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2.3 The strategic role of an enterprise zone along the axis Rinas International Airport – Tirana

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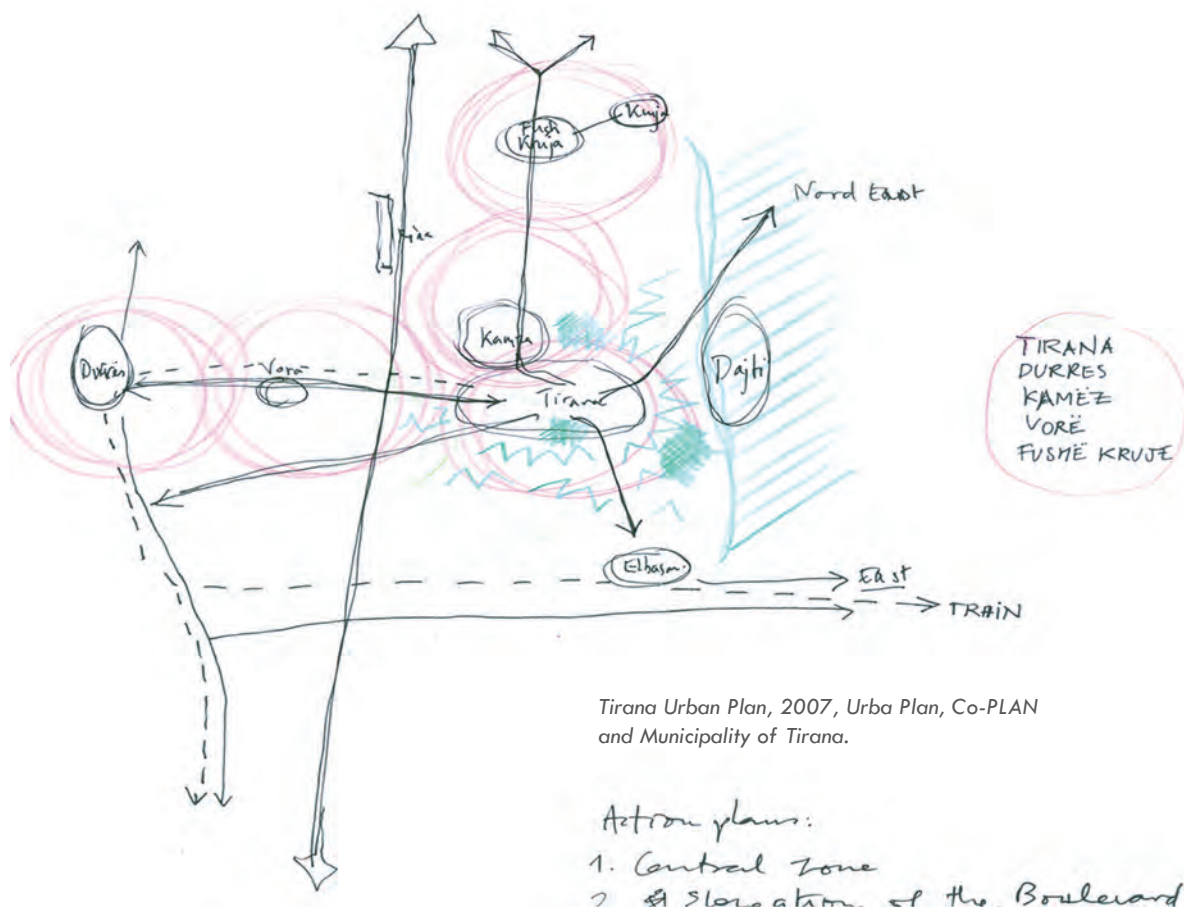
The first section of the road axis between Rinas Airport and Tirana has untapped development potentials which could benefit the whole country, serving as a show-case of quality real estate and urban landscape projects which could be replicated elsewhere in Albania.

Focus on the first part of the axis

The axis between Rinas Airport and Tirana is probably the most sensitive development area in all of Albania. This axis is basically composed of two distinct sections. The first section refers to the road from the Rinas Airport to the intersection with the multi-lane road which connects Tirana to Durres. This intersection located in the Kashar commune is known as the Berxull Node and has already drawn specific attention from a planning viewpoint. The second section of this sensitive axis goes from the Berxull Node to the center of Tirana. This last section is also influenced by its position as part of the Tirana-Durres road. Nevertheless, a high share of development pressure is motivated by transit flows to and from the airport service area. Thus, the whole axis should be seen as a unique entity. In the same area, the Kamza urban corridor can play a key role in developing a new image of Tirana, but it appears that its highest and best use lies more in the

residential and service sectors for local residents, as it is close to the airport but it is not the main road to access it.

The Rinas Airport – Tirana axis is the main “business card” that the country can hand out to business and touristic visitors. It is a show-case which, during the time-lapse required to commute from the airport to the capital, presents a powerful synopsis of the whole country. Certainly, this long-lasting first impression is provided by both sections of the axis as previously defined, but mostly by the first section. Thus, this article claims that, while there is evidence that any analysis of the Rinas International Airport and Tirana axis should include both road sections and certainly the Berxull Node, a special attention should be given to the first part of this axis, namely the space between the airport and the intersection of the Tirana-Durres at the Berxull Node.



Urban planning beyond the demolitions phase of informal development

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It has been stated that “experience shows that legalization, penalties and even demolition has not completely stopped informal development” (UN-HABITAT, 2010, p.5). If this is true referring to Greece and Albania and, generally speaking, to the southern part of Europe, it must also be said that legalization, penalties and even demolition are tools which are far from being utilized on a large scale in these countries. What happens in most cases is a lack of action, any action, by local governments. For decades, this *laissez-faire* attitude has been the only urban policy in Albania.

It is a well-known fact that, in the last two decades, Albania has lost a large percentage of its rich, agricultural land and its coastal zones, especially those close to urban centers. Most of the strategic areas are under constant threat from illegal developments and, in many urban areas, there is a large number of disputes over illegal developments related to the interpretation of environmental and cultural areas due, among other things, to a lack of maps that clearly define legal boundaries and devel-

opment rights in these areas. The challenge of urban development in Albania in the post-communism age is still to be analyzed in depth. However, some detailed analyses of the development of Tirana and its surrounding area after the fall of the dictator Enver Hoxha in 1991 have already been produced (see: Aliaj, Lulo, Myftiu, 2003; Ruijsink, Duka, Toto, 2013).

According to these detailed studies, illegal buildings sprung like mushrooms all over the country in the first years of the post-communist era. For example, by the mid-90s in Tirana, there were “at least 2.000 kiosks of which only about 500 were with provisional permits. (...) Whole quarters of illicit buildings were constructed in the outskirts of Tirana as a result of the free movement of people who came mainly from the northeastern regions of the country, where economic problems were even more complicated” (Aliaj, Lulo, Myftiu, 2003, p. 69).

The first demolitions of illegal construction date back to 1998 after the unrest of 1997 pushed Albanian authorities to act

more firmly in order to show the presence of the State in the country. However, the turning point was the intervention of Edi Rama, mayor of Tirana, in the center of the capital city. The success of the clearance of about 550 illegal constructions (including some 10-story buildings) along a 4 km length of the Lana river in the 1998-2003 period, demonstrated to all that cities could be governed and planned even in a country like Albania where informal development had apparently become the only rule.

In the first part of the last decade, demolitions of illegal constructions, big or small, conducted by the Municipality of Tirana in cooperation with the Construction Police “stopped the trend of breaking urban rules which cause destruction of public interest and damage image of Tirana city” (Aliaj, Lulo, Myftiu, 2003, p. 71). The point is that in Tirana, as well as in other Albanian cities, there are also *“a great number of buildings which are ‘legal’ from a point of view of official urban planning, though they do not respect even the most elementary rules of urban development, because they are built on green spaces between existing buildings and provide accommodations only, without other important functions of urban existence such as green spaces, room for car parking, emergency exits etc.”* (Aliaj, Lulo, Myftiu, 2003, p. 70).

Given the situation of Tirana as briefly described above, it has been maintained with reference to Albania as a whole, that: *“If the environment is to be effectively safeguarded then priority must be given to the legal delineation of environmentally sensitive areas and resources with maps provided to monitor these areas for any informal development. Spatial planning laws and zoning regulations must be supported with mapping.”* (UN-HABITAT, 2010 p.30).

A swift planning action centered on the first part of the axis: a new Gate to Albania Program.

The whole axis between Rinas Airport and Tirana has development potential which is still largely untapped, especially regarding its first part, located between the airport and the Berxull Node. In this part of the axis the so-called informal development, i.e. real estate speculation and illegal activities connected to it, has not yet taken the lead.

Pure land speculation occurs when somebody buys land in the hope that its value will increase without any further action and that the sale occurs in a short time period at prices that incorporate the benefits of public investments in infrastructures to which the landlord has not given any special contribution. Swift public action is the key to preventing land speculation. How? Here, as in other parts of Albania one could rightfully pose the question *“To Build or not to build ? “* and *“Who owns the right ?”* as some have recently done (see: Toto, 2011). Here however, much more than in any other parts of Albania, time is the key of to any public role in the area.

A “perfect” plan for a public positive role in land control and regulation of private development would probably require too much time to be drafted and approved. In the meantime, the whole potential of the area would probably be lost forever. As a response to this potential loss, local authorities must recognize the strategic value for the whole nation of this axis and act accordingly. A special plan must be provided in a seamless way, and it must be simple, sustainable and pro-growth with special attention paid to architectural quality and the environment. It should lead to the implementation of urban projects to the best of the capacities available in Albania today.

The answer to the “to do what?” Question must not be an ideological one, nor a “wait and see” attitude. An ideological answer would produce, for example, an urban plan with very strict regulations and limits, which would discourage investors or would direct them on areas just on fringe of the strictly planned area. And this would be the positive scenario, while the negative and most realistic scenario would be one where a very strict, theoretically efficient plan, to preserve agricultural land, would be bypassed or ignored altogether by powerful developers.

To ruin the great potential of a positive “business card” like the Rinas-Kashar axis, the area need not fully be developed ignoring the rules of a comprehensive urban plan. It would be sufficient that some illegal developments of a certain size would occur here and there along the road from the airport and the intersection with the Tirane-Durres axis, so that the scattered pattern of the new constructions would spoil

the integrity of the area. The “laissez-faire” option is also a constant danger. Given the new hopes emerging in the country with the election of Edi Rama, the prime minister, this option has lost ground but the danger of it coming back should not be ruled out.

First projects of the “New Gate to Albania Program”.

Firstly, local authorities should freeze any change along this axis, to prevent unwanted conversions of agricultural land which still exist. Secondly, the area should be planned as an enterprise zone, subject to special intervention powers of the Municipality supported by the by central government. Thirdly, the enterprise zone named Rinas-Kashar (or more precisely Rinas Airport- Berxull Node) should be divided into three sub areas: the red zone nearest to the airport, the green zone nearest to the Berxull Node, and the blue zone in between the other two areas.

For marketing reasons, the enterprise zone could be identified as the “New Gate to Albania Program” and should be given top priority in the Municipality procedures, which means, for example, the appointment of a single office in charge of all planning powers with a one-stop shop capability. A mix of incentives should be directed to these three sub-areas which could become, as a whole, the first special economic zone of Albania from a planning viewpoint, to be replicated in a very few other areas of special national interest.

While some common architectural rules should be issued for the front lines of the axis in all the three sub areas, planning incentives should be varied from one sub-area to another. The red sub-area should receive the highest incentives and only top quality developments should be allowed there. Incentives should then decrease in the blue and green area but still remain at a significant level so as to mark a difference between being inside or not the enterprise zone. A buffer zone should be designed around the boundaries of the enterprise zone.

To kick off development along this axis, a number of single projects should be identified. The Albanian Government and the

Municipality of Tirana have activated a number of technical assistance program with various foreign governments and cities. For example, in 2012, Japan promoted in tandem with the city of Tirana, a technical transfer project entitled “Project for Tirana Thematic Urban Planning”. This study was expected to formulate short and medium term projects and programs on urban infrastructure. Similar projects sponsored by various foreign subjects should be asked to concentrate on this enterprise zone and should be utilized to identify direct foreign investments, primarily of an institutional nature, to which to allocate on a competitive basis a land parcel in the new development area, a piece of the “New Gate to Albania” as a necessary area for fostering bilateral relations.

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