

TAW 2022 as a Vantage Observatory of an International Phenomenon. The Horizontal Dimension of Verticality.

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Tirana Architecture Weeks (TAW) is an international academic, professional, cultural, and social event, organized every two years by POLIS University, which aims to promote international knowledge related to art and architectural practices, sciences of the city, and research activities, starting from the Albanian context, reaching the international stage across Europe and other countries.

The edition of this year was focused on the thematic “Going High! The pros- and cons- of City verticalization”, related to the recent development of the urban context of Tirana, through the rapid increase of the high-rise buildings in the urban landscape, a phenomena-taking place worldwide. As a result, the main scope of this event was to exchange knowledge with international experience, which primarily resulted in creating a professional network of different backgrounds to analyze each of the components impacted by this phenomenon. One of the main objectives of Tirana Architecture Weeks 2022 was the exchange of academic experience between international universities and professionals, through the organization of 26 workshops in the disciplines of architecture, urban planning, engineering, environmental studies, and art design, focusing on the role of tall buildings as place-making components in the urban landscape. The output of workshops was developing new concepts from the analysis of different urban contexts, proposing several solutions, and elaborating project ideas, detailed solutions, or models.

The workshops were a collaboration between international professors and students, such as “Università degli Studi del Molise”, “Università degli Studi di Salerno” from Italy; “Ionian University”, “The University of Ioannina”, “National Techni-

cal University of Athens” from Greece; “The University of Minho” from Portugal; “Epoka University” from Albania, etc. The exchange of academic experience resulted in the development of different concepts to be applied in the Albanian context and opened academic debates not only between national and international academics but also between students, which were engaged with unknown urban landscapes, enabling the elaboration of a set of analysis and conclusions to be implemented in the case of Tirana. Other workshops were a collaboration of the academics of POLIS University and other professionals and organizations, such as the World Health Organization (WHO), UN-Habitat, United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE); and international firms of architecture and engineering discipline. Such collaboration provided the students with the knowledge of project elaboration and implementation in other European countries, or even the presentation of new technologies and materials applied in buildings and skyscrapers taking into consideration several aspects of their structure.

This edition of the Tirana Architecture Weeks aimed to promote academic collaboration through workshops, but also to encourage cooperation between different disciplines, by mixing the students and combining them with students from other fields of study. This collaboration not only prepares the students by exchanging knowledge with other profiles and using it for their professional growth but also prepares them with the practice of multidisciplinary teamwork for the development of a complete project.

The main achievement of these workshops was taking cognizance of high-rise structures and their role in placemak-

ing within the urban pattern. Primarily, by acknowledging their presence in the image of the city, serving as strong visual landmarks in the mental map of urban exploration, along with the importance of human scale relationship. Careful attention was given to the role of such structures in an existing urban context, by influencing several components of a city, such as a climate, territory, and social structure, resulting in alternating the dynamics of the city, an aspect that was further investigated to provide a set of principles to be executed in the building's architecture and reflected on the design quality, to be further investigated for the future of our cities.

During two intense weeks, where open lectures by prestigious keynote speakers in the field of architecture, planning and urban design were alternated together with international workshops, which also include empirical research on the topics of engineering, technology, the environment or even urban morphology, we achieved (just as successfully) to add another dimension to the TAW platform. We thought that the discussion at the theoretical level and the research at the practical level on the topic of verticalization in the city also needed a confrontation with other groups of interest, which share the same professional passion, but also the same professional doubts and civic concerns.

So, within this general framework on verticalization, we conceived and realized a round table, entitled "The Object and the Space" – the Vertical Dimension and the Horizontal Dimension. This free space of discussion gathered thoughts and professional opinions of architects, local architecture studios, lecturers, academics, urban planners, engineers, critics, publicists, anthropologists, researchers, journalists, activists, sociologists, lawyers and environmental experts. This constructive debate brought other professional viewpoints about the topic of verticality, a phenomenon that is drawing very strong traces at an incredible speed in a context as primitive, in terms of morphological articulation, as complex, in terms of cultural-social-economic, and the urban stratification of Tirana.

The purpose of the discussion was not to stigmatize the tower or the skyscraper, as a building (housing) typology in itself, but to discuss the relationship between Object (building/tower/verticality) - Space (environment/surroundings/plot/landscape), especially in the context of Tirana, where land speculation is starting to take on "pharaonic" (almost ideological) proportions. Even though the theme "object-space" for the architect may sound a bit out-of-date, almost modernist or post-modern, for professionals and other actors of the urban dimension this theme takes on another connotation, that of policies for the city.

Contrary to what is commonly thought and said, that the architect is the protagonist of the shape of an urban context/landscape, he, in an almost global scenario, remains a figure who puts his profession at the disposal of other powerful actors, such as builders, investors, owners, or the municipality. So the act of designing, and then placing/embedding/rooting a vertical object in a certain context (space/land/plot), therefore brings about the change in the social, economic, and cultural scenario of a certain group or community in its horizontal dimension.

The conclusions of this discussion between the profession-

als of the physical dimension of the city and those actors of its social-cultural dimension will be summarized in another special publication by POLIS University and POLIS_Press. It will probably be the first time, that for the situation and the current urban environment of Tirana in the last twenty-thirty years, such an open public discussion will also remain in written material. Let this be the beginning of a healthy tradition of discussions on the transformations of the city, and in our case, Tirana.

During two weeks, TAW also managed to organize a series of social-cultural events, which were again related to the theme of verticalization "Going High!" and the social and cultural phenomena related to it. This series began with the screening of the film "A Pile of Ghost", directed by Ella Raidel. As referred on the website of IHRFFA: "Dead new buildings and ruins, brokers and actors, documentation and fiction, simulation and lived experience: A Pile of Ghosts layers the seemingly disparate building blocks to form the title's "pile." In the end, one ghost story absorbs the other". The human dimension of the phenomenon of extreme verticalization is the main axis of the film, around which both the dramatic and funny stories of the characters revolve. The film was shown in collaboration with the "Marubi Film Academy", as part of the International Human Rights Film Festival Albania (IHRFFA), at the "Destil Creative Hub" in Tirana, whose premises have been recovered from a historic building from the 1930s.

The setting of almost all social events in buildings that belong to the heritage of the urban and architectural identity of Tirana was a deliberate choice. The social events had to emphasize the human dimension (in the social and cultural aspect) that such architectural objects and urban contexts offer, a dimension which is seriously at risk of disappearing due to the rapid urban transformations in Tirana in recent decades. Thus, "Polis Social Gathering" at "Bar Hemingway", "Alumnae Social Night" at "Vila Bunker" and Photo Exhibition "Urbanity in Verticalization Times" at "Banesa Begeja", were organized precisely in such contexts, bringing classical music in the courtyards of old historical houses and photographic exhibitions that emphasize the low surrounding walls of these courtyards. Non-professional photographers, such as Artan Rama, Jora Vaso, Doriana Musaj and Sabian Hasani, exhibited photos from the everyday urbanity of Tirana, often viewed from a critical perspective.

But, at the end of this part, as a conclusion, we would also like to bring here the interesting interpretation that Jora Vaso makes of this reality, as strange as it is stimulating: "I see connections between elements that perhaps cannot, or should not, be connected, but now it seems to me that this task has been assigned to me, by myself. Not to survive, but for much more. To preserve the desire for life, for nature, for beauty, especially in cases where they are threatened". To live, regardless of everything, trying to find a beautiful human dimension, even though it seems impossible!

To sum up, it is possible to affirm that TAW 2022 proposed a multifocal and international analysis of the phenomenon of urban verticality through the intellectual cataloguing of experiences, the summation of whose chapters proved fruitful in defining a common substratum beneficial for its decoding.

However, several limitations have emerged in this multicultural expression as a result of the atypicality and absoluteness, in some respects reactionary, of this urban manifestation.

From the keynote speakers' presentations during the TAW days and the discussions that emerged because of their interventions, skyscrapers seem to pose as adaptive to the expressive language of each era. They have moved from incarnating historicism as an aesthetic-formal quotation to an antihistoricism that reflects current times, where decontextualisation and designer-supplied experientiality act as context, replacing it.

The tall building and the skyscraper thus seem to be the result of the economic accumulation of capital in a given place and period and, consequently, a 'litmus test' of the wealth status of a city or country. Thus, a sort of index for anyone trying to infer its internal dynamics from an external point of view, albeit in a simplistic way. This sharpens its dissonance with the dense but informal context in which such objects are placed, as in the case of Tirana, the capital of Albania. In the Balkan city, the desire to enter an international discourse on capital allocation seems to willingly accept visual and factual homologation to this recognisable global linguistic syntax. At the altar of development appears to be sacrificed the so-called 'minute life' of the neighbourhood, which is redefined and reshaped by a kind of aporia, where the new demands require gentrification, expulsion, and relocation for its fulfilment.

Further, dilemmas also seem to open up concerning the true sustainability of the same, not only in economic or climate-related performance but also in terms of form and relations with land use in an urban context. In the latter case, dimensional differences emerge between European and American skyscrapers where, for the European ones, land occupation is only a few parcels while, in the American ones, it requires the replacement of the urban block with significant effects on the neighbourhood itself.

Net of these considerations, their realisation coincides with the exaltation of applied design technique in all its forms and fields. From the functional architectural programme, multifunctionality is a consolidated design practice. The hybridisation of functions occurs in the building's verticality and not only in specific areas, as was previously the case in the podium located at their base. Technological and structural solutions become distinctive and characterising, with effects on local and regional know-how in terms of realisation and stimulus in their application to more ordinary building types.

The technical fact, therefore, seems to be consummated if one considers the architect as a service provider rather than as the one who humanistically responds technically to questions of various kinds related to the above. Among the debatable questions of growing international media interest, one could mention the origin and ethical conditions of the workers engaged in the construction phases, the source of the capital invested in the real estate operation, etc.

The above seems to offer a fertile substratum for the germination of some critical questions, which nevertheless seem pressing in a contemporary historical period to which relativism, political apathy and indifference are blamed. First and foremost,

is it possible to channel the scope of these urban facts within a local or regional cultural discourse without the risk of bias and loss of richness in the social discussion? Is the architect still interested in embracing the ethical component in design practice, or do ethics only exist within the project without therefore contemplating the influence of boundary conditions? Given the increasing national and international criticality, volatility, and structural instability, is it still appropriate to build skyscrapers as a dichotomous symbol of immanence and duration? If the answer to the previous question does not immediately spring to mind for the reader, one wonders what the urban symbols of the future might be, towards which hyper-digitalisation seems to be leading to a continuous dematerialisation of the tangible.



Photo by Ermal Hoxha.

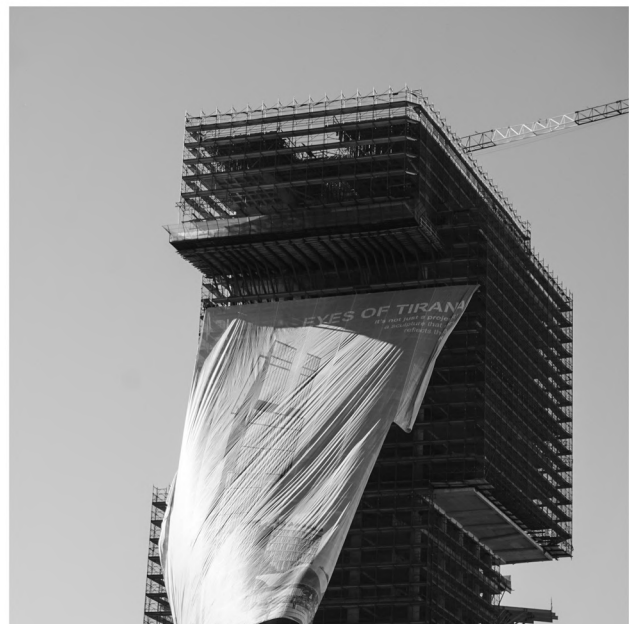


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