

Reclaiming Urban Space: Gordon Matta-Clark's Artistic Approach to the Peripheral Neighborhoods

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Abstract - This study examines the interaction of art works and architectural interventions by Gordon Matta-Clark in the context of Tirana, analyzing through his practice the destruction of areas of the city for requalification, a relatively recent phenomenon known as gentrification in Tirana. The main question of this research is how Matta-Clark's creativity can serve as a fruitful resource for understanding urban change and advances in formal sustainability.

While Tirana in recent years has experienced urban development, the city is challenging similar problems that important cities like New York have experienced during the 60s and 70s. The history of the city and the social issues are different, but still there are some similarities, especially in the case of gentrification. These problems were addressed by artists who aimed to create a dialogue between community rights and public authorities. Referred to that, Matta Clark's art practice can be seen as a way for dealing with those issues.

Matta-Clark's approach challenges the boundaries of the routed belief of the role of architecture; he challenges the fixed rules of architecture by focusing on deconstruction and community involvement. By using his works as a method to analyze urban space, this research investigates the artistic and social dimensions of architecture, urban voids, and the potential of temporary abandoned spaces to foster community engagement. The research examines the potential of Matta-Clark's methods in the context of Tirana's urban requalification.

Keywords

Art, Periphery, Social Structure, Space

Introduction - Our research focuses on the controversial act of deconstruction in architecture and the simultaneous construction of spaces that are well embodied in our collective memory, especially in the urban context of Tirana, Albania. The various protagonists that appear in this writing often intertwine and identify with the role of the architect as an artist and the artist as an architect; in this sense, for these artists and artworks, it is common to discuss architecture, buildings, and the act of construction of public space in the urban context. In the urban space there are roads, bridges, residential spaces, commercial spaces, service spaces, and many others. The spaces

that accompany man from prehistory to today have a common purpose, that of protection from natural elements. They have functioned as social structures of community society, especially living spaces. The archetype of the house or living space for a long time in the history of man has not been a sedentary place but a mobile place organized by the community, such as the Mongolian Yurt. When the community becomes sedentary and does not move, rooting itself in the fixed space, the need arises to organize common spaces and urban planning. Consequently, these also bring with them the challenges of contemporary society, adapting to the rules of community life. Or even problems

with areas in development and areas forgotten by investments—problems visible in contemporary cities around the world. The theoretical framework of this study starts from the concept of «anarchitecture», (Folland, 2019) a concept developed by Gordon Matta-Clark in 1973. Matta-Clark considered architecture not as rigid and static forms but as structures in continuous metamorphosis, formed by community actions. His interventions often involved cutting or modifying buildings to be demolished, challenging traditional notions of architecture. These structures became symbols of sustainability in the face of the urban gentrification of New York at the time (70s), existing in a different status, not that of the initial function but that of a fluid structure in continuous metamorphosis. In other cases, his interventions aimed to create what he calls "social structures" that did not destroy but built a place to serve the community. In Tirana, many buildings are awaiting demolition for several reasons; they can be just in the way of a project by the municipality for urban requalification, or the owners aren't living there due to emigration, or the owners are waiting for builders that offer more profitable properties like apartments in excess of the land. They provide an ideal environment in which to implement Matta-Clark's methodology. These buildings, which have long been forgotten, are significant both as a communal emblem and as a representation of urban growth. The gentrification of Tirana and the sociopolitical climate that influenced Matta-Clark's art in New York throughout

the 1970s provide an intriguing comparison. The purpose of this study is to investigate how Matta-Clark's work may impact modern urban initiatives, increase awareness of Tirana's potential for social sustainability.

Theoretical Framework: Anarchitecture and Temporality

Gordon Matta-Clark's introduction of the concept of "anarchitecture" questions the very idea of architecture as a fixed and permanent structure. His interventions between art and architecture are a criticism of the built environment of the time.

His works often dealt with buildings on the verge of collapse, spaces in transition. Matta-Clark's use of a multidisciplinary approach between architecture and art, as well as his own academic training, allows us to understand his works as a way of urban perception, focusing on the artistic elements of civic spaces and their potential impact on citizen awareness. Combining the artist's work with urban studies and sustainability offers a different perspective for analysing the interaction between art and urban environment. In regards of Matta-Clark work the art historian Rosalind Krauss wrote in 1979 this statement:

«Rather surprising things have come to be called sculpture: narrow corridors with TV monitors at the ends; large photographs documenting country hikes; mirrors placed at strange angles in ordinary rooms; temporary lines cut into the floor of the desert.» (Krauss, 1979)



Fig1 / Graphic representation of Gordon Matta - Clark art-practice, cutting; source / curtesy of the author.



Fig2 / Graphic representation of Gordon Matta - Clark art-practice, cutting; second part source / Courtesy of the author

4.4 She saw a connection between *Land Art's* intervention and Matta-Clark art practice. The artist himself had witnessed the negative impact of the urban modernization on his neighborhood in Manhattan, leading him to create some of his most famous works during the 70s. They were temporary works (interventions) created by saving and cutting sections of buildings, which in most cases were programmed to be demolished, he named them "anarchitecture", as Thomas Folland tells us, it was a phrase that embodied a meaning which came from the words anarchy and architecture. In his works there is a kind of melancholy associated with nostalgia, his artistic practice focuses on the understanding of social structures. (Folland, 2019)

Gordon Matta-Clark's theory is based on buildings and infrastructure «*should be in perpetual metamorphosis by virtue of people continually acting on the space that surrounds them*». (Pobric, 2017)

This statement, as well as the artistic understanding of his work, reveal the fundamental linkages between Matta-Clark's works' meanings and their fit for Tirana's sustainable aspirations. The artist's works help to comprehend the evolution of urban development by emphasizing the use of abandoned spaces and community participation in the formation of the urban environment. Starting with anarchitecture as a concept, there are two main subjects to be considered:

- The first is that building structures (those to be demolished) which have different time-space relation. So, in terms

of temporality differ from each other. It is important to understand what meaning these structures hold for the community's perspective.

- And the second one is anarchy—by this, it is understood the act of destroying. Firstly, let's discuss about the meaning of this building structures and the effect of their presence in the urban context to people.

Buildings are more than just physical structures; beyond the function of shelter, they hold an emotional and psychological connection between inhabitants/communities and environment, basically dwelling itself is an important aspect to human's existence.

According to Heidegger, Architecture, serves as a manifestation of human existence, shaping and evolving alongside human activities, gradually giving buildings personal significance. (Heidegger, 2006) The buildings are the manifestation of existence. Thus, structures that are left inhabited or witnessing the act of demolition shakes the existence of a person. This feeling is as during an earthquake or after the war, where the inhabitant holds memories to that place and use to serve as a nest, the meaning of his existence takes another significance.

His work seeks to pay attention to these spaces as public spaces, which are continuously shaped by human actions and social changes. In a way, this opens new ways to urban sustainability and community participation, challenging urban planning approaches and the role of art in shaping public discourse on these topics. Through the theoretical

concepts of anarchitecture and its use of temporality, destruction, and social structures, it is possible to investigate the relation between architecture and community and a nuanced understanding of urban developments. The temporal nature of these buildings, which are awaiting destruction, becomes a focal point. The question then arises: What meaning do these structures hold for the communities that live around them? Matta-Clark's interventions, with their ephemeral nature, bring into question the permanence of architecture and the socio-political implications of its destruction.

Case Study: Artistic Destruction and Reinterpretation

One of Matta-Clark's most notable contributions to this discourse is his act of cutting into buildings, which he used to expose and challenge the underlying structures of architecture. His interventions emphasized contradictions in architecture by deconstructing the physical space and questioning notions of permanence and function. His work was always a testimony of its engagement with the community and public space. The idea of continues transformation and meeting point where dialogue and exchanges of ideas were possible parts of its work, he thought that even food can be a catalyst for it. He opened in 1971 an artist-run restaurant called 'Food' in SoHo, New York. (fakewhale, 2024) That he used as a way to reconnect everyday life with art; in doing so, he was criticizing the commercialization of urban space. But Matta Clark's approach is better known

for interventions in architecture where destruction cannot be avoided because it is precisely one of the motivations that push the artist to react. It is important to note that his practice was not solely focused on destruction but also on reimagining and repurposing. In the early stages of his 'anarchitecture' projects, these were not actions in themselves but rather weekly gatherings of artist friends who engaged in discussions about the meaning and nature of architecture. Works like "Splitting" (1974) or the "Office Baroque" project in Antwerp, Belgium (1977), provide new perspectives on how public spaces can be perceived. These works had a temporary nature, and as such, they now exist only through documentation—photographs, videos, and in some cases, through displacement, as with "Bingo" (1974), where a portion of a building's facade was removed and exhibited in a museum. (MoMA, 2024) In this case, the intimate act of destruction was transformed into one of preservation. Matta Clark's work, alongside that of other contemporary artists who have similarly engaged with the transformation of architectural and urban elements, considers several key factors in the composition of their work. These include: Deconstruction: through the act of destruction to emphasizes contradictions in architecture from the fixed and strict norms in architecture. Ephemerality and Impermanence: emphasizing the existential meaning of these structures and the inevitable cyclical change. As provocation: to challenge the notion of authority, ownership, and questioning who has the right to decide about the fate

of a building. Re interpretation: by giving another meaning to an existing building Transgressive aesthetics, to challenge societal taboos and conventions. All of these incentives give in the end a different perspective to urban context and reshaping it. It is valuable for this study to examine various artists who have employed a similar approach. One essential artist for our discussion is David Hammons, whose works consistently challenge community concepts by raising questions about gender, class, and the dysfunctions of modern economics. His engagement with memory and urban space is particularly evident in his work "Day's End" (2014-21), which is based on a piece of the same name by Gordon Matta-Clark. Matta-Clark's "Day's End" (1975) was set in an abandoned warehouse on Pier 52, a structure slated for demolition. The artist transformed the space by cutting various sections open—some facing the sky, others toward the city, and still others toward the river. He turned the space into a gigantic, temporary installation, where the interplay of light and shadows created by the sun gave the structure a sundial-like quality. Those transformations of space changed the perception and function of that space, turning it into a center of relaxation and reflection for the community. It became a place to spend time with other people where light and shadows organized the passage of time. In this work, Matta-Clark's artistic practice involved making cuts, but his intention was to create a space for the community. David Hammons reinterprets and recreates the piece with the same objective, though with different methods. Hammons draws from the original for both its title and location—his installation is positioned on the very site of Matta-Clark's original work, which was demolished 40 years earlier. What Hammons creates is an exact replica of the original structure in terms of dimensions, but made of open, metallic frames. His work becomes a ghostly reconstruction of a past building, a reminder of a different city and a different time. In this way, the structure of the building turns into a memorial not of the original work but a memorial of the culture of those years. It is heavy and light at the same time. It imposes itself on memory as a reminder not to forget, not to lose the textures, culture, and memories of the past. (Art, 2021) Meanwhile, staying on memory and form, Rachel Whiteread is one artist who has used the physical characteristics of a building that no longer exists as a memory of that place to reshape the urban context.

In "House" (1993), one of her most well-known creations, the artist created a concrete cast of the interior of an East London Victorian terrace house that was going to be demolished. (Houser, 2001) The resulting sculpture preserved the negative space of the building, capturing the memory and history of the structure before its destruction, her work is an approach for social space. To not forget an artistic operation with notable precedents in art history such as *Le Plein* by Arman Fernandez, where he filled the Iris Clert gallery in Paris completely with debris, rendering it inaccessible to the public, or Yves Klein, who invited the audience to enter in his exhibition *Le Vide* and consider emptiness as full. Rachel Whiteread physically reverses emptiness as full. And continuing with the well-known duo Christo and Jeanne-Claude, their work "Wrapped Reichstag" involves the wrapping or covering of structures, such as *Wrapped Reichstag* in Berlin (1995); the act of temporarily concealing architecture can be seen as a form of alteration or transformation. Becoming the building in its different features as a landmark. All temporary interventions undertaken by Christo and Jeanne-Claude aim to reevaluate the object through covering; as they are transient in nature, they do not compromise spatial integrity over time. (Jeanne-Claude, 1995) Of course, there are many other artists who have worked in similar ways, but those are some good examples of artworks that can provide an example of urban intervention in requalification and use of temporary spaces for community engagements.

Application to Peripheral Neighborhoods: Urban Evolution and Community Engagement - The artist's artworks help comprehending the evolution of urban development by emphasizing the use of abandoned spaces and community participation in the formation of the urban environment. In Tirana, many buildings are left in a state of limbo, awaiting demolition. In Tirana there are a lot of buildings that are in the process of being demolished or abandoned. But they differ from each other due to their temporality/ relational time-space/ the act of waiting to be demolished. These buildings are objects in an undefined temporal space. This time before the final extinction time is meaningful and emerges diverse shapes of architecture that are closely related to an important factor: event. Typically, interventions have been for the reuse of spaces that have functioned as community hubs or



Fig3 / David Hammons "Day's End," 2021.
source / Retrieved by Whitney Museum of American Art



Fig4 / Gordon Matta-Clark, "Day's End," 1975
source / The Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark; and David Zwirner, New York/London/Hong Kong.
Retrieved by Momus.ca

as social facilities, transforming them into small cultural islands on the outskirts of the city; for example, there was once a cultural center called Tirana Ekspres where the new Boulevard is located today. Or how the place known as the tractor factory near Tirana still exists today. Both of these structures continue to function, but, in the case of the first, with a change of location and faded from the vitality that once characterized it. And the second continues more as an effort that is reactivated from time to time. At its peak, Tirana Ekspres, housed in a former warehouse that once served as part of a goods station during the communist era at the end of the railway station, played a pivotal role in the city's cultural scene. The surrounding area was predominantly inhabited by residents with limited economic means who had found refuge in various adjacent warehouses, forming a community microclimate. Tirana Ekspres itself became a critical nerve center for cultural life, hosting numerous exhibitions, discussions, concerts, and workshops. Similar to Gordon Matta-Clark's *'Day's End,'* the space functioned as a continually evolving installation, and, like Matta-Clark's work, it was ultimately dismantled to make way for urban development. Several projects took place at Tirana Ekspres, including Ilir Kaso's visual project *'MUR,'* where the artist projected the word *'Mur'* (wall) onto the building's façade at dusk. The projection appeared as a fissure, behind which selected films were shown, turning the wall into a catalyst for both the artistic community and local residents. This space thus served as a form of resistance against the gentrification of the area. In the case of the tractor factory on Tirana's outskirts, the site forms part of a conglomerate of buildings erected during the heroic communist period. These structures still stand, serving as reminders of the past, though they now await demolition to be replaced by residential towers or commercial centers. It is only thanks to human interaction that these spaces have been able to exist as public spaces, even for a limited time. According to the author Henri Lefebvre, public space is a by-product of human relations, which underlines its symbolic importance as a place to exchange collective meanings. (Lefebvre, 1968) Although these examples are not direct replicas of Matta-Clark's "anarchitecture," they reflect his core idea of community involvement in shaping the urban environment. These temporary cultural spaces, born from abandoned or neglected buildings, embody social structures accepted



Fig5 / The images show the status of the building before and after
source / Rachel Whiteread, House, 1993



Fig6 / Images showing the process of destruction to make room for new buildings in the peripheral neighborhoods of Tirana.
source / Ballkan Web 2019

and used by the community for the community. Residents' resistance to gentrification processes has often been accompanied by violent acts of violence and performative acts, independently made by activists and artists. The areas known as Astiri and 5 Maji have long been emblems of civil resistance against central and local policies for radical change in the area. Urban development policies in these cases served to eradicate the microsocial climate, which was composed of the roots, the belonging, and the culture of the community. The community's resistance lasted for months, evolving into a significant topic within civil society concerning the rights of residents to determine the character of public space.

Matta-Clark's Legacy and Implications for Sustainable Urbanism

The fundamental linkages between Matta-Clark's artistic understanding and Tirana's peripheral sustainable aspirations are clear. His works provide a framework for rethinking how urban spaces can evolve through the active participation of communities, emphasizing the use of abandoned structures as a resource for sustainable development. By applying his concepts to Tirana, we gain insights into how art can help foster more inclusive and environmentally conscious urban planning. Gordon Matta-Clark's artistic practice can be applied in various peripheral areas, particularly in neighborhoods subjected to gentrification, which remain in a state of anticipation. For example, in the 5 May area, where urban disarray is particularly evident, interventions involving cutouts could introduce new perspectives on visibility. The public space created would return to the community as a gathering place for the exchange of experiences. Conversely, if we note that the Uzina Traktorit partially still stands, we can make a similar observation regarding the Tirana Ekspres building. Located nearby is a large parking lot for buses and a green area of the new boulevard. Following the example of David Hammons' *'Day's End,'* it would be prudent to replicate this work but in the likeness of the now non-existent Tirana Ekspres building. In both versions of *'Day's End,'* both Matta-Clark's and Hammons', the Tirana Ekspres building would find several parallels. Similar to the first iteration of the work, Tirana Ekspres has served as a neuralgic center for the community and the artistic scene. It has also undergone metamorphosis and was abandoned only when people were evicted from it for its destruction. In the

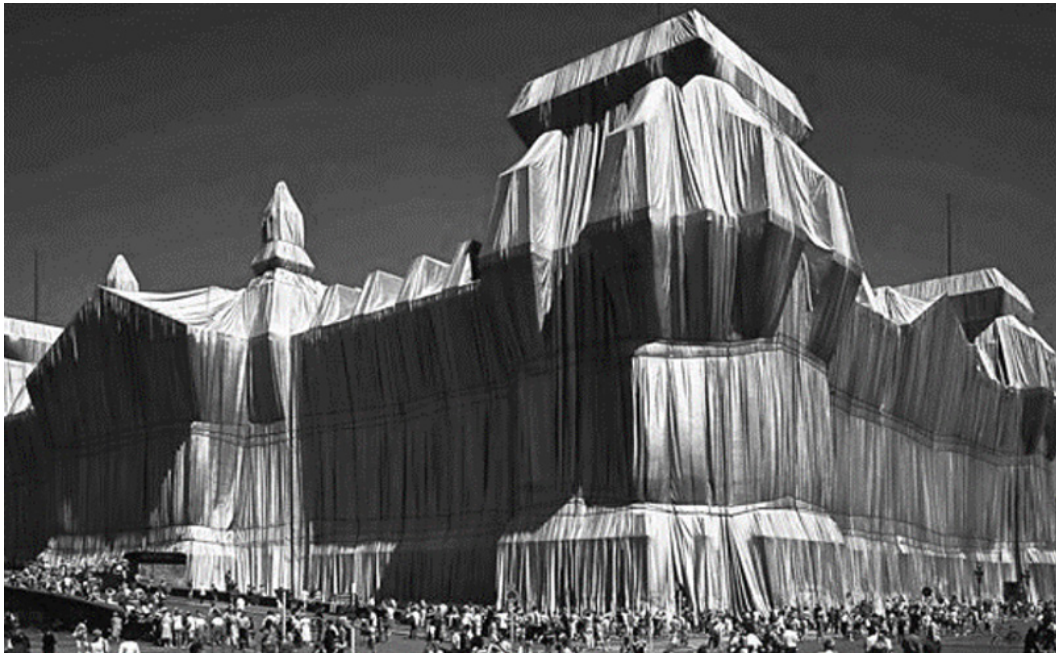


Fig7 / "Wrapped Reichstag"
source / Christo and Jeanne-Claude, 1995



Fig8 / Tirana Ekspres, and the Wall project, artistic project of Ilir Kaso, 2012
source /Endri Dani, 2012

second case, that of Hammons, Tirana Ekspres would function as an open space that would thrive due to the monumental symbolism inherent in its history. Stability and continuity would be ensured. To draw a parallel, this memorial would be, as Ardian Vehbiu describes the Sahat Tower of Tirana, a witness to the cultural and social processes that have transpired. Nonetheless, these interventions would carry a touch of melancholy, as in most cases they would possess ephemeral and temporary characteristics. Primarily, they would continue to exist through documentation via photographs, videos, and books. Even when constructed, they would still relate to the nostalgic memory of a bygone era.

Conclusion

This study underscores the importance of using art as a tool for understanding and reimagining urban development. Gordon Matta-Clark's "anarchitecture" provides a method for critiquing the static nature of architecture and promoting a more dynamic, community-driven approach to urban sustainability. The application of Matta-Clark's practices to Tirana reveals new possibilities for sustainable living and urban planning. As Tirana continues to evolve, his work serves as a reminder of the power of art to challenge conventional structures and inspire meaningful social change. In rethinking these abandoned or transitional spaces, we encourage a deeper connection between citizens and the urban environment, ultimately fostering a more sustainable and inclusive future. The study offers an additional perspective on Tirana by utilizing Gordon Matta-Clark's works to comprehend the breadth and complexities of civic development. Through this artistic reading, the research helps to promote urban awareness and citizens' active connection with the place in which they live. In conclusion, this study emphasizes the necessity of using art as a resource to better understand urban developments and encourage more inclusive and sustainable living. Gordon Matta-Clark's works, taken as a reading tool for Tirana, can lead to new and enhanced advancements in the fields of urban planning and formal sustainability.

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