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The ‘London Opportunity Areas’ as a model for Tirana’s uneven growth

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Abstract

Tirana presents itself as an experimental urban laboratory, where events unfold in a context marked by a widespread perception of disorder. “Nënë Tereza” Square, the urban terminus of the 9 Dëshmorët e Kombit Boulevard and once a splendid metaphysical space framed by the former stadium, today retains only a portion of its original configuration—and of its symbolic and spatial value. The new stadium, significantly larger in scale, functionally more complex, disrupts the spatial harmony envisioned by Gherardo Bosio. Despite the existence of a regulatory plan (Tirana 2030 by Stefano Boeri) and two masterplans for the city’s central area (by Grimshaw and Architecture Studio), high-rise buildings are emerging in locations that appear contextually incoherent. By contrast, urban development in London is not governed by a traditional masterplan, but rather shaped through urban projects with a strong formal and spatial identity. Specific “Opportunity Areas” are identified based on strategic interests and needs, and the responsibility for regeneration is delegated to private initiatives, in exchange for the provision of public spaces and services. A paradigmatic example of this approach is “VNEB”; similarly, in Tirana, the “Riverside Albania” development reflects this model. Might this represent the future trajectory of urban development in Tirana?

Keywords:

opportunity areas, uneven growth, urban layers

Introduction

Urban design plays a critical role in shaping cities, influencing their spatial, social, economic, and environmental sustainability. As cities grow and evolve, they face challenges such as population growth, migration, infrastructure deficits, and social inequality. At the same time, they present opportunities to rethink and redevelop urban spaces to meet future needs. London, one of the world's most iconic cities, and Tirana, Albania's capital, represent two urban centres at very different stages of development. This essay will explore opportunity areas in London and the ongoing development of Tirana, considering the challenges and possibilities each city faces in the context of urban design.

London, a city with a rich history, faces the challenge of accommodating a growing population while maintaining its heritage. Opportunity areas in London are typically sites where urban regeneration can address issues such as housing shortages, transportation needs, and environmental sustainability. On the other hand, Tirana, a city with a relatively short history of urban planning and development post-communism, is undergoing a transformation from a Soviet-era capital into a modern European city. The urban development of Tirana offers significant potential to enhance its public spaces, infrastructure, and social cohesion.

This essay will provide an in-depth analysis of opportunity areas in London, focusing on key regeneration projects, and contrast this with Tirana's urban development, examining how the city is capitalizing on opportunities for growth and modernization.

Opportunity Areas in London

London is a city in constant flux, with demand for housing, services, and infrastructure continually rising. The concept of opportunity areas (OAs) emerged in the early 21st century as a response to these challenges, particularly in the context of the 2012 London Olympics, which provided a significant catalyst for regeneration. Opportunity areas are defined as locations in London where significant development potential exists, often within areas of underused land or brownfield sites. These areas typically involve a mixture of housing, employment space, community facilities, and improved transport links.

King's Cross and Euston

One of the most notable opportunity areas in London is the King's Cross/Euston corridor. This area has seen massive redevelopment over the past two decades, turning what was once a dilapidated industrial zone into a thriving urban quarter. King's Cross has become synonymous with high-quality architecture, sustainability, and mixed-use development. The regeneration of the King's Cross area has resulted in the construction of over 50 new buildings, including residential apartments, office spaces,

es, cultural venues, and public parks. The presence of King's Cross Station, a key transport hub, has made this area a focal point for development.

Euston, located just to the west of King's Cross, is also undergoing redevelopment, especially with plans for the HS2 high-speed rail terminal. The opportunity area here focuses on the transformation of underutilized land and aging infrastructure into a mixed-use, vibrant neighborhood. The addition of improved transport infrastructure, including the HS2 and Crossrail links, promises to make the Euston area a major connector between central London and the rest of the country.

Old Oak Common

Old Oak Common, located in West London, is another significant opportunity area, which aims to become one of the largest regeneration projects in Europe. This site, spanning over 150 hectares, is poised for a transformation that will include thousands of new homes, commercial spaces, and a new transport hub linking the HS2, Crossrail, and the London Overground lines. The regeneration of Old Oak Common is a prime example of how integrated transport systems can help unlock the potential of large urban sites.

The development of Old Oak Common offers a unique opportunity to create a sustainable, mixed-use neighborhood that can address the housing crisis in London while contributing to the city's economic growth. The project is designed to include green spaces, pedestrian-friendly streets, and community centers to enhance the quality of life for residents. However, challenges such as displacement, affordable housing provisions, and environmental considerations remain significant hurdles.

Barking Riverside

Barking Riverside, located in East London along the Thames, is another prime opportunity area that reflects London's ambitions for regeneration in the 21st century. With 10,800 new homes planned, along with schools, parks, and commercial facilities, the area is set to become one of the most vibrant and sustainable communities in London. A major feature of the Barking Riverside development is its accessibility, particularly the extension of the London Overground to the site, ensuring that future residents will have good connections to central London.

Barking Riverside is an example of how London's regeneration efforts are increasingly focused on environmentally sustainable practices. The development plans emphasize the creation of low-carbon buildings, green spaces, and sustainable transportation systems, in line with London's goal of becoming a zero-carbon city by 2050. Despite these ambitions, issues related to the affordability of housing and the potential for gentrification remain concerns for local communities.

Vauxhall, Nine Elms, Battersea. The VNEB.

The urban designers call it VNEB (Vauxhall, Nine Elms, Battersea). It is a triangular 195 hectares wide area which eastern vertex, towards Westminster, is Vauxhall and the western bottom is Battersea; its masterplan is drafted by Terry Farrell (fig1,2,3). The biggest urban regeneration project in Europe, shared between 13 owners, will be linked to the North Bank by a new bridge and an extension of the Northern Line, under construction. Over 16,000 new flats -the 15% under the “help to buy” public scheme- enough work space for 25,000 jobs in the pipeline, new pedestrian areas along the Thames (similar to the South-Bank at east) and a vast park connecting the three clumps of the masterplan are under construction. A large catalogue of buildings selected from the “XXI century International style”, grotesque self-portraits of the most important architectural firms, is scattered along the green walkway.

Key Lessons from London's OAs

From London's experience we can extract several lessons:

- Importance of Transport & Phasing: Without transport improvements, high-density mixed-use development becomes unsustainable. Phased infrastructure delivery aligned with development is essential.
- Governance & Collaboration: OAs require coordinated work across boroughs, London-level government, transport agencies, private developers. Clear frameworks (like OAPFs) help.
- Balancing Housing, Jobs, Environment: It's not enough to build houses; need jobs, amenities, green space, public realm. Also dealing with affordability and inclusion is crucial.
- Managing Scale & Character: Opportunity Areas often at edges or Downtown; maintaining or reinterpreting heritage, ensuring legibility, scale, identity matters.
- Sustainability & Climate Resilience: Requirements around flood risk, energy, green infrastructure, are vital. OAs often involve brownfields or waterfronts with environmental constraints/opportunities.

The development of Tirana

In contrast to London, Tirana is a city that has undergone significant transformation in a much shorter period. As Albania's capital, Tirana has moved from a tightly controlled, Soviet-era urban form to a more modern and liberalized city. Tirana's rapid growth over the past two decades has created opportunities for redevelopment and urban design innovation. The city is now focused on creating sustainable urban spaces that cater to its growing population while preserving its unique cultural identity.

Post-communist Transformation

Tirana's urban landscape changed dramatically after the fall of communism in the early 1990s. During the communist era, urban planning was rigid and centered around state control, with limited investment in public infrastructure and little room for architectural creativity. After the regime collapsed, there was a sudden surge in construction, with much of it being informal and unregulated. The city's skyline began to fill with high-rise buildings, many of which lacked aesthetic coherence or proper urban planning. The result was a chaotic cityscape that struggled to meet the needs of its citizens.

In the early 2000s, however, Tirana's urban planners, led by former Mayor Edi Rama, began to embrace a new approach. A focus on public spaces, the revitalization of old neighbourhoods, and the introduction of more green areas became central to the city's urban design. Projects such as the redevelopment of Skanderbeg Square, the heart of the city, have transformed Tirana into a more liveable and attractive place. The square, once dominated by grey concrete, was redesigned to be more pedestrian-friendly, with new green spaces, fountains, and public art installations.

The Role of public Spaces

A key focus in Tirana's development has been the improvement of public spaces. Public squares, pedestrian streets, and parks are increasingly seen as essential components of the city's urban fabric. The recent transformation of the Grand Park of Tirana (Parku i Madh) is a good example of this shift. This large green space, located on the shores of the Artificial Lake, has been developed into a key leisure and recreational space for residents. The park has also been equipped with walking paths, bike lanes, and sports facilities, making it an essential element of Tirana's green infrastructure.

In addition, the development of the Lana River has been part of Tirana's effort to reclaim natural spaces within the urban environment. Once heavily polluted, the Lana River has seen significant investment to restore it as a clean, accessible waterway, with pedestrian paths and public parks along its banks.

Sustainability and Future Planning

Looking forward, Tirana's urban planning will likely focus on sustainability and smart city technologies. The city has plans to incorporate more energy-efficient buildings, renewable energy sources, and better waste management systems. One example is the introduction of electric buses and the expansion of bike lanes to encourage sustainable transportation. Additionally, the city is working to address its traffic congestion, which is one of the main challenges of urban life in Tirana.

As with many fast-developing cities, Tirana's growth must balance moderniza-

tion with social inclusivity. Issues of affordable housing, public service provision, and the preservation of historical sites are likely to remain key points in the city's urban design strategy.

Key strategic plans and visions for the future of Tirana are:

- Tirana 2030 / "Tirana Reimagined": This is a strategic vision for the city's future. Key features include reclaiming green landscape, increasing green areas, ecological corridors, improving mobility, densification with vertical growth, preserving nature. Stefano Boeri Architetti+2

- Emphasis on environmental sustainability: in Tirana 2030, there is a plan to triple green areas, implement "orbital forest system", ecological corridors along rivers (Lana, Tirana, Erzeni), a green ring road (fourth ring), etc. Stefano Boeri Architetti+1

- Tirana Riverside: Designed by Stefano Boeri Architetti + SON Group. A large regeneration master plan along the northern boundary of the city, near the Tirana River. Mixed uses: residence, services, retail, education, parks. Very strong emphasis on green spaces (urban gardens, urban forest, cycle paths), clean energy/self sufficiency. Stefano Boeri Architetti+1

- Vertical Forest Tirana: Residential mixed use high-rise building (21 floors), with 145 trees and 3,200 plants on façades, aligning with the Mother Plan's goal of vertical densification plus green surfaces. Wikipedia

- Downtown One: Mixed use skyscraper, LEED Gold pre-certified, combining hotel, serviced apartments, office space. It signals ambition for high quality sustainable high-rise design. Wikipedia

- Alban Tower, Ambasador III, Tirana Garden Building: Other significant tall buildings or mixed-use complexes. They contribute to skyline change and higher density. Wikipedia+2

- Public Administrative Cluster by Coldefy: A project aiming to improve public services while improving the public realm: open courtyards, plazas, pedestrian connectivity, underground parking to reduce street congestion.

- Other projects: e.g. "River Residence 2", "Ndarja Building" etc., smaller scale but contribute to mixed use, improving public spaces, integrating with nature. RTF | Rethinking The Future+1

Major challenges or constraints are:

- Rapid informal / unregulated growth: In Tirana, as in many fast-growing cities, there has been unregulated building, inadequate planning enforcement; this leads to problems of infrastructure lag, poor quality of public realm, inadequate utilities, congestion. (Though specific academic references may be deeper, this is broadly reported).

- Infrastructure deficit: Transport, public transit capacity, water, sewage,

green space, public services (schools, health), are all under stress given rapid growth. Government has ambitious plans but financing, phasing, capacity are challenges.

- Environmental concerns: Urban heat island, flood risk, pollution. Rivers like Lana have been heavily channel, neglected. Green space is being re-claimed, but often it's small, fragmented.
- Governance, planning capacity: The institutional capacity to enforce plans, ensure quality, manage public participation, ensure synergies among projects, is often weaker than in places like London. Funding and legal frameworks need strengthening too.
- Identity, social inclusion: Rapid vertical developments risk being exclusive; housing affordability, social mixing are concerns. Also heritage and urban character must be preserved.

Comparative Analysis: London and Tirana.

Both London and Tirana are cities that are undergoing significant urban transformations, yet they are at very different stages of development. London, as one of the most advanced global cities, is focused on revitalizing existing areas through regeneration projects such as those in King's Cross and Barking Riverside. In contrast, Tirana is in the midst of reimagining itself, transitioning from a post-communist city to a more contemporary urban center, with a focus on public space, sustainability, and social inclusivity.

A key similarity between the two cities is their focus on sustainable urban design. London's efforts to incorporate green building practices, renewable energy, and low-carbon transportation systems align with Tirana's ambition to create a smart, sustainable city. Both cities also recognize the importance of public spaces in fostering social interaction and community engagement, as demonstrated by the redevelopment of Skanderbeg Square in Tirana and the creation of green spaces in London's opportunity areas.

However, challenges remain. In London, issues such as housing affordability, gentrification, and the environmental impacts of new developments need careful management. In Tirana, the challenge lies in managing rapid growth while maintaining a balance between modernity and tradition, ensuring that new developments do not overwhelm the city's historical and cultural identity.

To identify what London's Opportunity Area strategy can teach Tirana it is worth to make a comparison across several dimensions:

Dimension	London (OAs)	Tirana
Scale / density	Large brownfield sites, dense mixed-use infill, high job-housing ratios; densification aligned with transport capacity.	Emerging vertical growth; dense high-rise mixed-use in central/near-centre areas. However, some growth is less planned and more reactive.
Transport & Connectivity	OAs often require and are planned around substantial transport investment: rail, tube, Overground, etc. London has mature public transport, but expansions are costly and slow.	Tirana is expanding road networks, planning river-side urbanism, but public transit is weaker; projects such as electrification of bus lines (e-BRT) are underway. Heavy investment needed for transit to match density
Green/Public Realm	Emphasis on parks, green corridors, public spaces, walkability, active transport. Environmental sustainability increasingly core	Strong recent orientation in policies like Tirana 2030 and Waterfront / Riverside projects to increase green areas, ecological corridors, vertical greening; still catching up in terms of implementation, maintenance, integration.
Governance & Planning	Strong legal and policy frameworks, budgets, oversight (GLA, TfL), long-term frameworks (London Plan, OAPF), community consultation	Progressing: policies and masterplans exist; international architects involved; but challenges remain in regulatory enforcement, financing, ensuring inclusive outcomes.
Affordability & Social Inclusion	Affordability is a major concern; London's OAs often generate high value development risking displacement; policies seek to include affordable housing, mixed tenure etc.	Similarly, a concern: if new development is only high end, risk of inequality; Tirana must ensure social housing, inclusive design, access to services

Lessons & Design Principles for Tirana from London's OAs

From the comparative table, we derive several design principles and policy recommendations for Tirana:

Align Density with Transport Capacity

- New tall or dense mixed-use projects need parallel investment in public transit: more frequent, reliable, efficient mass or bus transport, cycling infrastructure. Without transport, traffic congestion, pollution, loss of quality of life will follow.

- London's OAs show that densifying around transit nodes works better than

constant horizontal expansion. Tirana should concentrate high density near good transport corridors, nodes (existing or planned).

Masterplans and Phasing

- Use masterplans (as London does with OAPFs) to coordinate land use, infrastructure, public realm, environmental safeguards. Phasing should ensure infrastructure (utilities, public services, green space) comes early and in step with built capacity.

- Tirana's masterplans (Tirana 2030, Tirana Riverside etc) are promising examples; ensuring phasing and enforceable commitments is key.

Green Infrastructure & Ecological Networks

- Beyond parks, green corridors, river restitution etc. Need continuous, accessible green infrastructure. Not just isolated towers with planting, but connections: riparian zones, urban forests, ring roads, etc.

- Passive climate design (shading, building orientation, green façades etc) to mitigate urban heat.

Public Realm, Walkability, Mixed Use & Human Scale

- Street level design: good public spaces, squares, sidewalks, streets, places for social interaction, pedestrian comfort. Mixed uses so that streets are active at different times (shops, cafés, cultural venues).

- Avoid monolithic high-rise blocks without ground level permeability. London's success in many OAs hinges on quality public space, which Tirana projects are embracing but must execute well.

Environmental Sustainability and Resilience

- Flooding risk, water management, air quality, energy efficiency, climate adaptation need to be embedded. For example, river restoration, managing runoff, use of renewable energy, efficient buildings.

- Tirana's ecological corridors and green ring, and projects like Vertical Forest show awareness; implementation, maintenance, and the institutional capacity to deliver are vital.

Governance, Regulations, Community Engagement

- Transparent planning, public participation, strong regulation to enforce design, quality, inclusion, heritage protection.

- Fiscal tools: incentives, affordable housing quotas, possibly zoning, land value capture to enable infrastructure funding.

Identity, Heritage, Social Mixing

- Preserving or integrating historical buildings, vernacular, local culture, to ensure that new development is rooted in place, not generic global high rise.

- Ensuring that housing is available to a broad spectrum of incomes, not just luxury/market rate; inclusion of public amenities, services.

Potential Risks & Trade-offs

It's important to recognize trade-offs and tensions:

- Density vs Life Quality: High density can strain services, reduce sunlight, increase congestion if not carefully designed; quality of life can suffer.
- Speed vs Quality: Rapid construction can cut corners in building quality, environmental controls, public amenities, leading to long term costs.
- Gentrification / Displacement: As areas become attractive, property values rise; lower income residents may be pushed out unless policies protect them.
- Environmental Impact: Without robust environmental assessment, large developments by rivers, or on ecologically sensitive areas, can do damage.
- Financial Viability & Affordability: Projects must balance profit, cost recovery, and affordable/non market housing; not all high design or green features are cheap; financing and subsidies may be required.

Synthesis: Opportunities for Tirana Based on London's Model

Given all of the above, here are some specific opportunities and suggestions for Tirana:

Designation of Opportunity Zones / Areas

• Tirana could formally define “Opportunity Areas” analogous to London: brownfield or under used zones where high-density mixed use is encouraged, with committed infrastructure upgrades. This would help channel investment, align planning, and manage expectations.

Transport Investment as Trigger

• Projects like the electrification of bus lines (e BRT) are promising. Further, investment in light rail, tram, metro, or enhancements of public transit corridors should be paired with zoning for density. If building high rises but leaving roads clogged, sustainability suffers.

Green Network & River Restoration

• Rivers such as Lana and Erzeni have been burdened historically; restoring river banks, creating river walkways, flood management, ecological corridors are not only environmental goods but public amenity.

• The green ring road idea is very interesting; similarly, urban forests, co-development of green roofs/façades can help with microclimate.

Public Realm & Mixed Use Street Life

Design new neighborhoods to include shops, cafés, culture, schools, health services at street level rather than segregated zones; encourage ground floor active uses.

Open spaces and squares should be integral in neighborhoods; avoid leaving residual or leftover open spaces, ensure quality, shade, good connectivity.

Focus on Sustainability & Resilience

- Energy efficiency, rainwater capture, waste management, solar or renewable energy should be part of the standard in new developments. Consider seismic risk, climate change.

Affordable Housing & Inclusivity

- Adopt policies that require or incentivize affordable housing in new developments. Mixed tenure should be a baseline, and government should ensure services infrastructure keeps pace.

Strong Regulatory & Institutional Capacity

Strengthen planning regulations, enforce codes for environmental standards, building safety, design quality. Ensure community participation and transparency.

Phasing & Long Term Financing

- Use phased development that aligns with infrastructure, with mechanisms (public/private partnerships, land value capture, grants) to support upfront capital investment.

Concluding Reflections

London's Opportunity Areas provide both inspiration and warning: they show what is possible when cities plan strategically for densification, infrastructure, and mixed use; but also how things can go wrong if design, public realm, affordability, or environment are neglected.

Tirana is in an exciting moment: its policies (Tirana 2030, Riverside, Vertical Forest etc.) show awareness of global concerns: green infrastructure, sustainable growth, ecological corridors. If these are executed with good governance, inclusive design, and infrastructure that matches development, Tirana has potential to become a model for sustainable urban transformation in rapidly urbanising contexts.

Urban design is not just about buildings; it's about how people live: mobility, access to nature, the quality of public space, social equity. London and Tirana together show that with careful design, vision, and institutions, cities can grow in ways that improve lives, not just increase density.

If you like, I can send you a version with case studies, images, or more data about infrastructure and housing numbers in Tirana to deepen the analysis

Conclusion

The urban design of both London and Tirana offers valuable lessons in how cities can evolve and adapt to meet the challenges of the 21st century. London's opportunity areas exemplify how established cities can regenerate and renew themselves, offering high-quality housing and services while tackling issues such as sustainability and urban mobility. Meanwhile, Tirana's development shows how a city can reinvent itself in a short period, with a focus on creating vibrant public spaces, green infrastructure.