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Vision and Imagination in Urban Planning

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Abstract

“Life is very complex. Don’t try to find the answers, because when you find them, life changes the questions.” (Unknown)

“I am enough of an artist to draw freely upon my imagination. Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited, whereas imagination embraces the entire world, stimulating progress, giving birth to evolution.” (Albert Einstein, 1924)

Within the realms of sustainable and resilient territorial and spatial (urban) planning, the pivotal role of Vision and Imagination emerges as a decisive factor for genuine and effective outcomes. Urban planning, inherently a technical tool, unfolds within a multidisciplinary framework that converges into a comprehensive synthesis of plans and explanatory materials. This complexity extends beyond a mere enumeration of stages or degrees of final approval, as the resultant framework is submitted to central or local governments. Their role encompasses not only adherence but also the oversight and control of the document’s execution, a document that serves as a guiding force for necessary transformations and investments in the planned territory. The objectives of planning primarily center around extensive terrains, necessitating prolonged periods of study and design. The implementation itself unfolds over a relatively extended timeline, commencing with the examination of local plans, urban development plans, city plans, and progressing to regional plans. Acknowledging the inherent dynamics and potential alterations in final indicators and goals during the sustainable and resilient planning processes, it becomes imperative to establish a vision early on. It is in this context of necessitated vision and imagination that we present our perspective in this paper.

Keywords: *Imagination Planning Resilient Sustainable Urban Vision Architecture / City / Form / Morphology / Postmodern*

Introduction

The material prepared for this symposium has an added emphasis on the meanings embedded in terms usually used in other disciplines, such as ‘VISION’ and ‘IMAGINATION’, in the knowledge and the production processes of urban planning. We stand by the notion that the concept of VISION lays at the axis of mid- to long-term urban planning. Vision here refers to the conceptual scheme of an imagined future in the urban environments. IMAGINATION is the medium in which to materialize this imagined future. An urban planner is not merely a technician, but a Visionary as well (‘looking-far’ is the key concept in the previous sentence to ‘urban planning’), and the course and outcome of urban development demand such foresight. For the practice of urban planning, this means that it is not sufficient to just look at statistics, at surveys and past precedents. Time is lived and, as a result, what has been collected as data becomes unreliable and too subject to specific events. It needs to be recast and viewed through a more visionary lens. ‘Life is very complicated. Don’t try to find the answer because when you

find the answer LIFE changes the question.' Here is where Vision comes in – subjective, but allowing us to add a touch of refinement to our understanding of the urban condition, connecting it to the ultimate goals of urban studies towards which we cobble our comparative findings. These principles map almost everywhere, from micro-scale local initiatives to the macro-scale of national strategic frameworks. Indeed, we could say that urbanism itself is visionary by nature. How Vision and Imagination have been used by some of the great urban designers throughout history to shape and define the built environment, is usefully illustrated in some classics of urban planning such as Lúcio Costa's 'CITY PLANNING OF BRASÍLIA' and Le Corbusier's 'VILLE RADIEUSE'. Although the latter has not been realized due to its modernist and technical futuristic utopian character, certain strands of it remain pertinent to the amazing developments in growing metropolises such as Dubai, for example. This was a visionary piece of work in that Le Corbusier looked ahead in terms of innovative circulation strategies and the provision of public spaces that could be accessible and used by the majority. Though there are many others, these two illustrations emphasize the way in which Vision and Imagination could change the shape of the modern metropolis.

Esteemed Colleagues

We, Eno and Gjergj, are proud to share this material with you, having been committed to engage in an honest and more pragmatic approach in the evaluation of the current challenges – and practice – of urban planning, with the aim of making the construction and development of our cities more sustainable. We've recently dived into some disruptive modern views through the lens of 'A Global Benchmark of Urban Risk, Response, and Recovery', looking at the 'Resilient Cities Index 2023'. Developed by the Tokio Marine Group and a team of international experts, this report analyzes the challenges that will characterize our cities up to 2050. According to its findings, two-thirds of the world's population will likely be living in urban areas by then, and thanks to the predictions of natural disasters such as floods and higher sea levels, much of that development will be under threat in the coming years. And yet, it is clear that this material has been gathered, organized, and analyzed very carefully, based on a variety of technical, economic, and environmental variables that also connect to urban development and spatial planning, and are embedded in questions of sustainability. Scientists, in particular, have been attentive and innovative here in drawing on their scientific knowledge and profitably using these insights to forge a path towards goals that, thankfully, rarely leave much room for error or random opportunity.

The number that jumped out at us was the 2050 timeline, which includes a vision for how things should be, especially in terms of basic need capacities in mega-cities that cannot currently financially support development in basic services and infrastructure – a significant problem in mega-cities in Africa and South-East Asia, though not for mega-cities in Europe traditionally. One-third the global population will be in mega-cities, including in countries below a 2 million population.

We feel a professional responsibility tempered by relief that we are acting in accordance with the needs of the times. Sure, we feel the weight of moral responsibility, but we can also feel the weight of cities lifting from our shoulders.

Sadly, there is little chance that we will see this type of serious Albanian government commitment to the science of territorial planning that would include studies of every type at all the scales. Prior to 1990, such a structure was almost in place, with urban studies (reversible in time) of every city, village or residential center, plus additions to old studies every 15 years and new studies for every generation. There were also regional and thematic national studies envisaged with a period of 25 years.

Therefore, today we have inherited cities with a highly concentrated but free-flown structure suitable for sustainable development, whereas small cities have grown down due to the depopulation that is

still ongoing for immigration reasons. One of the main factors of depopulation in Albania, is the opportunities for a life in an developed country, which has a greater weight for young Albanians. This brutal and unjustly uneven competition is creating a decided lack of vision in the way our cities prepare for change. A vision that guides investments and developments in all its aspects and in all sectors can help create opportunities for employment and a decent life for all inhabitants. The impact of urban planning, especially of the capital, is the greatest when there is a huge gap in income distribution.

The rise of a wealthy class which turned the ideal of a 'unified city' almost a utopian vision, is most evident in the capital city where you can feel the social disconnect, and notice the urbanization of large-scale gated living areas. Although ranked lower on Resilient Cities Index 2023, the 24/7 drinking water and sustainable integrated development is still lacking in the capital. Territorial and structural planning of the suburbs is missing beyond 'The Great Ring Road of Tirana', the ring road whose completion will change traffic patterns in the roads surrounding it.

More worrying is the lack of affordable family housing, both through lack of purpose-built housing and an excess of informal settlements. There is an intriguing phenomenon here which would bear investigation in order to explore underlying causes. The issue involves people moving into cheap rented dwellings, but also concerns broader social issues, especially in the megacities of Central and South America, and of Africa, where these problems are becoming profoundly serious.

Today is that pivotal moment to turn to the past to rediscover the "Great Ring Road of Tirana" and how it was conceived in the "Regulatory Plan of the City of Tirana", C.M. Decision No. 45 on 07/02/1990, one of the greatest utopian visions ever put into practice in Tirana. A utopia that became reality. Although, Boulevard 'Zogu I' which was planned to extend even more towards Paskuqan, Kamez and to the Mother Theresa Airport stands as a testament to the success of this regulatory plan. Still, this Plan remains a contribution to the urban planning and zoning of Tirana while promoting a sustainable development that never seemed to fade.

By finishing this task now, the Great Ring Road not only further solidifies the urban form to control movement trajectories but also creates a corridor for housing expansion to the more environmentally conducive areas in the east and the northeast of Tirana. This way, the city is made denser and greener, and thus leads to more controlled development. Whether this direction-setting for housing development will be materialized by meticulous planning and studies remains to be seen. How eager and capable the local government is will also be a determining factor of achieving this grand Vision.

Meanwhile, at the same time some alarming trends emerge. The unintentional efficient forms and direction, without any serious local studies and a solid vision, created the strange phenomena of skyscrapers built in the center of the capital, the unexplained phenomenon of building housing, mass buying of newly built apartments without being lived in, and increased real-estate rates in areas where people live. These phenomena must be thoroughly explained by the relevant authorities and the state councils, though surely they seem not relevant to the discussed goals in this paper. These phenomena, however, are part of the reality of what is taking place in Tirana.

The city where Tirana ranks as second weakest for development in Europe and fourth weakest in the world – meanwhile, its population is only going to continue rising in the years to come. The city urgently needs help in managing its growth in sustainable and self-reliant ways.

Basic human needs are still unmet These include 24/7 supply of drinking water and green spaces and playgrounds, especially for vulnerable age groups, public health and air quality, people's wellbeing and, in general, how people live. Again, Tirana performs below the European average. We're also losing valuable open spaces, parks and green areas, especially in the inner-city zones. It goes without saying that air-quality data exceeds the level considered acceptable by specialized agencies of the Council of Europe.

Compounding this situation are the glaring challenges of a structural absence of vision 'for what kind of Albania do we want to live in.' The intricate and critical realities of two key phenomena, both the large demographic shifts and the consequences of the changing urbanization dynamics, must be carefully analyzed and critiqued.

Despite the urgent need to produce data-driven insights, as of yet the official announcement of the 2023 Census indicators – including those relevant to urban development, such as the flows of population and changes in building status – are pending. Unofficial announcements state that the tendency is upward as far as the population of Tirana is concerned. And it is in fact growing, as the population of Tirana will reach 1 million inhabitants. Most importantly, this reporting is an alert as to the increasing concentration of residents in one city, while the rest of the population of the country is spread thin over the territory. Every year an additional 25,000 residents (more than the actual increase in the population in the whole country) populate Tirana. This is the second alarming demographic marker: an alarming demographic indicator is accentuated by the phenomenon of emigration among the working-age population.

We stand on the threshold of an era in which the sustainable development of cities, villages and any residential centers is at a standstill. Building or renovating houses in regions outside the coastal zones is merely a temporary solution to this grave problem. This evaluation might come across as pessimistic, but it unfortunately reflects the truth. However, the foundations of sustainable construction and development are still hopeful almost entirely in the zones of the Adriatic-Ionian coastline and the tourism centers.

Taking all these factors into account, we believe that there is more need than ever before for urban planning and studies, especially for long-term visions, and present multi-year urban development perspective of Tirana and the tourist hubs, which if implemented and respected with strict conditions, will definitely have a positive impact on the economy of Albania. It is indeed a very difficult task to anticipate until 2050 about urban developments, but this task is crucial for urban planners (architects, urban experts, researchers, etc.). We realize that we are lacking on some areas due to being deprived of accurate data often not available officially, and as much as we can do and would like to do, we aim to deconstruct the urban phenomena in the most realistic manner possible.

What is worrying, however, is the lack of any visionary studies for the long-term development of Tirana being a case in point. Not only is Tirana an emblematic model of short-term political decision making, it mirrors large trends and developments in the built structure of large urban areas, their ecological impact and process of environmental pollution. Today, the preservation of the natural environment is establishing itself as one of the most urgent global issues of our times, and it comes with important consequences for urbanisation and the preservation of the habitats.

Although there are environmental agencies and NGOs in Albania, there's still the glaring lack of state institutions that can take some real action and invest in the environment, and there's still the glaring lack of a real vision to deal with this issue that's global. We need to work together and start thinking together. As such, by concentrating efforts and unified decision-making, we can tackle environmental challenges and chart a sustainable future of our cities and our ecosystems.

The negligence and inaction seen in all environmental issues, especially along the coast, demand visionary approaches especially to Coastal Buildings Visions. It's saddening, up to date, that a unified sewage along the coastline has never been linked. Past and current environmental problems have continued to exist.

Most recently and most poignantly, approval of the construction of the Skavice Hydropow-

er Plant (HEC) was granted by the government. This took place despite the wishes of the residents of the region in the Peshkopia district in Kosovo, and despite their request for a referendum on the issue. The referendum was later rejected in early 2019 by the Constitutional Court. Building large dams in natural water flows has now become an approach rejected by scientific consensus and by most countries, and increasingly rejected because of its severe environmental impact. Building the future on top of a half-destroyed history is unsustainable. The new model would need to address more than the massive depopulation that is evident today, and its accompanying forced displacement, but also would need to protect the cultural, social and personal heritage that carries the DNA of these people. Respecting such heritages is not the same as defining and interpreting these through statistical 'facts per thousand'. We must recognize the living spiritual and sociological dimensions that exist in these communities.

Our massive unskilled emigration to Europe today presents an even bigger dilemma and marks deep contradiction for the Albanian state. Albania has aimed at a rapid and comprehensive economic development, in the absence of abundant energy resources. Now, the circumstances warrant a change, and the government must acknowledge this, and it must develop a more nuanced and balanced development vision. As are the many manifestations of the newly emerging global consensus. This change in thinking requires a paradigm shift towards a more sustainable and forward-looking approach, which rests upon four important pillars

Utilization of Alternative Energy Sources- We need to continue to adopt renewable energy solutions, which can both reduce the dependency on non-renewable sources and minimize pollution resulting from the actual production of energy.

Preservation of Natural Environments- We need to save our natural ecosystems for continued human life on Earth. This means maintaining biodiversity, preserving biomes, and reversing deforestation and habitat degradation.

Protection of Human Habitats- In light of modern awareness of the interdependency between human settlements and the natural environment, it is now of great urgency to serve in shielding communities from intrusive interventions, depopulation pressures and negative impacts of urban agglomeration, and to facilitate sustainable and adaptive urban planning oriented towards resiliency and inclusivity.

Responsible Urban Replanning- Urban planning has to be reflective of environmental stewardship. If we integrate environmental sustainability with the blueprint of residential constructions, we could effectively turn our homes into self-regulated ecosystems that are low on ecological footprints and high on quality of life.

Given these visionary mandates, the approval of projects that run counter to this spirit – like the construction of HPPs based on outdated, environmentally damaging modalities that negatively affect local ecosystems and displace communities – becomes unacceptable. It is counter to the general trend of sustainable development. This illustrates the fluid nature of Vision and Imagination, and how they require ongoing adjustment and fine-tuning the requirement to continually respond to a changing social context, advances in technology, and environmental necessities. Visions must continue to grow as humanity grows, so we can develop a more sustainable and equitable future.