

ALBANIA *The Role of Design, Planning and Landscaping for the National Growth, Image Building and Branding*

Prof. PhD. Besnik Aliaj

Rector, Polis University, Tirana Albania

Background:

Between 1945-1990, Albania experienced one of the harshest authoritarian regimes of the Cold War period, and was considered the “Northern Korea” of Eastern Europe. The country prohibited any form of organized religion, private initiative, and freedom of movement. No foreigners could enter the country, practically. Indeed it was considered a strict “no fly zone” for tourists and any international transportation mean, both from east and west. The rest of the world was considered by the authoritarian regime of that time as “degenerate and corrupt”!

Despite heavy preaching by the communist leaders which considered Albania the “center of the world” and “the only real” communist country, the reality during the 80s looked bleak. The whole country could be considered entrapped in a national imprisonment, where people lived from hand to mouth.

Since early 1991, Albania entered a radical process of change and nowadays the country is totally transformed from its state directly emerging from its dictatorial heritage. The transition towards pluralism, democracy and market economy during the

90s was harsh and often traumatic and included several episodes of national social and political unrest, because of the collapse of pyramidal investments schemes, as well as war in Kosovo.

During the last decade Albania experienced a stage of stabilization and rapid socio-economic growth with an average GDP increase of 6% per annum. The country joined NATO, and it has since progressed regarding its EU membership, despite continuous internal political quarrels. Meanwhile foreign investments have gradually increased, but not at the expected potentials. This is mainly because of problems due to unclear land restitution policies. The country, in the meantime, has placed a lot of hopes on the growing industries of tourism, mining, alternative energy production, and bio- agriculture.

Nevertheless the global economic crisis, especially in the neighboring EU countries like Greece and Italy, hinted at a crisis for the Albanian economy as well. In addition, remittances from emigration dropped from 50% during the 90s to 20% at present time. Despite such a slowdown, during the last years the economy is still growing at an av-

erage of 1-2%, remaining far better than many neighboring countries in the region. Most of such relative success relies both on certain liberal policies from authorities and on the entrepreneurial spirit of Albanians. However, the economy still remains largely informal. It is estimated that 50% of Albania's economy operates out of formal channels, and more is to be done to achieve EU's average standards.

Context:

Until 1990, Albania was considered the most rural-oriented society of Europe, with only 35% of population living in urban settlements. Authorities were discouraging urbanization with all the available means because they were neither capable nor willing to support freedom of movement, and the consequences of housing, infrastructure, and job opportunities for the new settlers. Instead, young people and cadres were sent by force to work in remote and rural areas based on similar ideological inspirations borrowed by the “Chinese Cultural Revolution”. During this period the country’s population was growing at the dramatic trends of 3% per annum, while small towns were strictly planned according to the local “pseudo-modernist” ideological principles, as well as the logic of economic savings and self-reliance.

During the 90s, when private initiative was introduced, authorities were focused on other emerging political and economic issues of national importance, thus not being able to guide the dramatic growth rates of 5-10% per annum towards main urban centers. At the present time the speed has slowed down to 2-3% per annum, while the real estate boom has entered a crisis stage. In a few words a rapid and dramatic urbanization process has happened in the last 20 years, predominantly of an informal character, where housing constructions in the periphery and business spaces in the center have been the main typologies of development. Nowadays almost 60% of the nation’s population lives in urban areas, while 1 in 4 Albanians lives abroad.

This urbanization happens in tandem with a continuous process of the decentraliza-

tion of power and finances from the central government towards local communities. However, this is also associated with negative externalities such as: urban sprawl, environmental degradation, loss of public space as well as inefficiency of public infrastructure and services, corruption and informality, etc.

Despite such vivid but chaotic urban models, often more typical of Latin American cities, it is to be recognized that the people’s energy has been immense and crucial to the growth and progress of the country. If authorities are able to initiate intelligent processes of planning as well as administration of the territory and resources, Albania could become more attractive to the foreign investors and the growing number of visitors/tourists. This process needs not only a consolidation of the existing legal-economic reforms, but also implementation of several strategic programs of urban-rural governance; territorial management; resource conservation and planning; landscape planning and qualitative urban design; national image building and branding, etc.

Better organization and management of the spatial developments is also needed in areas such as: the coastal-touristic regions; the metropolitan regions; national parks; main national corridors and trunk infrastructure; (inter-) national airports, ports and entry borders/customs, etc., and so on. All these are becoming of crucial importance to improving the country’s reputation, to boasting economic performance, as well as winning the trust of local communities and foreign investors.

Therefore, POLIS University, a leading Albanian school of territorial policies, in collaboration with its partners is highly interested in exploring such issues.

U_POLIS, UNIFE and their Joint International PhD Program:

POLIS University is a new educational and research alternative established in Albania, with impact in the Western Balkans, focused on the issues of Design, Architecture, Engi-

neering, Planning and Environmental studies. U_POLIS is institutionally and program accredited, and member of several international and European university and research networks. It provides programs of Bachelor, Masters and PhD levels, and undertakes research and innovation of scientific and applied nature. Thanks to the previous exchanges of staff and students, as well as an agreement between Rectors, a Double Degree PhD program is jointly organized with the University of Ferrara (UNIFE). At a second stage the program will be joined also by two European schools of architecture and planning in Bratislava and Malta.

The team, Theme, Objectives & Structure of the Project:

In order to strengthen this cooperation and contribute with a vision for the country, the researchers of the PhD program and students of Postgraduate Programs at U-POLIS, during 2013-2014 undertook an envisioning research project in one of the main strategic corridors of the metropolitan area Durres-Tirana in Albania.

A total of 12 PhD researchers and 9 postgraduate students, were organized in three teams of mixed professional backgrounds and life experiences. Most of them had already solid professional and/or educational-research-intellectual expertise both at an Albanian and international level, including some of the most reputable universities or international development organizations in EU and USA. Three selected PhD researchers from UNIFE also joined the project team. This team was then jointly guided by the academic staff of the PhD Programs of POLIS and UNIFE.

The teams were organized in this way:

Team 1: Dritan Shutina, Rudina Toto, Anila Gjika, Elona Karafili, Habib Ymeri (PhD researchers) & Lorin Cekrezi, Saimir Kristo (post-Master student), Carlo Ruyblas Lesi (UNIFE), Stefania Cellini (UNIFE).

Team 2: Sotir Dharmo, Dorina Papa (PhD researchers), Gjergj Dushniku, Rezart Struga,

Nevila Zajmi (post-Master students), Mario Assisi (UNIFE)

Team 3: Endrit Marku, Laura Pedata, (PhD researchers), Mario Shllaku, Joana Dhiamanti (post-Master students), Elena Dorato (UNIFE), Chiara Canevazzi (UNIFE).

Workshop coordination

Prof. Antonello Stella (UNIFE)

PhD. Loris Rossi (POLIS)

Tutors from UNIFE

Prof. PhD. Roberto di Giulio (Dean of the Faculty of Architecture at UNIFE)

Prof. PhD. Daniele Pini (Vice-Dean of the Faculty of Architecture at UNIFE)

Prof. PhD. Antonello Stella

Prof. PhD. Romeo Farinella

Prof. PhD. Luca Emanuelli

Planning the sustainable development as well as the transformation of this corridor as a new symbol of "Albania in the 21st century" - a role-model for the rest of country - has been the core subject of the research project described in this publication. Therefore, the main theme of the project and PhD laboratory was: *Building the image for Albania's 21st Century! Boosting positive spatial developments, economic growth and a smart aesthetic vision on the region between Tirana's International Airport and City Center.*

Mother Theresa Airport is the main and the only international air gate of Albania, re-developed thanks to a PPP concession managed since 2005 by a German-Canadian company, and currently bought as a profitable airport by an international operator. This shift in ownership has dramatically increased the number of flights landing/departure per day and the influx of travelers, and is considered an international best practice with a very positive impact on the local economy and country image. More on this visit: www.tirana-airport.com.al.

Tirana is the main city and capital of Albania. The municipality counts at least 700,000 inhabitants, but the metropolitan area along with the adjacent communities and the neighboring city of Durres, the

main port city of Albania, all in total counts around 1 million inhabitants. See: www.tirana.gov.al. The corridor between the Tirana-Airport and Durres Port is the real heart of Albania's economy along with interesting services and a rich agricultural-landscape valley.

However, the positive developments of this corridor are limited due to the lack of a clear policy and territorial administration from the local as well as the metropolitan-national authorities. It desperately needs to promote good urban-spatial governance, encouraging foreign direct investments and tourism growth.

The objectives of the research projects were:

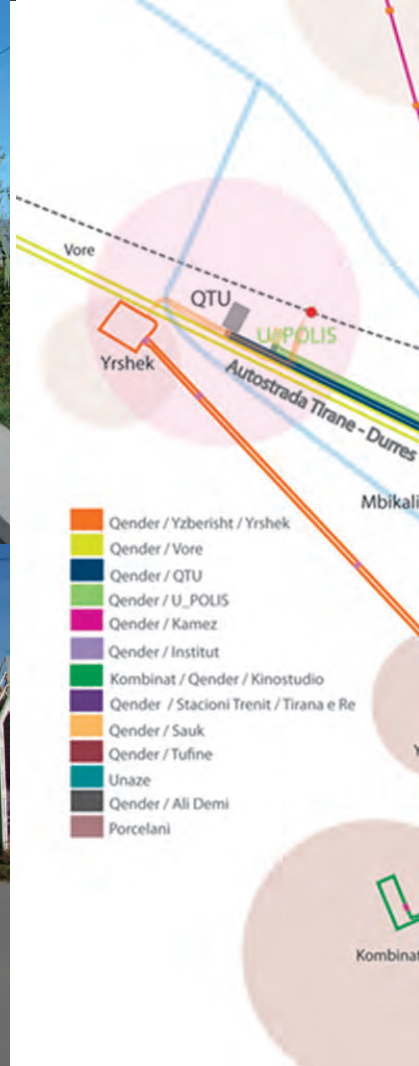
- *To analyze the existing situation and developments of the territorial, economic and landscape/environmental patterns in the area between the Tirana city center and its international airport.*
- *To conceptualize and develop a pilot program/project on the necessary improvements towards coordinated territorial management of a space which is the economic and services' engine of Tirana's Metropolitan Area.*
- *To make concrete proposals from: a spatial planning point of view; from an image, design & architectural perspective; as well as from the environmental and landscaping aspects, and so on...*
- *To bring all analyses, researches and graphical visualizations together and produce a document capturing the vision which will hopefully be used by Albanian authorities and local businesses.*
- *Preferably, to mobilize interest on a potential project that better manages the area under study, and potentially initiate in this way a process of positive transformations on the basis of this preliminary research document to be further elaborated and detailed in another cooperation of POLIS & FERRARA Universities with Albanian authorities and society.*

The structure of the research project was organized over one year, with three main workshops in Tirana, and a forth one in Ferrara where projections and conclusions were finalized:

- **Workshop 1:** Spatial planning and economic boosting, including image, branding and marketing, tourism and services promotion, etc (Tirana).
- **Workshop 2:** Sustainable development, including landscape planning and architecture, green and smart developments, etc (Tirana).
- **Workshop 3:** Strategic architectural and urban design issues (Tirana).
- **Workshop 4:** Final presentation and conference (Ferrara).

I sincerely thank all the researchers involved. A special acknowledgment goes to the colleagues of POLIS Albania and UNIFE Italy. We all hope that this project is useful to Albanian authorities, and that it is a good first step towards our joint contribution for a better Albania.





Concept MetroPolis Studio 2010, Reactivating Durana Railway Connection

