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Table of Content

Informality and Urban Management Projects in Albania: Three Decades Later

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Abstract

This paper examines the housing crisis and the emergence of informal settlements in post-1990s Tirana, driven by a massive wave of urbanization following the fall of the dictatorship and the lifting of restrictions on internal migration, which led large numbers of unemployed individuals to move to major cities. It explores the responses to this phenomenon by informal communities, the government, NGOs, and especially international organizations. The analysis highlights key actors and interventions, beginning with pilot projects led by Co-PLAN – The Institute for Habitat Development, a local NGO, which laid the groundwork for broader urban upgrading initiatives later scaled up with support from the World Bank (WB). The paper investigates the motivations and context behind the Albanian government's adoption of the neighborhood upgrading model and argues for its institutionalization through legal and policy reform for the legalization of informal settlements and their integration into the formal economy. It also reflects on the need for a paradigmatic shift—recognizing self-help, community-led housing with minimal state intervention as a viable alternative to conventional public housing. Drawing on these experiences, the paper concludes by emphasizing the importance of a co-evolutionary approach in which formal and informal systems evolve and adapt together.

Keywords:
Affordable Housing, Housing Policy, Tirana, Albania, Developing Countries, Housing Affordability, Policy Effectiveness.

Context: Post-1990s Transition and the Housing Crisis in Tirana

Traces of creative spontaneity remain visible throughout Tirana —a city largely shaped by its inhabitants, often beyond the official regulations. Since its inception, Tirana has evolved between two opposing forces: grassroots spontaneity and rigid authoritarianism—a dynamic that has echoed throughout its history. This enduring tension has left a lasting imprint on both the city's physical landscape and its identity. But how did it all begin?

With the fall of the dictatorship in 1991, the role of the state was fundamentally reshaped, particularly in relation to socio-economic development and the individual. The collapse of industries across the country— unable to withstand competition in the newly liberalized market—and the closure of mines because of outdated technologies, combined with the lifting of restrictions on population movement, resulted in a mass of unemployed people who either migrated to major cities or emigrated abroad. This marked the largest and most intense wave of urbanization, particularly along the Tirana-Durrës corridor, occurring under conditions of limited control.

According to a World Bank report (PAD 1998, p. 3), Tirana experienced an annual population growth rate of 7%, amounting to approximately 30,000 new residents—or 6,500 families—each year. Various World Bank reports from this period provide similar estimates, though the exact scale of the situation remained difficult to quantify. Nonetheless, they reflected the alarming conditions generated by rapid urban expansion. The PADCO report (1995, p. 3) notes that Tirana's population grew from 374,500 in 1990 to 475,000 in just four years.

During the same period, the city's urban footprint expanded by roughly 200 hectares annually, reaching 2,400 hectares by comparison to 1,600 hectares in 1990. Similarly, the Socio-economic Report (1998, p. 1) estimated that by the end of 1997, Greater Tirana's population had reached around 575,000. Projections at the time anticipated that the city could reach 1 million residents by 2012, with as many as 600,000—mostly low- and middle-income families—living in areas lacking basic infrastructure if no measures were taken. In reality, these numbers were never reached, largely due to the broader dynamics of the transition period, which also spurred large-scale emigration abroad.

Meanwhile, the city was expanding at a rate three times higher than that projected by Tirana's 1989 master plan. Given that housing and infrastructure were already inadequate prior to the 1990s, it was evident that the city was ill-equipped to manage such rapid growth. Although the government had spent 90 million USD on social housing, this effort addressed only a small fraction of the actual need. As noted in the PAD Report (1998, pp. 3, 7-8), the policy proved both ineffective and excessively costly in meeting housing objectives.

Under these conditions, the majority of newcomers constructed their homes illegally. Initially built with temporary materials, these dwellings—even when later constructed with bricks and improved quality—were located in areas lacking essential infrastructure. According to the WB Report (PAD 1998, p. 3), investments in these informal homes were estimated at around 40 million USD. While housing construction and residential expansion kept pace with population growth, infrastructure development lagged dramatically behind. By 1997, approximately 235,000 people—about 45% of Tirana's population—were living in areas with severe infrastructure deficits. These zones accounted for roughly 1,200 hectares, or 57% of Greater Tirana's built-up area. Nearly half the residents depended on underground water sources or were illegally connected to main water and electricity networks, while wastewater and domestic refuse were often discharged into nearby streams. This situation contributed to frequent outbreaks of gastroenteric illnesses. Additionally, high losses in the city's main water and electricity systems further exacerbated supply issues and hindered cost recovery.

As the situation deteriorated, Albanian institutions lacked both the necessary know-how and awareness. The National Institute of Urban Planning, disconnected from reality and lacking information, continued to believe in the "dream of the past"—that the only solution lay in evicting newcomers and imposing top-down plans. These attempts ultimately proved unsuccessful. Within this institutional context, organizations such as the WB injected their ideas and implemented their projects through special project coordination units, which operated under dual dependency—both on the WB and the Albanian government.

To address the institutional vacuum, humanitarian organizations and NGOs began operating on the ground, initiating grassroots and self-help initiatives to improve housing conditions through the development of physical and social infrastructure—such as schools, kindergartens, nurseries, religious institutions, and healthcare facilities. Co-PLAN was the first Albanian NGO in the field of urban planning to engage directly at the community level, beginning in 1994. Initially supported by VIS (Volontariato Internazionale per lo Sviluppo, Italy) and later by CORDAID (Catholic Organization for Relief and Development Aid, Netherlands), Co-PLAN focused its early efforts in the Breglumas area. This pioneering participatory planning process resulted in a plan supported by 80% of residents, the construction of 3 kilometers of graveled roads, and the creation of a social center comprising a health clinic, kindergarten, and sports facilities. Perhaps the most significant outcome was a shift in attitudes toward public space, evident in the removal of fences and the community's co-financing of 20% of the project costs (Aliaj et al. 2009, p. 39).

In parallel with its fieldwork, Co-PLAN advocated for a redefinition of urban planning in Albania—moving away from a top-down, authoritarian model to-

ward a participatory approach based on institutional collaboration and stakeholder engagement. This paradigm shift faced strong resistance from both governmental and academic institutions. In this context, Dutch organizations such as CORDAID, NOVIB (Netherlands Organization for International Development Cooperation), and IHS (Institute for Housing and Urban Development Studies) played a pioneering role in the 1990s—supporting Co-PLAN's urban upgrading initiatives and contributing to capacity-building in urban planning and management (Aliaj et al. 2009, p. 33). With this backing, Co-PLAN extended its model to the country's largest informal settlement, Bathore, north of Tirana, scaling up its interventions from 13 hectares to 250 hectares.

In this context, the WB supported the Albanian government in identifying projects that would engage local actors already active on the ground. To facilitate this, the government established the Land Management Task Force (LMTF) within the Ministry of Public Works, supported by USAID (1994–1996) and advised by the Harvard Graduate School of Design. A socio-economic survey, conducted from a realistic perspective, informed the development of the more comprehensive Urban Land Management Program (ULMP), which advanced the participatory planning model initiated by Co-PLAN. Concurrently, the Austrian government assisted the Municipality of Tirana to align urban expansion with a transportation plan and broader regulatory frameworks, while the Japanese government, through JICA, supported sewage infrastructure planning. However, none of these initiatives were ever implemented. The disregard for these studies has led to long-term, irreversible consequences for the city's development.

Why Upgrading

Clearly, NGO-led interventions and fragmented projects alone were insufficient to address the scale of the challenge. A broader, nationally coordinated effort was required to advance urban upgrading programs by engaging state institutions responsible for housing and service delivery. The WB took on this strategic—at times directive—role, responding to the Albanian government's request with a loan that went beyond financing infrastructure. Its objective was to introduce a new planning standard by combining local experience with international expertise drawn from comparable contexts. As noted in the PAD report (1998, p. 7), before approving the ULMP loan, the WB evaluated two alternative approaches, both ultimately deemed unfeasible. The rationale behind these alternatives offers valuable insight into Albania's early post-transition period.

The first alternative involved supporting the construction of social housing. However, based on the prior experience of Credit 2534-ALB, the WB found this approach neither cost-effective nor fiscally sustainable, given the scale of the housing shortage under conditions of rapid growth —

an annual increase of 5,000 to 8,000 families over five years. Addressing this demand through social housing would have required 50–80 million USD in public funding. Additionally, the previous loan revealed poor cost recovery from beneficiaries, making the model financially unviable.

The second alternative involved a greenfield development approach, where the public sector would provide land equipped with basic infrastructure for sale—either wholesale to private developers or retail to individuals—to stimulate private-sector housing development. However, this option faced several challenges: a lengthy delay between infrastructure installation and private housing construction; high costs and risks in Albania's still-emerging formal land and housing market; and the public sector's limited capacity to function as a private developer, further hampered by past unsuccessful housing projects. Ultimately, this alternative was abandoned after the scheme failed to take off in the Kombinat area, which had become informally occupied while the LMTF project was still in preparation.

The most cost-effective and socially and environmentally sustainable approach was to extend infrastructure to areas where residents had already established themselves. To support this initiative, a USD 10 million loan was approved in June 1998, with disbursement planned through March 2004. Designed to foster awareness through a cost-sharing model between beneficiaries and the government, the total estimated cost was projected at USD 15.58 million. Residents were to contribute USD 3.96 million over five years, covering the full cost of tertiary infrastructure (from secondary supply to the house) and 20% of secondary infrastructure (within neighborhoods), while the loan financed the remaining 80%. The government committed USD 1.62 million to cover 70% of primary infrastructure costs (e.g., water and electricity supply to the community perimeter), with the loan funding the remaining 30% (Socio-economic Report 1998, p. 8).

This investment model was piloted for the first time in Albania, shortly after the 1997 financial crisis, which had eroded public trust in state institutions. Rebuilding this trust required both institutional reforms and the creation of community-based mechanisms for collecting and managing their financial contributions. The Socio-economic Report (1998, p. 6) *summarized this as a demand-driven, community-empowered, participatory approach,* deemed vital for addressing Tirana's rapid urban expansion. This required a shift by the government from a supply- to a demand-driven system of infrastructure planning and implementation, with active community involvement seen as critical to fostering local ownership. Implementing this participatory model was particularly difficult in a context shaped by hierarchical, top-down governance traditions. To reduce the risk of failure, eligibility criteria required beneficiary communities to sign formal agreements—endorsed by at least two-thirds of residents—and to contribute a minimum of 20% of secondary infrastructure costs through a land development fee.

This payment granted residents the legal right to acquire the land they occupied.

In this context, the project aimed to deliver essential infrastructure—including roads, water supply, sewerage, drainage, electricity, and street lighting—while strengthening urban service institutions at both central and local levels. Additionally, it supported the preparation of subprojects and facilitated early-stage implementation activities such as construction, supervision, and community-building initiatives through NGOs (WB Project Portfolio 2000, p. 13; PAD 1998, p. 4). Similar projects had been implemented at least two decades earlier in countries across Latin America and others. In Albania, this experience was contextualized through the work of Co-PLAN and other organizations operating on the ground. Naturally, this required Albania to adopt methodologies rooted in a new paradigm of planning, housing, and urban upgrading.

Required Paradigmatic Shift

The implementation of these projects required a significant shift in professional paradigms. The conventional planning sequence—plan preparation, infrastructure provision, housing construction, and resident settlement—had been reversed, with settlement preceding any formal planning, that at the end aimed to improve the situation. This inversion called for a more holistic understanding of informality and housing. Numerous scholars examining informality through both empirical and scientific lenses have argued that the term *informal*—often associated with illegality, poverty, marginalization, slums, or squatting—fails to capture the full complexity of the phenomenon.

According to Roy and AlSayyad (2004, cited in Roy 2005, p. 148), the formal and informal city are not dichotomous. For them, informality is “a mode of urbanization” or “an organizing logic” based on an alternative normative system that governs urban development when housing needs are not addressed; informality is “a series of transactions that connect” economies and spaces. In this sense, they reject the use of the term “informal.” Similarly, Dovey (2012, p. 372) argues that formal and informal processes are interwoven; for him, what we describe as organic or vernacular are in fact historic informal settlements. Both organic and informal cities are rooted in self-organizing processes, with differences attributed to their temporal maturity.

Reframing informality as the embryonic stage of the organic city helps counter its associated stigma. In this vein, Alexander (1965, p. 1), in his seminal essay *“The City is Not a Tree”,* introduces the concept of the “natural city”—urban forms that evolve “more or less spontaneously over many, many years,” gaining complexity and resilience over time. Kostov (2003, p. 43) refers to such cities as “chance-grown,” “generated,” and “geomorphic,” while Batty and Longley (1994, pp. 8, 28, 31, 35) describe them as outcomes of numerous “individual decisions

coordinated in the small," producing non-Euclidean geometries often dismissed by mainstream planning for their deviation from formal geometric norms.

According to Suhartini and Jones (2019, p. 20), informal settlements evolve into meaningful places and communities rooted in underlying socio-cultural traditions. In this sense, informal areas embody human dimensions that must be analyzed and understood. Along these lines, Di Raimo (2020, p. 18) argues that, even at the architectural scale, informality should be recognized as an unconscious process of interpreting architecture.

To move beyond simplistic approaches that define informal cities merely as illegal or unplanned, it is essential to analyze and understand the network of relationships underlying their emergent nature and complexity—elements that may reveal the underlying logic that shapes and sustains these settlements (Dhamo 2021, p. 16). As Silva (2016, pp. 2, 10) notes, complexity theory helps explain territories that emerged without formal planning, evolving instead through bottom-up, self-organized processes as adaptive responses by citizens—interactions between "actors and their systems." In this context, informal settlements can be seen as a form of "upgrading of unused land into affordable housing" (Dovey et al. 2023, p. 19).

These theoretical concepts were further developed both scientifically and practically, particularly in the decades following the 1990s, informed by the global experience of the projects mentioned above. Today, it is widely acknowledged that informal settlements cannot be prevented or erased; that the vast majority are permanent; and, most importantly, that community-based upgrading represents the only viable pathway to development (Dovey et al. 2023, p. 12).

This reconceptualization also relates to the role and positioning of the architect in relation to social housing and informality. The modernist period—despite its positive ethical impulse to raise architects' awareness of their role in addressing social housing—also contributed to shaping the figure of the architect as a universal expert imposing top-down solution. Previously distant from social issues, architects became involved in designing new low-cost housing typologies, guided by an objective, scientific, and absolute logic aimed at ensuring dignified living conditions for the most economically disadvantaged. However, the mission for a better society gradually faded—especially after the post–World War II reconstruction period—when many cities reached unprecedented scales. Mass construction diluted the principles of modernist architecture, and the city increasingly shifted from an organic phenomenon to an artificial one, characterized by homogenization and urban alienation.

In the decades following World War II, the housing crisis extended to Latin American countries, where informal housing expanded rapidly on the urban peripheries—a phenomenon that had already existed. Social housing policies

modeled after those in Europe were not only unaffordable but also inadequate in meeting growing demand. In this context, during the 1950s and 1960s, British architect John Turner emerged as a highly influential figure. Writing from the informal settlements of Lima, he saw these self-built environments and their internal organization not as problems, but as potential. His views contributed to bringing the marginalized reality of informal settlements into professional and academic discourse (Ballegooijen and Rocco 2013, p. 1). Most importantly, his ideas on self-help upgrading—focused on participation and community development with minimal state intervention—together with Hernando De Soto's proposals to integrate the informal economy into the formal market, shaped the WB's urban upgrading policies beginning in the 1960s. This represents one pathway through which informal urbanism may be assimilated as Dovey (2012, p. 371) says "economically, socially, environmentally, and aesthetically". Within the framework of these neoliberal policies, the architect or urban planner assumed the role of facilitator in housing issues—contrasting with the modernist architect, whose technical expertise often imposed itself over local practices and community skills. The World Bank's promotion of this policy as a primary alternative to social housing in 1990s Albania was closely tied to the post-transition context described earlier. Although this alternative arrived in Albania later, due to specific local circumstances, it played a significant role not only in introducing new methodologies for urban upgrading but also in initiating a debate on redefining the architect's role—shifting away from a purely technical position toward one engaged with social responsibility and proactive involvement in issues of social housing and informality. This challenge remains relevant today.

First Steps

To better understand the condition of Tirana's informal periphery, the following data—drawn from the Socio-Economic Report (1998, pp. 6, 13, 15–28) within the framework of the ULMP—refer to two areas, Breglumas and Bathore, where field observations were conducted. Dwellings, often incomplete and built without permits, were financed through household income, remittances, loans, and savings, with investments ranging from USD 1,000–10,000. Streets were largely absent, rights-of-way unclear though residents expressed willingness to retreat if roads were graveled, and public transport scarce; development clustered along remnants of agricultural infrastructure such as dirt roads or irrigation channels. Only about 10% of households had legal water connections, the rest relying on illegal hookups or wells; wastewater was discharged into septic pits or irrigation channels, and stormwater drainage was non-existent. Solid waste was burned or left to decompose, while fewer than 20% had formal electricity connections. Breglumas (33 ha, 2,700 residents, avg. household size 5.2,

avg. age 27) drew 62% of its population from northern rural Albania; Bathore (13.5 ha pilot within 250 ha, 420 residents, avg. household size 5.5, avg. age 24.5) was 95% from the same regions. Both settlements, structured around kinship and acquaintance networks, featured modest housing (often occupied during construction) from wooden shacks to single-story concrete-block houses (50–100 m²) on average plots of 475 m² in Breglumas and 513 m² in Bathore.

In Breglumas, Co-PLAN—supported by the Roads for a *Civil Society* project funded by CORDAID—had been working for several years to organize the community, assist the local social center (established in 1993) used for a kindergarten, community meetings, and youth programs, and to open rights-of-way. The area also had an overcrowded primary school operating in three shifts (1998, pp. 13, 15–20). The Breglumas urban concept plan, prepared in consultation with the community and approved by the KRRT (National Council of Territory) in 1996, became the basis for organizing self-help efforts. Co-PLAN mobilized residents by street to remove fences and secure 8 m rights-of-way, which were to be graveled to prevent further encroachment and ensure a coherent circulation network—a challenging process implemented for the first time in Albania. For these reasons, Breglumas was well-prepared for infrastructure upgrading under the ULMP, which aligned with Co-PLAN's ongoing work on the electricity network. ULMP's infrastructure improvements aimed to increase plot density and raise the population from 2,700 to 5,000 within ten years (1998, p. 18).

In Bathore, no social services existed; instead, the area was "governed" through a traditional system in which elders represented the interests of extended families within the community. Complementing this structure, and with Co-PLAN's support, a residents' association was established to negotiate with authorities for the development of social services, infrastructure improvements under an urban plan (submitted to the KRRT in 1998), and the legalization of housing. In the Bathore pilot area, Co-PLAN had begun work in 1997 to demarcate rights-of-way, engaging residents in educational activities to remove fences. It was therefore logical that this became the second area where ULMP joined forces with Co-PLAN to construct the primary and secondary water supply and sewerage networks, which were later extended to almost the entire settlement. With these infrastructure upgrades, the population was expected to increase from 420 to 2,050 within ten years (1998, pp. 21–28). These efforts laid the foundation for the first models of urban improvement based on self-help strategies.

From Early Models to Reform Attempts

In 2000, WB Project Portfolio (2000, p. 13) assessed the project as "satisfactory," highlighting the full commitment of central and local authorities, community members, and local NGOs to its objectives and implementation framework.

Infrastructure upgrades were implemented in both target areas and later scaled up nationally. Resident contributions—considered the project's cornerstone—progressed satisfactorily despite challenges. In Breglumasi, for instance, 95% of beneficiaries met their commitments for secondary infrastructure.

It appeared that the goal of fostering an enabling environment for the creative replication of similar urban upgrading and regularization projects across the country's municipalities had been achieved. These initiatives formed the basis for subsequent projects that shifted focus from solely infrastructure and community development to broader urban governance—such as the Enabling Good Urban Governance (EGUG) program, implemented by Co-PLAN and funded by the Dutch government. Similarly, these programs combined on-the-job training with technical assistance in urban planning, infrastructure improvement, and related processes in several municipalities. Such projects were successfully implemented until the first half of the 2000s.

During these years, valuable know-how was developed in managing demand-driven projects based on beneficiary contributions and cost-sharing, as well as in fostering new relationships between the government—acting as facilitator—and participating communities, aimed at regularization and legalization. These approaches surpassed the prevailing simplistic technocratic models in Albania. The dissemination of this expertise was supported primarily by IHS in the Netherlands, World Bank training programs, and scholarships for specialized studies in the United States. However, this knowledge failed to take root within the still weak, unmotivated, and unstable central and local government structures. Consequently, central authorities remained passive, while local authorities acted only with the backing of projects and NGOs possessing such expertise. Nonetheless, this phase yielded several concrete outcomes that merit acknowledgment.

The main outcome of this urban policy was the establishment of Albania's legal framework for the legalization, urbanization, and integration of informal settlements, centered on Law No. 9482 (2006) and its amendments, notably Law No. 9895 (2008), which clarified ALUIZN's (Agency for the Legalization, Urbanization, and Integration of Informal Areas) mandate. Building on prior initiatives—especially Co-PLAN and the ULMP—the Law introduced institutional responsibilities, documentation procedures, and deadlines, with legalization based on self-declaration and fees covering administrative, infrastructure, and land transfer costs. Its ambition extended beyond issuing property titles and upgrading infrastructure to fostering spatial and social integration.

In practice, however, its impact was constrained by delays in urban service delivery, heavy documentation burdens on poorer residents, and administrative obstacles coupled with politicization of the process. Over time, residents came to prioritize investments in schools and healthcare, whose absence eroded trust in the Law's effectiveness. In terms of fees, the Law

failed to account for residents who, under previous agreements with the government—such as the ULMP—had already paid for land development costs. This omission weakened confidence in participatory processes and continuity of projects, which had been among earlier key achievements. By 2020, roughly 25% of Albania's urban population still lived in informal zones. Furthermore, overlapping legal frameworks—on agricultural land, property restitution and compensation, and legalization— generated significant complications, requiring improved coordination of information (Aliaj 2008, p. 216).

The most significant achievement was the reform undertaken by the government between 2005 and 2009, assisted by the Institute for Liberty and Democracy (ILD) led by Hernando de Soto, which approached the issue through a more comprehensive socio-economic lens, within the broader context of Albania's efforts to consolidate its market economy. The reform comprised three stages: (1) awareness-raising, involving diagnosis of the extralegal sector—"dead capital" that could be mobilized to enhance welfare; (2) design and implementation, with policy and institutional proposals to integrate into the legal framework immovable assets and businesses constrained by informality; and (3) capital formation and improved governance by linking newly legalized assets to formal markets (Aliaj 2008, pp. 237–238). Despite the progressive and open-minded approach of the reform, the governing structures proved unable to follow its steps consistently or, above all, to confront with transparency and political courage several "uncomfortable" findings concerning the informal economy's dubious sources. These hesitations led to delays, obstacles, and a lack of effectiveness, reducing a reform of broad socio-economic scope to limited institutional sectors.

Over the past decade, escalating land and construction market pressures in long-established informal areas of Tirana—such as Astiri, 5 Maji, and others—combined with delays in the legalization process, which left large numbers of residents in uncertainty, and with repeated but unfulfilled political promises, have generated social tensions during police-led eviction efforts. After 2010, it appears that the governing paradigm shifted toward a drastically different model of urban development. The pendulum moved away from self-help, grassroots participatory processes and a state role that, while not leading investment, facilitated upgrading, legalization, and integration into the formal market, toward top-down, authoritarian decision-making. This pendular alternation between extreme modes of urban development is a recurrent pattern in Tirana's history, observable since its very foundation.

Conclusions

With the benefit of retrospection, it is clear that in the context of Albania's transition from a fully closed system, the strategies tested to address informal settlements and alleviate the housing problem— though only partially successful —

constituted important steps toward learning and the relative mitigation of the crisis. The acceptance of informal settlement upgrading as an alternative to state-provided housing, together with the enactment of the legalization law aimed at integrating such areas into the formal economy and social life, were decisive benchmarks in this trajectory, yielding—and continuing to yield—significant impacts.

Although the top-down approach currently predominates, contemporary theory and practice—particularly those grounded in complexity theory— reaffirm the need to reconceptualize the formal–informal relationship not as a dichotomy, but as mutually integrated and intrinsically connected to the city (Dovey 2012, pp. 371, 385). Understanding the informal city as an expression of human spontaneity and an organic field of interactions that embody human properties —rather than as a space devoid of historical, social, or cultural significance—can inform planning and design methodologies that enable gradual co-evolution. This perspective calls for flexible formal planning institutions that cultivate conditions in which planned and unplanned processes continually learn from and transform each other through adaptive cycles.

As argued, important steps toward this goal were taken in Albania from the mid-1990s onward, yet they failed to evolve into effective reforms due to mismanagement and political misuse. In the present context, the challenge of overcoming this temporary regression remains pertinent for scholars in the field. It entails devising ways to translate organic or spontaneous urban phenomena into high-quality urban design; to integrate seemingly irrational rules within a rational planning framework; and to move beyond purely top-down strategies by adopting genuinely bottom-up or hybrid approaches (Dhamo 2021, pp. 232–233).

Viewed through an evolutionary lens, the involvement of architects and planners is an integral part of the broader process in which formal and informal urban systems co-evolve, with interdependent and intertwined solutions requiring adaptive governance frameworks that enable continuous learning and refinement of planning regulations over time (Silva 2018, pp. 1, 4, 9, 10). As such, the designer or planner “becomes a discreet part of the process” (2016, p. 3). In this context, conceiving architects and planners merely as technicians or facilitators of self-help is overly simplistic. This article, consistent with numerous studies emphasizing gradual co-evolution rather than a formal–informal dichotomy, presupposes a fundamental shift in mindset for those seeking to engage with the complexity, adaptability, and uncertainties emerging in the planning, design, and architecture of informal settlements. This mindset must combine the accumulated experiences of self-help practices with the theoretical framework of complexity science to uncover the human essence underlying these processes and leverage it to improve these settlements.

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