



Dipartimento
Architettura
Ferrara

BOOK OF PROCEEDINGS

2nd INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON HOUSING, PLANNING, AND RESILIENT DEVELOPMENT OF THE TERRITORY

TOWARDS EURO-MEDITERRANEAN PERSPECTIVES

OCTOBER 16th-17th, 2025

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2nd International Conference on Housing, Planning, and Resilient Development of the Territory

Towards Euro-Mediterranean Perspectives

Conference Theme and Rationale

This conference returned for the second time within the Albanian and Mediterranean academic context, aiming to build a tradition of collaboration centered on scientific research and academia. Following the success of the first edition held on October 13th-14th, 2023, where proceedings were published in the Book of Proceedings, Albanica journal, and various international academic platforms, POLIS University and the Academy of Sciences of Albania relaunched this important event. The 2025 edition focused on housing, urban planning, and resilient territorial development, offering a platform for researchers, policymakers, and experts from the region and beyond.

Albania and the Western Balkans have faced major transformations in urbanization, spatial planning, and environmental management. Demographic changes, economic pressures, and environmental challenges created a need for new strategies in architecture, planning, and governance. This conference brought together diverse voices to explore these themes and promote resilient and sustainable development.

Key topics included architecture and the city, with emphasis on urban form, housing typologies, and the role of cultural heritage in modern urban design; urban mobility, addressing traffic challenges, public transport, and the use of technologies like GIS and AI in planning; and new housing models, focusing on affordability, energy efficiency, and innovative materials.

Discussions also covered demography and economy, exploring territorial governance, smart cities, social enterprises, and digital technologies such as AI, VR, and the Metaverse in urban management. Finally, the urban and natural environment was addressed through topics like pollution, adaptive planning, and nature-based solutions for climate resilience.

Through this conference, POLIS University and the Academy of Sciences of Albania aimed to foster a broad interdisciplinary debate on these pressing issues, combining academic and practical perspectives to offer concrete recommendations for future urban and territorial development policies and projects.

Organizers' Announcement

The International Scientific Conference on Housing, Urban Planning, and Resilient Territorial Development: Toward Euro-Mediterranean Approaches was held on October 16th-17th, 2025, in Tirana, Albania. Organized by POLIS University in collaboration with the Academy of Sciences of Albania and supported by national and international partners, including the University of Ferrara and Co-PLAN, Institute for Habitat Development, the event brought together researchers, academics, policymakers, and professionals to address key challenges in urban development, with a focus on resilience and sustainability in the Euro-Mediterranean region. The first day of the conference took place at the Academy of Sciences, while the second day was hosted at POLIS University.

The conference explored five main themes:

- I. Architecture and the City, which investigated the typological and morphological dimensions of urban form, the evolution of collective and individual housing types, the relationship between architectural design and urban identity, and the role of historical and cultural heritage in shaping contemporary cities;
- II. Urban Mobility and Resilient Cities, which addressed traffic congestion, infrastructure challenges, and public transportation, while also promoting the redesign of public spaces – such as streets, squares, and pedestrian zones – to improve accessibility and mobility; it also explored the integration of digital technologies like GIS, AI, and simulation tools to enhance planning, automation, and infrastructure management;
- III. New Housing Models, which examined innovative approaches to affordable and social housing in response to demographic shifts and technological change, along with energy efficiency strategies, passive energy systems, and the application of new sustainable materials and construction technologies;
- IV. Demography and Economy, which focused on macro-regional and national dynamics impacting territorial development, including urban governance, disaster risk reduction, and the rise of smart and inclusive cities; it also explored how emerging technologies – such as AI, VR, and the Metaverse – along with social enterprises and circular economy practices, could foster more equitable and adaptive urban systems; and
- V. Urban and Natural Environment, which analyzed environmental degradation in urban settings, including air, water, and soil pollution, and promoted nature-based solutions, ecosystem-based planning, and adaptive strategies to enhance environmental sustainability and climate resilience.

The conference was conducted in English and Albanian (with self-translated texts where applicable) and was free of charge, with all registration fees fully covered by POLIS University in support of open academic exchange. Key deadlines included abstract submission by June 15th, acceptance notification by June 30th, first draft of papers by September 15th, and final submissions by October 31st.

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I. Architecture and the City: Architectural, Typological and Morphological aspects of Settlement Form

From building to city form: Tools and approaches in shaping the urban fabric, in relation to new constructions and historical/urban heritage.

Typologies of collective and individual housing / History of cities and architecture /
Architectural design: Morphology and form.

Urban regeneration and conservation / Cultural and historical heritage / Regenerative
approaches to design and adaptive reuse of spaces.

Durrës After Transition: Urban Identity at the Edge of Time, Tourism, and Transformation

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Abstract

Durrës has been a city in constant transformation since the 1990s, particularly following the fall of communism in Albania. Uncontrolled construction, particularly in the tourist zones, especially along the coastal zone extending to Kavaja, was triggered by this important historical turning point. Throughout this entire period, extending from the 1990s up to the present day, the city has experienced an uncontrollable and ongoing era of urban transition, losing some essential aspects of its historic identity and gradually becoming a hybrid city that combines elements of tourism, informality, and endangered history. Once recognised widely as a clear representation of a city with a history spanning thousands of years, Durrës is now increasingly a site of conflict between urban expansion, cultural heritage, mass tourism, and real estate investment. All these transformations have significantly and visibly affected the character of the city, overshadowing its historical core and its valuable cultural heritage, thereby deeply impacting its image and the values it embodies. Despite the fact that Durrës has undergone substantial physical and social changes over the years, it has consistently managed to attract a large number of tourists and investors from around the world. Through a variety of targeted and multifaceted marketing strategies intended to highlight and promote the city's attractive features, this phenomenon has effectively sparked major reactions on social media platforms. However, this promotional approach tends to overshadow the deeper and underlying issues that the city is currently facing, positioning it as an urban space in a transitional state between modernity and postmodernity. The aim of the research is to carefully analyse how the city's physical and symbolic image has changed over time to reflect its current situation and what this transformation ultimately represents in relation to the broad social and economic context in which it is taking place.

Keywords

Urban identity, city image, cultural heritage, tourism

1. Introduction

1.1. A glimpse of history

Durrës is known for a three-thousand-year history as one of the most important cities in the region, in terms of its geographical position, port, cultural, political, and economic role. It has always been the gateway to Albania and a trade hub between East and West. It is also important to mention the cultural and urban heritage from antiquity to the present day. The city's space has been significantly impacted by every historical era, including the Ancient, Byzantine, Ottoman, Italian, and Communist periods. Examples include the Castle Walls, the Amphitheatre, the Venetian Tower, "Liria" Square, the City Hall, and more. However, amid the 1990s and the fall of communism, urban changes took a completely unexpected turn: the coastal area's rapid expansion, as well as the population of the former "Keneta" and "Spitalla"¹ area. From 1992 until 2000, national and municipal urban administration failed, resulting in informal settlements (Misja & Misja, 2004).

The internal migration that occurred from the North and East regions was one of the main causes of this phenomenon (Figure 1). Being known as Albania's principal port city and the country's second-most important city after Tirana, this might attract entrepreneurs and individuals who came to the city for greater opportunities in the future. The exact same thing applies for newcomers who purchased homes near the city centre, considering the area as an appropriate replacement for Tirana that may provide an urban lifestyle at a more affordable cost. The city's social and physical attributes witnessed transformations as the result of these developments. On the other hand, the added pressure of tourism generated a sharp contrast between the recent established urban areas and the historical legacy. Due to this process, Durrës offers a unique case for understanding the way urban layers interact with the challenges of the post-socialist transition.



Figure 1. Migration to the city of Durrës by area of origin.

Source: Albanian Stats (2023).

¹ Spitala and Këneta are two neighboring areas located in the western part of Durrës, Albania, close to the industrial and port areas of the city.

1.2. Analysis of the Transformation of Urban Image

The physical transformation of the post-socialist city of Durrës was marked by the spread of informal settlements along the city's outskirts, replacing agricultural land, while the central areas were dominated by high-rise buildings built at the expense of the public green spaces that had characterized the socialist period. The focus will be on urban transformations relating to the city centre and the coastline area because peripheral urban transformations are beyond the purpose of this study. Locations nearby the city's main plaza, "Liria", the beachfront and "Taulantia" promenade, "Aleksandër Goga" Street, "Dyrrah" Boulevard, and especially the sloping area along the coast and Royal Residence hill, were obviously of the greatest interest to investors. With profit maximization as the main objective of developers, a wave of high-rise construction emerged without much consideration for historically significant areas of the city, including the surroundings of the Royal Villa, the Roman-era Amphitheatre, and the inner districts of the old city. One of the earliest documented cases of public opposition to such developments in the 2000s was the construction of the "Fly" Building near the Port of Durrës. The controversy stemmed from its proximity to the Venetian Tower and the castle walls, as well as its placement atop a historic wall in an area known for its rich archaeological heritage (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Portiku Bar, "Fly" Building.

Source: Tripadvisor (2016).

In many cases, multi-storey apartment blocks with impressive designs have been built in the city centre without adhering to a comprehensive urban regulation, as building permits have been granted through so-called "partial urban plans". In Durrës, this planning approach has produced a hybrid urban structure, where old detached houses from the periods of Ottoman, Albanian and Italian occupation coexist with large post-socialist buildings and mid-sized modern structures from the socialist era (Manahasa, 2023). Some of the city's most important historical sites have been overshadowed by the size and intensity of post-socialist developments, creating an unbalanced image of the city and weakening its urban character. Furthermore, the construction of unauthorized detached houses - a number of which were later legalized - near historical monuments has damaged the city's aesthetic image and, consequently, its sense of urban identity.

2. Durrës in historical layers

This study's morphological analysis of a major central and coastal area of Durrës aims to examine the city's urban character by presenting three urban phases: the pre-socialist, socialist, and post-socialist.

2.1. The pre-socialist urban layer

The pre-socialist urban layer is connected to the historic core of the city, including monuments from antiquity, as well as architectural heritage from the Ottoman, Albanian Kingdom and Italian occupation periods. Due to its low-rise structure and antique ornamental decorations, these buildings can be easily identified. There are two primary types of buildings from this era: public and residential. The residential structure includes low-rise apartment blocks dating from the Kingdom and Italian occupation periods, along with detached dwellings preserved from the Ottoman era. Notably, along the "*Mercantile Street*", some buildings display neoclassical features, while structures erected after 1926 reflect the stylistic principles of Italian Rationalism (Semini et al., 2014).

Private houses, which are primarily deteriorating and in poor condition based on our observations, cannot be stated to be in the same condition as the majority of low-rise apartment buildings. Because of their public character, the majority of the buildings on "*Mercantile Street*" are used primarily for ground-floor commercial operations. Large windows and vaults that have ornamentation and often serve as tunnels connecting the inner neighborhood to the street, were highlights of the ground floors.

Since the "Plazhi"² zone had not yet established as a dense urban district, the pre-socialist layer there is less noticeable than in the historical center. Rather, there were few summer residences and a largely undeveloped beach.

2.2. The socialist urban layer

Buildings constructed after World War II until the regime's overthrow in the 1990s are included in the socialist period urban layer. Most of these are low-rise structures designed to support a socialist lifestyle based on equality and collectivism. The socialist regime's construction by voluntary labor was one of its tactics; individuals from institutions worked over work hours to create these houses, which frequently produced poor apartments. Using technology imported from China to build prefabricated mass houses was another tactic used in the 1970s. Finding affordable and efficient technology to build apartments for the socialist society was the ultimate objective. These structures were constructed alongside "*Dyrrah*" Boulevard, close to "*Pranvera*", close to "*Liria Square*", and in the vicinity of the stadium, where they are most prevalent. Purist regular forms and up to six floors were the primary characteristics of socialist-era architecture. The main staircase was accessible from the entrance, which was primarily exposed to the street. The main cadres of the Labor Party confirmed the accepted apartment block plan scheme. Apartment blocks from the socialist era had a modernist look, but in other ways they were also dull and lifeless (Manahasa et al., 2022).

² Plazhi zone is located along the southern coastline of the city, stretching from "*Dajlan*" Bridge to "*Plepa*".

During these years, the Plazhi zone changed into a state-run leisure area meant mostly for mass tourism. One of the main hotels built on the coastline in that period was "*Hotel Adriatik*". It was built in the late 1950s (around 1957) as one of the most modern socialist tourism buildings in Albania. It was part of a state-controlled network for mass tourism, but with a special status as a prestigious hotel. Because it was often used by foreign delegations, the political elite, and ordinary workers and citizens, the hotel had a character that was in between the masses and the elite.

2.3. The post-socialist urban layer

Buildings constructed after the 1990s and up to the present day compose the current post-socialist urban layer. The city's overall architectural characteristics were significantly impacted by the regime change. The use of more flexible and dynamic forms in residential buildings is a reflection of the freedom that democracy brings. On the other hand, in some cases, the use of public space for the erection of high buildings could be defended as a democratic "misinterpretation." Additionally, buildings from this period have highly distinct architectural styles. High-rise apartment complexes and detached houses are the two primary housing typologies associated with the post-socialist period. Up to fifteen floors can be observed in the high-rise buildings. High-rise apartment buildings are particularly apparent in the second line and, in some ways, surpass previous ones, whilst the first line buildings are part of the pre-socialist layer. While the upper floors are used for residential purposes, the floors beneath are primarily utilized for business purposes. In certain instances, the commoditization of space has resulted in detached houses that are conceptualized using the same logic as modest apartments. Comparing these housing typologies to high-rise buildings, their volumes do not create a visual disruption because they are just four floors high (Figure 3).

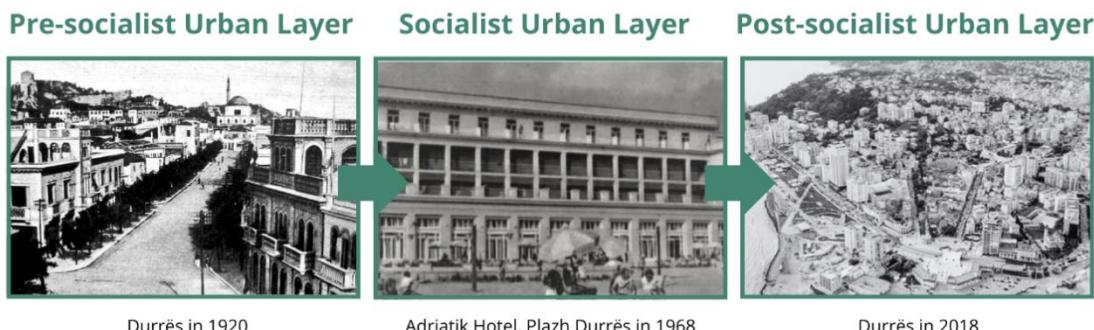


Figure 3. Historical layers of Durrës.

Source: Author.

3. Tourism and the new urban imagination

The market economy and mass tourism were brought in Durrës following the collapse of communism. Urban and tourism growth intensified as a consequence, with contemporary infrastructure construction frequently taking precedence over heritage preservation. According to (Turku, 2019), the ancient city of Durrës, which is built on archaeological layers, became a terrain for major investments, often at the expense of monuments and historical memory.

A notable example of this transition is the “*Veliera*” project (2016–2018), a massive concrete building built next to the Byzantine wall and the Venetian Tower that was supposed to be a representation of touristic modernity. The goal of this project was to establish Durrës as a modern tourist destination by creating an “urban icon” for the city. However, it went opposite the aims of cultural heritage preservation and economic and tourism development, as demonstrated by the courts and media. Strong institutional, legal, and civic responses resulted from the intervention near the Venetian Tower and the Byzantine wall, which brought to light the conflict between the city's remarketing strategies and irreplaceable archeological assets. The case of “*Veliera*” illustrates that in the conditions of post-socialist transition, tourism is often seen as an immediate economic engine, while historical heritage is seen as an obstacle, although in fact it constitutes the most valuable cultural capital for sustainable development and the long-term image of the city (Figure 4).

Boulevard Epidamn view Boulevard Epidamn view



Figure 4. Boulevard view before and after “Veliera” project.
Source: Author.

Also, the building of the “*Kamelia*” resort on the beach zone of “*Golem*” in the midst of Durrës' post-socialist expansion, clearly demonstrates the relationship between the rise of mass tourism and the absence of a sustainable city identity concept (Figure 5).

This resort, positioned on spaces that were once public and accessible to the community, reflects the typical model of transition: the transformation of the coast in the function of elite tourism and the privatization of the territory, often at the expense of the general civic interest. If “*Veliera*” represented the symbolic intervention on historical heritage, “*Kamelia*” illustrates how commercial tourism is putting pressure on the beach's natural and social landscape, further dividing the preservation of the collective right to a sustainable environment and tourism, from short-term economic development. This case highlights that the post-socialist tourism model in Durrës has often built an image of modernity through monumental structures or private resorts, while weakening public access and the preservation of urban and social identity.



Figure 5. "Kamelia" Resort, Durrës.

Source: Reddit (2024).

4. Conclusion

The aim of this research was to examine how the image of Durrës has evolved across three distinct historical periods and to analyze the urban transformations of the city over time. According to the research, the most significant and most drastic changes happened in the post-socialist period when uncontrolled construction became a major factor in the loss of urban identity and the preservation of natural and cultural heritage, which had a direct impact on the tourism sector.

By reviewing the case studies of the "Veliera" and the "Kamelia," it can be argued that these represent inappropriate interventions that disrupted both the image of the "old" city of Durrës and the natural environment of its coastline. From this analysis, valuable lessons can be drawn by comparing Durrës with relatively similar Balkan cities such as Kotor and Dubrovnik, where the "old" town has been carefully preserved, restored, and shielded from postmodern interventions aimed at "improving" it. In these neighboring cities, this preservation has been guarded with rigor and strategically promoted through international marketing. This approach has increased authenticity and attracted tourists' interest, both of which have benefited the tourism sector.

The city's urban and cultural qualities could have been better exploited, enhancing its true urban character and producing a stronger and longer-lasting effect on tourism development, if such inappropriate interventions as those in Durrës had been avoided.

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