

Does the High-Rise Building Typology meet the needs for City Densification? The case of Tirana, Albania

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The first high-rise building ever in Tirana and Albania was built during the 70-s. This was Hotel Tirana or “15-kateshi” as it was nicknamed. At that time, Tirana was building not more than six floors high due to limitations in finances, technology, as well as seismic regulations. Hotel Tirana was an exception for ideological and symbolic reasons of the regime.

After the ‘change’ of the early 90-s and the return of the market economy, several private construction companies came up by developing ‘tower’ typology buildings of 7-9 floors. In the second decade of transformations, the municipality developed several international architectural competitions, including a masterplan for the city centre (2003) and other specific construction sites, mainly for strategic high-rise building purposes. During these years, Tirana was densified by tripling its population thanks to a typology of towers of 9-11 floors. There has been a lot of criticism of the respective municipal decision-making procedures, allegedly related to the politicization and corruption of the verticalization and densification process via control of the building permissions system.

The new municipal plans since then continued with the logic of densification, especially in the city centre. However, the last municipal development plan (2016) came up also with a proposal for verticalization, which reached the climax of implementation, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. Active citizens, intellectuals and professionals complain that in such conditions of total isolation, the decision-making was non-transparent at all, and everything became a matter of fact.

Nowadays, several international monitoring agencies speak for indicators that show a worsening in terms of life quality in

Tirana. Most of the worsening indicators such as traffic, air pollution, flooding, loss of green areas and public space, deteriorating infrastructure, and loss of visual contact with surrounding landscapes, among others, are devoted to the sudden verticalization and densification of the city by local and central authorities.

Therefore, it is interesting to understand the main reasons for the attractiveness of this type of building from a theoretical and practical perspective. It is also a fact that Tirana inherited from the times of the centralized economy was not so much efficient in terms of image, buildings and infrastructure, and something had to be done. Meantime, some of the main arguments mentioned in favour of verticalization and densification are as below:

- Land scarcity and territorial constraints – In Albania, land scarcity and territorial constraints are linked to the existence of a high percentage of mountains and numerous hills (almost 70% of the territory). Such conditions limit the cities from expanding in width, thus leading to the densification that supports development at higher floors. However, this cannot be done by harming the public, green and sports spaces that ensure the revival of community spirit and health. The emergence of pandemics and the number of deaths proved that Tirana is no more a healthy and sustainable city.
- Urbanization and re-urbanization – Cities are at the heart of economic life for a country. They also play a pivotal role in social, cultural, and political life. They provide access to a higher quality of life, especially thanks to the proximity of infrastructures and access to a richer ‘menu’ of services. Of course, this increases the

demand for housing in urban centres, and thus the construction of this type of building, as well. Albania and Tirana lived through a radical process of urbanization from early 1990 up to 2010. The impact of the global financial and real estate crisis, and the limit of growth related to the moderate scale of the country, somehow completed the phase of urbanization. The need for getting out of the economic crisis, as well as the national project to join the EU somehow pushed for a kind of re-urbanization process of the city centres, but the decay and dryness of other regions of the country.

- Population growth/decay – INSTAT Albania has undertaken several national censuses and planned different scenarios for the evolution of the Albanian population between now and the future. Albania reached almost 4 million inhabitants by the end of the 80-s after 4-5 decades of self-isolation. During the early 90-s, the country lost almost one million inhabitants due to massive emigration after the ‘change’. The second decade of the transition was a time of growth in all aspects, but the third decade suffered again massive escape of youngsters and a “brain drain”. At this point, Albania is evaluated to have around 2 million people living in the country. Most of them dream of better ‘housing’ conditions, while many emigrated families want to have their second houses in their home country when they come to meet families and for holidays. Also, the number of foreigners and expats living in Albania is increasing, while the percentage of the grey economy has flourished during the last decade as well. It provokes (artificially or not) demand for new houses, but in order to meet the needs, supply should, therefore, develop vertically due to the territorial constraints mentioned above.
- Architecture quality – It is a fact that Architecture in Tirana is used as a tool for building the new city/country image if one considers the “grey-sad images” of cities inherited from the communist past. However, the evolution of construction techniques and technologies has, therefore, made it possible to build buildings that are taller, more robust, dynamic, and beautiful; and often considering better integration into the city environment. Contrary to the boom of the 90-s and wild informality, when the quality of architecture and building materials was inferior to today, techniques have largely evolved and “tower” projects started to consider integration into the local context, facilitating acceptance by the population, despite the specific complaints in the case of Tirana. The presence of well-known international architects contributes as a “guarantee brand” for quality pushed further in this development direction.
- Benefits from the rents – The more dwellings are located on the upper floors, the more the landlords will have the possibility to adjust the rent or the selling price upwards, thus bringing to them and the municipal tax office a better return on the investments. Coupled with

the fact that land is becoming increasingly scarce and more expensive (not to mention the legal complexity of ownership in Tirana), developers have higher incentives to build high-rises, especially in the city centre and the main gravity areas and access roads. It is, at present times, the main development trend for Tirana.

- The evolution of lifestyle – The traditional couples based on the man who works and the woman who stays at home are over. Meantime, there is a real growing trend for youngsters who want to live alone for a longer period; young people who are extending their studies; couples who are postponing the arrival of a child; or those who simply do not wish to have children. Thus, the desire to live better and alone, more than a constraint, intensifies and supports the need to densify cities to meet the demand.
- The emergence of a collaborative economy – The last decades brought many changes in the mentality and models of lifework in the cities. Supported by technology, the “sharing economy” facilitated the arrival of working and living concepts like Airbnb, Uber, and other digital companies. This trend has increased the autonomy and accustomed residents to share their daily lives; by taking advantage of significant discounts - whether in sports common halls, laundries or other services or on sharing rooftop terraces and balconies, for example. Thus, to take full advantage of such benefits, residents are more inclined to reside in urban centres rather than periphery or rural areas. It is also becoming a matter of social and economic “status”.
- Regulation after a long period of deregulation – Finally, there is also a political desire for densification at the height that is promoted by local regulators in order to conserve and preserve, among other things, a minimum of agricultural land and green spaces within and around cities, but also to meet the growing need for central housing by maximizing infrastructure efficiency. It is also stimulated further because of a kind of “fed up” of the public with the long transition and wild informality. However, a combination of verticalization and densification could also result in very bad outcomes if planning processes are not transparent or worst manipulated by local political and economic lobbies as it is the criticism in the case of Tirana.

In conclusion, we can say that there are positive arguments, as well as negative impacts on the cities concerning verticalization and densification processes. Although this has played a significant role in changing the image of the capital and country in Albania, the resulting outcome also shows many problems in reality and deformations or deviations from the constructive arguments that are brought in theory and public discourse.

Verticalization, in the conditions of rapid urbanization, is considered as the rapid increase of inner-city apartments via high-rise buildings, resulting in the development of “vertical” city parts, as well as urban densification in general. Al-

though both verticalization and densification processes in cities can provide several advantages, such modifications in the urban landscape are usually implemented extremely fast, especially after World War II (in the case of Western Europe and Latin Americas), or after the “Berlin Wall fall” (in the case of former socialist cities/countries – Eastern Europe).



Tirana during the 1920s.



Tirana during the Communist period in the 1980s.



Tirana in the 2010s.