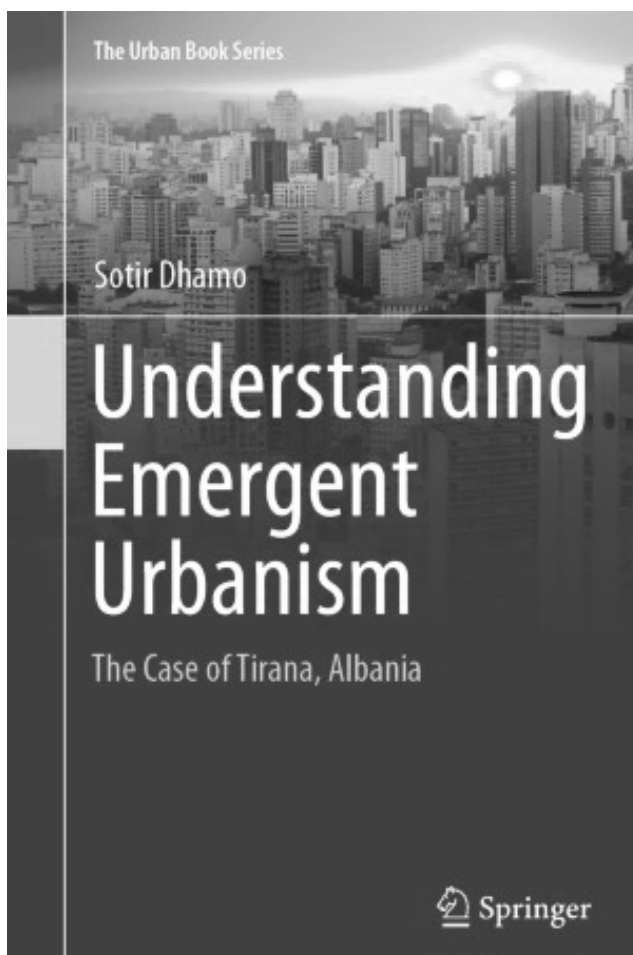


Understanding Emergent Urbanism The Case of Tirana, Albania

VALERIO PERNA

POLIS University



Author: Sotir Dhamo

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The canonical architectural studies have handed us the idea that city is the result of a series of top-down procedures - and related documentary materials - which depict a rigid and hardly contestable direction of development of our urban tissues. Looking at the different regulatory plans throughout which contemporary cities have been developed, it is quite difficult to perceive the human component of such spaces, leaving us to wander in a series of linear relations where the final form is predetermined by external judging eyes. But if we look at the city as a living being, characterized from the different complex entities that inhabit it and interact among each others, is it possible to bring the real city - or as the author underlines, the city of everyday life - close to conventional planning? Can we read its tissues not only from a quantitative/standard-oriented point of view but through an holistic approach? And, even more important, can we model this 'emergent' complexity and apply as a methodology to design better and more human-based cities? These are just some of the main questions addressed in the book *Understanding Emergent Urbanism. The Case of Tirana, Albania* authored by Sotir Dhamo, architect, urbanist and professor of Urban Design at POLIS University, Tirana.

The text is the result of a series of intense years of active research of the author in this field: firstly, through his involvement in the Albanian NGO Co-PLAN (Institute for Habitat Development), that after the fall of the Communist regime imported grassroots and bottom-up processes in Albania; and then through his pedagogy experience at POLIS University. His PhD thesis, of which this book is the natural prosecution, represented a first attempt to systematize and transmit a specific knowledge that was accumulated only thanks to almost 20 years of applied research and continuous clashes with that specific reality that the text urge the readers understand: the city of Tirana. The very city is not presented in a canonical way throughout the work: dimensions, toponymy, quantitative values, etc. are unimportant elements that leave space for an urban environment that discloses in front of our eyes as a com-

plex palimpsest amidst different layers, each of those can be interpreted using some specific categories proposed by Dhamo. According to the author, if we aim to correct the distortions and the rigidity of common top-procedures we need to find the courage to move on from this consolidated approach and lose ourselves in the historical and anthropological nature of urban phenomena, through an original point of view: understanding reality through quantum physics ideas that can lead us to computational procedures. With such interesting premises, and in order to sustain this peculiar perspective, the book is divided into eight parts (plus 2 appendix) which in turn are composed of numerous subchapters. The overall feeling, while reading the book, is to be submerged in a dreamlike Fellini movie where first the reality is first presented as it is and then fades in a continuous leap of scale and labyrinthine path just like the streets of the city of Tirana.

The opening section, "Introduction", has the fundamental role of opening Dhamo's digression and to explain precisely why the Albanian capital has been chosen as a case study besides biographical reasons. It represents the author's 'manifesto of intent', where the city is analyzed through the methods and approaches based on the conceptual tools of quantum, fractal, self-organization, and the theory of complexity. Some of the specific characters of Tirana are highlighted and discussed and, most important, the methodology used is presented and anticipated to that reader that will understand the importance of such a mixed quantitative/qualitative-based approach.

The second part, "The Natural City", presents the concept that gives the name to the whole chapter. Opposed to the "artificial" one, the natural city is described as a complex emergent phenomena which, created by the collective intelligence of its citizens, self-organizes from the bottom in a continuous exchange between formal/informal moments that guarantee its continuity and survival. The related ideas of 'organic', 'informal', 'sprawl', 'spontaneous', etc. are explained by means of their self-organized structure and their inner similarities with complex biological entities. In response to the bureaucratic planning that gripped Albania for more than half of a century, the chapter has the objective of raising a more informed and enhancing knowledge (both theoretical and practical) in the young generations of architects and planners that could start to critically reflect around the possibility of having new tools-at-hand to face problems such as social housing, urban sprawl, and informality issues. "Additional Theoretical Lens to Understand the City" is the third chapter and opens up the discussion regarding some fundamental theoretical concepts to understand the phenomena of the 'natural city' and its divergence from the previously perpetuated 'top-down' model. To understand the emerging reality of a city we should first of all understand the interrelationships among such ideas and stand exactly in their intersection. The fractal city logic is the attempt to overcome the mechanistic and positivist paradigm and understand the recursivity of the internal dynamics of growth and development of specific cities through an holistic lens.

The fourth section, "Historical Notes on Tirana" it is an his-

torical overview of the many faces that Tirana have had during the last century: the capital of a Monarchy; of a Communist parade-oriented regime; to end up as the main city of a country in a never-ending transition towards a democratic system. Nevertheless, besides the historiographical interest of this part, its real purpose is to serve as trigger to introduce the following one "Tirana Patterns at a Glance". In the latter, three main generative patterns have been identified, extracted, and analyzed both from the point of view of time, of their characteristics and position in the urban tissue of Tirana. Historical Organic is presented as an urban maze of internal parts with a labyrinth and introvert structure. Such areas still maintains a peculiar capacity through influence the passage of time, preventing their replacement by the contemporary city. Recording over is the attempt of giving new meaning to the geometric frames of the residential blocks built during the Communist regime that became the symbol of the revenge against the public space in order to forget the painful past of the country. The last one, New Organic, is still active, it is the attempt of the emergent city to erase the city form through a self-organized spontaneous process that gave birth to a kaleidoscopic and non-defined forma urbis. Each of them is presented through maps, diagrams, and on-site documentation to let the readers directly understand what (and where) they refer too in the contemporary city. The penultimate chapter, "Holistic Approach to Tirana Pattern Analysis", stands as a deeper understanding of the above-mentioned patterns, and focus this time not on their physical characteristics, but on the web of interrelationships they weave as hierarchical structures of a more complex system behavior filtered through the lens of a quantum approach. The holistic analysis is composed by the application of the already explained concepts in the existing reality to underline the direct translation of human behavior in the built environment. Such holistic approach is then transferred into a proper methodology in the last section "Methodology for Holistic Understanding of the Urban Patterns". Three main steps composes it: the conception of reality as a larger whole (holistic reality); the need to unpack the overall qualities that are generated by the interrelationships of past and present event on a collapsed horizon of time; the transformation of the previous ones (holistic and relational) into an information system to be modeled for design purposes.

The "Conclusions" tries to re-tie the threads of the author's narrative and highlight the need of such complex analysis when it comes to emergent realities such in the case of Tirana and the need for pedagogy processes to prepare a new generation of architects and planners to a deeper understanding of the reality they live in.

At this point, even if the book might have come to an end, there are still two appendices that Dhamo shares with the readers. The first one (A), through charts and sheets, explains how the measurement process he has conducting for years, have made possible the understanding and the delineation of the patterns presented in the book. Those calculations are the sum of some solitary investigation campaigns and others with students and colleagues. The material presented is stands at the inter-

section between math and phenomenological interpretation of reality and confirms the holistic approach that permeated all the work.

The second one (B) is an interesting work conducted with a group of selected students and colleagues where the analysis and observation are transferred into a computational design model. After identifying some of the main emergent characteristics of a specific portion of a Tirana's neighborhood, the model is built through several iterations that guarantee its further development and evolution. In the end, a design project is presented has one of the possible crystallization of the multiple interrelationships amidst the different components of the diagrammatic model.

As a young researcher at POLIS University, I had the chance of being involved on several levels in the genesis of this text: starting from some brainstorming moments with the author to reflect on some his theoretical assumption, arriving to be part of the implementation team that produced the results showcased in the Appendix B. Apart from the interesting and valuable concepts and speculations contained in this book, one of its biggest value stands for me in the attempt of the author to reconnect theory and praxis and to show how a research can live of different moments, outputs and to engage different level of an academic and professional lives. Some of the students that were exposed to the contents throughout of the workshops today, while I am writing this review, have become our colleagues and most probably will apply for a PhD program. They understood clearly the value of ideas as a tool to disclose new perspectives on existing reality and to questions things that we are used to take for granted in our everyday activity. Some of them maybe will take the ideas and, together with the author, will do another step forward towards new discoveries and implementation of the methodology because, as he stated in a passage of the introduction that is likely to go unnoticed, "although the theory in this book is illustrating using the specific reality of Tirana, the logic is valid for cities in general". The text is a clear ideas of how the circularities of ideas can have a direct resonance of the multiple and interrelated levels: architectural, theoretical and, most of all, human.