, bikers playing, visitors making selfies, or just transit walkers passing. While the appearance is new, the critical question is about its value: will the citizens of Tirana, Albania, attach importance to this new space? Will they develop a form of place attachment? The administration of the local government made possible the implementation of the project in a short time and even added to the original project design a large underground public parking space. The Skanderbeg square is identified as the most important public space in Tirana and is still perceived as the most representative plaza in Albania.



Fig.7 The historical center of Tirana was almost entirely erased. New Skanderberg Square ≈1980 [39] Palace of Culture Source: National Technical Archive

The totalitarian squares in Albania present aspects of a lack of adaptability and flexibility overtime. In the absence of a dominant political power, these squares, in their bigness, are often mute and full of solitude, testifying to the heavy historical failures that influenced urban radicalism and city-making. On the other side, central space, with its rich history, gives us as architects and planners the eternal lesson that these spaces first need to be understood if we tend to intervene on them. This process can only be achieved through deep knowledge of the history that made them and which they help to make. Tirana's main square project intends to enact a new image and a new identity for the city and the country. The new square was not a popular demand but rather the perception of the political.



Photo 8:

Skanderbeg Square (Facebook Edi Rama, public realm)

The participatory process was structured based on the spatial practice's strategies:

(a) not seeking consensus but rather opening a citizen debate via community engagement (b) a non-prescriptive, open-ended, and responsive process of participatory events—each event informed the subsequent ones based on the connections, interactions, and assemblage of actors; (c) open-ended and emergent outputs; a decision-making process rather than a voting process; (d) generating initial design ideas by responding to community feedback; (e) consulting on these design ideas with local community stakeholders (including the landowners and its residents); (f) providing the vision for the community; (g) negotiating with the citizens, including community members, musicians, teachers, and local authority representatives, who were ceremonially given the keys to the school building.

Discussions

Regarding the analysis of the context of two case studies of the PA projects, we can appreciate different urban situations that vary in types and levels of participation. Both projects illustrate strong connections with PA historical practices and evolutions of participatory tactics and strategies. The cases are aligned with the types of participatory planning defined by [Guedes, 2019]: formal participation (initiated by public authorities), and community-led participation (driven by communities).

The New Bazaar project, is the only project instigated by the local communities and Tirana Municipality and greatly diverse community groups, who approached the PA.

New Bazaar project where architects had a more intimate engagement approach with the community and the proposed engagement process was centered on the citizens' needs using a personal, empathetic, and ethnographic participative approach, which ensured the participation of low-income communities and residents during the process, and Skenderbeg square, where participants adopted passive or consultative roles, describing more controlled strategies and tactics, with architects mediating and filtering the design outputs. Similarly to co-design, PA is

not possible without building trust and relationships among architects, residents, and stakeholders [McKercher, 2020].

In practice, the combination of PA strategies and tactics allows architects to develop workable participatory methodologies to build a bridge between citizens and the public sector. This combination helps to flatten pre-existing power structures and hierarchies, facilitating collaboration between diverse groups, enabling them to become active agents in architectural processes. Although strategies and tactics are usually identified as separate concepts, in both projects reviewed, it is clear they actually work in unison, and often the lines between strategy and tactic are blurred. New Bazaar project set up tactics for engagement of the physical lab – engaging local community in urban actions to prototype the ideas generated using from digital lab and Skenderbeg square, school set up tactics for the digital lab – engaging young architects and practitioners to promote a global debate, but also generating a vessel for international concepts, which was simultaneously a tactic and a strategy;

Looking across the PA projects, the following common strategies and tactics must be identified:

Build trust and meaningful relationships; encourage citizen participation and tactic as: each resident's situation needs to be considered differently and give them the freedom during the process while trying to develop a sense of the collective good rather than just an individualistic viewpoint.

Conclusions:

In conclusion, this visionary model may help in the encouragement of PA and serve as a model for further collaborative processes between different stakeholders. This paper introduces PA as a strong alternative to overcome the issues associated with conventional approaches to architecture that exclude people from the design process. None of these two projects have directly led to immediate wider societal changes, which indicates that there is a need to evaluate PA approaches and track the impact of PA over time. Today we live in a period that needs deep and rapid transformations, where research on PA is highly required to adapt our environments to sustainable ways of living and to address the upcoming climate changes. Good communication between the local authorities and the community is necessary, not only in terms of use but also in the terms of design, and this will be the real regeneration of educational and social infrastructure and the key to a healthy and participatory democratic political culture.

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