



**DA** Dipartimento  
Architettura  
Ferrara

## BOOK OF PROCEEDINGS

2<sup>nd</sup> INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON HOUSING,  
PLANNING, AND RESILIENT DEVELOPMENT OF THE  
TERRITORY

TOWARDS EURO-MEDITERRANEAN PERSPECTIVES

**OCTOBER 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup>, 2025**

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## **2<sup>nd</sup> 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 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup>, 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 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup>, 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 15<sup>th</sup>, acceptance notification by June 30<sup>th</sup>, first draft of papers by September 15<sup>th</sup>, and final submissions by October 31<sup>st</sup>.

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Dr. Doriana Musaj / POLIS University

Armela Reka / POLIS University

Sindi Doce / POLIS University

**Layout & Design:**

Sindi Doce

Armela Reka

**POLIS University Contact:**

Rr. Bylis 12, Autostrada Tiranë-Durrës, Km 5, Kashar

Kodi Postar 1051, Kutia Postare 2995

Tiranë, Albania

Tel: +355.(0)4.2407420 / +355.(0)4.2407421

Fax: +355. (0)4.2407422

Mob: +355 (0) 69 40 88 111

Email: [contact@universitetipolis.edu.al](mailto:contact@universitetipolis.edu.al)

Website: [www.universitetipolis.edu.al](http://www.universitetipolis.edu.al)

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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.

# Vertical Growth and Urban Morphology

## High-Rise Towers Reshaping Tirana's City Form

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MSc. Eneida MUHAMUÇI

ORCID 0000-0003-2271-9553

Department of Planning and Environment, POLIS University, Albania,  
eneida\_muhamuci@universitetipolis.edu.al

### Abstract

*Tirana has rapidly changed in the last few decades, with a growing trend toward vertical construction. High-rise towers signify a dramatic shift in the morphological makeup of the city, particularly in central and highly sought-after urban areas.*

*This paper explores the spatial and structural consequences of vertical growth on the urban form of Tirana, focusing on the interaction between the development of tall buildings and key elements such as street networks, public spaces, skyline composition and overall urban continuity.*

*The study investigates how the concentration of towers in selected areas affects the historical urban structure, often disrupting established patterns of connectivity, pedestrian access and socio-spatial coherence. Drawing on mapping analysis, field observations and selected case studies, the paper critically examines the morphological fragmentation caused by inconsistent vertical interventions, many of which lack integration with wider planning frameworks or infrastructural capacity.*

*The change of the skyline as an expressive layer of urban identity is given special consideration. Tall buildings represent ambition and economic advancement, but their unregulated expansion creates visual clutter issues. The study also looks at the effects of tower-induced densification on public space, emphasizing how verticalization frequently results in less civic permeability and the privatization of ground-level spaces.*

*The study highlights patterns of spatial inequality and sheds light on the difficulties in balancing vertical growth with resilient, inclusive, and historically conscious urban design by placing Tirana's experience within the larger Euro-Mediterranean urban dynamic. In order to guarantee that the construction of high-rise structures enhances Tirana's changing urban form while maintaining its spatial legibility and cultural identity, the paper concludes by suggesting strategic urban design and policy tools.*

### Keywords

*Urban morphology, high-rise development, vertical growth, Tirana, public space, skyline transformation*

## 1. Introduction

Since 1991, Tirana has become a symbolic city reflecting Albania's political and economic change, free movement, the need for housing, and drastic changes in urban development. For 45 years, Tirana was characterized by a compact urban form, with residential blocks with low buildings that did not exceed 15 m in height. After 1991, the capital expanded rapidly, unprepared to accommodate the high number of new residents, which led to urban sprawl with entire neighborhoods of informal buildings, additions to residential buildings built during the communist regime, and new residential buildings that, although equipped with a building permit, did not comply with the construction conditions set out in the Regulatory Plans.

Even though more than 3 decades have passed since Tirana became the main destination of large investments, it still retains the symbolism of drastic urban changes (often not supported by spatial planning) now with a new typology of tall buildings. Unlike European cities where vertical growth has been accompanied by modernism, urban densification and dynamic economic development, in the case of Tirana critical questions arise regarding the preservation of cultural identity, spatial coherence and regulatory capacity.

This paper explores the influence of high-rise buildings on the urban morphology of Tirana, with particular emphasis on the relationship between this building typology and morphological components such as the road network, public space, and the skyline. Most high-rise buildings are concentrated in the areas around the city core and along the main arterial corridors of the city, fragmenting the historical urban fabric and hence impacting the pedestrian access, social inclusion, and spatial legibility.

Vertical growth is mainly guided by long term planning frameworks, while in the case of Tirana this development has come quickly, lacking sustainable integration with urban design principles. Often such approaches lead to the privatization of ground floor space, increasing spatial inequality, disrupting long-established urban patterns. Also, the change of the skyline represents a new visual identity of the city that leaves room for discussion.

Using Tirana as a case study in broader European urban dynamics, this paper attempts to assess critically the spatial implications of vertical growth and to elaborate on planning and policy instruments that will better steer the development of tall buildings while respecting the urban and social context.

## 2. Background & conceptual framework

### 2.1. Urban morphology and vertical growth

The physical form of urban space structures shaped over time by infrastructure, planned architecture and socio-economic forces makes up urban morphology. As mentioned above, Tirana's urban morphology was a low-rise, horizontally developed city, whose skyline was characterized by the simplicity of Ottoman plans, the rationalist interventions of the Italians and the planning models of the socialist era.

Vertical growth, the construction of tall buildings is a relatively recent phenomenon in Tirana. The main reasons and characteristics for vertical growth such as the need to accommodate increasing urban density, optimizing land value, creating new urban spaces, besides symbolizing economic progress, do not reflect the current context of Tirana, and Albania in general.

However, this verticality, when applied in cities with little-in-place coercive frameworks, yields dysfunctional development.

## 2.2. The role of skyline in the urban identity

Not just a visual output, however, the skyline defines an expressive layer of urban identity. It relates with the historical layers, planning ideologies, and collective memory. In Tirana, the skyline is undergoing a rapid, uncoordinated transformation of competing high-rise buildings for visibility rather than a coherent urban image. The absence of a regulated skyline plan threatens chaos in views and diminishes the legibility of the form of the city.

## 3. Methodology

This study based on qualitative spatial analysis focuses on urban morphology and field observation.

### 3.1. Data sources

Historical maps and satellite imagery were used to assess the change in building height, density and land use changes.

Field observations were conducted in several key areas of high-rise development, such as Skanderbeg Square, the Lana River corridor and Blloku.

Several tower projects such as Downtown One, Eyes of Tirana and Book Building were taken as case studies to demonstrate different typologies and spatial impacts.

### 3.2. Analytical framework

The analysis focused on the following morphological dimensions:

1. Discontinuity of the road and pedestrian network.
2. Permeability at ground level and public-private interface.
3. Skyline composition and visual coherence.

## 4. Case study – Vertical growth of Tirana

### 4.1. Historical morphological layers

To understand the city of Tirana, it is important to read the morphological layers according to socio-political periods.

**Ottoman Period:** In its earliest form, Tirana was a small Ottoman city with irregularly shaped street networks and houses closed towards private inner courtyards, with an organic morphology of the city with low density. Houses were clustered in various configurations around mosques, baths and bazaars that were religious and civic institutions. In general, spatial cohesion is more important than hierarchy, thus facilitating a pedestrian environment on a human scale.

**Italian Occupation:** Under the influence of King Zog and later of Fascist Italy, Tirana was radically restructured through a series of master plans. Rationalist principles of urban planning emerged with axial boulevards, symmetry and monumental public buildings. The Boulevard of the Martyrs of the Nation, which connected the city center with the main institutions, reoriented the formal axis of the city's development and provided an introduction to the European modernist aesthetic. This layer has formed a state-centered urban order and is a residual source for the symbolic core of Tirana.

**Socialist Period:** After World War II, the communist regime carried out central planning emphasizing aspects of equality and functionality above any aesthetic considerations. Subsequently, the expansion of the city developed into a uniform type of low- to medium-rise residential blocks - a pattern mainly of five- to seven-story panel buildings - connected to public facilities and green spaces. Urban expansion was horizontal, to a certain extent, and controlled through zoning regulations and state land policy. The very morphology of this era gave rise to a complete separation of functions and penalized verticality in the name of collectivist ideals.

**Post-1991 Liberalization:** The other side of the story is that the quick fall of communism was followed by an abrupt deregulation of land use and uncontrolled construction, informal settlements, and rampant speculation in land. Under the combined weight of neoliberal reform, planning institutions were gradually reduced to impotence, and Tirana underwent a wild urban boom. Lack of a coherent zoning policy allowed the vertical constructions to sprout with scant regard to their contextual relevance, infrastructural capacity, or heritage preservation. This period has, however, seen an altogether departure from the once-strong horizontal growth paradigm. Private interests, political partnership, and foreign investments largely fuel this transition to vertical growth.

The urban morphology of Tirana represented of all the historical processes which have been layered up. The integrity of these processes has been disturbed and redefined by modern vertical interventions that are challenging in terms of scale, linearity and public space: interventions made recently in this time of change.



**Figure 1.** Adapted from *Tirana – Qyteti i Munguar*.

Source: S. Dhamo, G. Thomai, & B. Aliaj (2016), Polis-Press.

## 4.2. Tower development hotspots

Within the pre-existing zones of high real estate value and symbolic significance, vertical growth is increasingly operating and orienting itself. These "vertical hotspots" are redefining not just the skyline anymore but also the socio-spatial logic of the city.

**Skanderbeg Square & Boulevard Dëshmorët e Kombit:** The area assumedly having the city's most administrative and symbolic heart has fast become a hotbed for high-rise development. The post 2010 urban regeneration of Skanderbeg Square through its minimalist reconfiguration served as the aesthetic backdrop for luxury developments. The new towers around the square, however, are now increasingly shadowing historic sightlines and monuments. The boulevard, which once represented Italian Rationalism at its best, is now flanked with vertical glass and steel structures that are increasingly losing the characteristics of clarity and proportionality from that of the original design.

**Lana River Corridor:** From being a neglected edge condition, the Lana River corridor is transforming very rapidly into a commercial spine. High-rise office towers and mixed-use buildings have replaced low-rise housing and informal workshops. This linear corridor, which runs parallel to the main boulevard, is being positioned as a secondary central business district.

**Blloku Area:** Blloku has been rebranded into a trendy high end urban district. This is a hotbed of vertical development, particularly luxury residential and hotel towers. Here, verticality is a tool not just to maximize floor area but to convey exclusivity and prestige. But the shift from human scale blocks to high-rise buildings has sliced up the urban grain, raising serious concerns about sunlight access, walkability and displacement of communities.

In all these hotspots, high-rise constructions are happening alongside strategic land acquisition, unclear regulatory frameworks. Most of these developments are sometimes positioned on sites that registered the existence of buildings of cultural or architectural importance, thus intensifying the debate over memory, identity, and the right to the city.

## 4.3. Key projects

**Downtown One:** Standing 144 m high and completed in 2023, it is one of the tallest mixed-use buildings within Albania. It perches over the banks of the Lana River, housing commercial



areas, luxury apartments, and underground parking. It has been marketed as a symbol of progress; yet, critics have faulted it for obstructing visual access to both Dajti Mountain and historic buildings along key urban corridors. Bulky massing breaks the skyline.



Eyes of Tirana: Designed next to Skanderbeg Square, its an attempt to create an architectural landmark for the city. The tower would be clad in reflective glass and rise in sharp contrast to the neighbouring historic architecture. However, they offer little in terms of integration with the public domain. Retail at the podium level is impervious to the surrounding public and little public space exists around the complex itself. Critics argue for the elevation to take precedence over urban integrity.



The Book Building: This mixed-use tower attempts to juxtapose modern architecture against cultural references. Its north and south façades show reliefs resonant with Albanian folklore and literature, symbolically qualifying the tower as a "vertical library." Further, while more literate of symbolic narratives, its ground activation raises concerns. The public interface here is dominated by private pathways and minimal commercial frontages, thus inhibiting public life. Nevertheless, the intent is to give verticality some local meaning.

These towers are not merely architectural interventions, but also instruments within a broader political and economic signaling context. Often commissioned by politically connected developers, they serve as traditional markers for Tirana's globalizing aspirations.

Yet cumulatively, these have birthed a fragmented urban landscape, where vertical icons vie for attention as opposed to furthering a decent public creation.

Verticalization for Tirana will end up in very serious urban development change and perspective. Instead of horizontal expansion when the state was actively steering the development, the city has now gone up as a result of market-economic, speculative rationality, very powerful, and the symbolism of height. High-rise towers, while there is a lot of promise and potential density beneficial, they mostly come unfulfilled with respect to not understanding historical continuity, urban scale, nor social equity. The current spate of verticalization puts Tirana at a clear test of whether it can manage to maintain a coherent and inclusive public realm as well as an identity.

As the city continues going up, a much more sophisticated approach to vertical urbanism needs to be urgently inculcated – one that acknowledges the very rich layered morphology of Tirana, integrates towers into the urban fabric, and weighs private gain against public good.

## 5. Key impacts on urban morphology

Tirana is recently vertically transforming its urban form. More than just a height change, this is a radical reorganization of its morphological fabric. High-rise development in central and symbolically representative zones has caused spatial, functional, and aesthetic disruptions. These relatively speculative interventions haven't found a proper integration into the existing urban fabric, thereby creating fragmentation at the ground level and skyline levels. Three main impacts on Tirana's urban morphology will be examined here: disruption of street networks, erosion of public space, and fragmentation of the skyline and urban identity.

### 5.1. Disruption of street networks & continuity

Vertical development in Tirana has ruptured the traditional street patterns and pedestrian continuity at once and almost instantaneously. High-rises typically require large parcels of land and expansive podiums which, upon many occasions, are not compatible with the fine-grained pedestrian-oriented urban grid the city historically has, as Nase and Ocakçi put it (2010).

Most of the time, this disturbance in the permeability of the urban fabric superblocks or stand-alone towers, which break the connections between adjacent neighborhoods and important public amenities. For instance, the Downtown One complex on Rruga e Elbasanit sits at an integral corner site near Lana River. Although advertised as a mixed-use project joining together offices, retail, and residential units, the design interrupts the east-west pedestrian flow that had once been porous and activated as a city edge.

Such blockage turns against one of the other most treasured values of Tirana as a space: informal walkability. During the post-socialist term when plans were not in place, Tirana cultivated a strong pedestrian culture mostly by improvised shortcuts, narrow alleys, and rich sidewalk life (Požani, 2015). Such vertical constructions usually ignore this network, preferring

to set up controlled entrance points, underground movement, or poorly connected internal courtyards that are inaccessible to the public.

Furthermore, many towers are constructed disjointedly, not relating their ground-level arrangement to existing street grids, resulting in poor corner articulation, underprivileged rear façades, and random building setbacks (Ghazaleheniya and Akçay, 2022). In places like the Blloku district, where the street network is narrow and historically rich, towers encroach upon older patterns without consideration for scale, dimension or rhythm and also disorient large residents and foreigners alike (Mele et al., 2022).

## 5.2. Public space loss and ground-level privatization

Another adverse consequence of vertical growth in Tirana is public space erosion and privatization of ground jetties. Floor area ratios (FAR) in high-rise buildings can be considered as concentrated vertical volumes. Theoretically, the only trade-off must be ground space released for public use. Promises to create publicly accessible plazas or landscaped setbacks often accompany permits of this type, but these spaces are easily scaled down during implementation or made functionally private by elements such as barriers or fences or surveillance infrastructure (Poiani, 2015).

For example, for projects like The Book Building (Libri). While its facades have artistic reference and cultural symbolism, the ground floor has very minimal active frontage. Retail units exist on a very limited number and are not available to all income groups, while access to residential and office spaces is designed as controlled-access lobbies (Yunitsyna & Laçi, 2024). This way, it minimizes the public realm and makes the edges of these buildings inert, diminishing the vibrancy and safety that is usually provided by active street life (Ghazaleheniya & Akçay, 2022). The accumulation of all these effects is, in short, the weakening of public culture in Tirana, long rooted within whose tradition of informal gatherings, street cafés, and spontaneous interaction (Poiani, 2015).

## 5.3. Fragmentation of the skyline and identity tension

Once, the Tirana skyline was easily tethered to significant symbolism by structures such as the Clock Tower, Et'hem Bey Mosque, the National History Museum, and the Palace of Culture. More importantly, in terms of time space, the monuments were thoroughly controlled by their symbolic representation in the sky. These landmarks established a horizontal rhythm and provided clear orientation points (Poiani, 2015). With increased height, buildings are gradually dwarfing and blocking views of these landmarks. A case in point: the view corridor from Skanderbeg Square toward Dajti Mountain: once a celebrated urban panorama, it is now partially obstructed by high-rises, such as Downtown One and the ABA Business Center (Aliaj, 2023).

While the sky should have focal points and transitions, it rather consists of a random scattering of glass towers of different heights, materials, and orientations (Ghazaleheniya & Akçay,

2022). This decreases the sense of urban cohesion and complicates visual 'reading' of the city to its citizens.

Many towers depend for their design on those universal aesthetics, glass curtain walls, reflective facades, and sculptural forms, stripped from the local climate, history, and architectural tradition of Tirana (Prifti, 2024). It has been noted that although very few projects, such as The Book Building, try to localize cultural motifs, the rest contribute to placelessness in the city: "it's as if Tirana exists within some other global, interchangeable city" (Mele et al. 2022).

Vertical growth, in general, is absolutely not negative, but the present practice in Tirana lacks the strategic foresight, control mechanisms, and context determination to achieve a coherent and inclusive urban environment. In its rising future, Tirana must now ask itself: For whom is the vertical city-and at what cost to Tirana's urban identity and livability?

## 6. Policy and design implications

### 6.1. Urban design tools

#### Skyline Management Guidelines

A citywide height map should delineate the bands of heights permissible for distance from historic centers, highways, or landmarks.

#### Vertical Zoning/context-sensitive Height Mapping

Establish a height overlay for sites with varying bulk and height restrictions. For instance: higher towers (e.g., 30-40 stories) should be allowed only in locations such as transportation hubs and arterials, with those taller than 5-10 stories in areas like Blloku or older Ottoman areas restricted. Use GIS-based height mapping to enforce these stratified zones, with new tower projects modeled against these before permits can be issued.

#### Permissibility at Ground Level

Any of the newly proposed larger tower projects should offer permissible, accessible pedestrian connection through blocks by cuts-through or building open plazas, or arcades. Legally require proportion of street-facing wall surface for transparency (windows, entrances) over minimum percentage (60-70%) in certain areas. Standardize at a minimum width for sidewalks and also trees, chairs, illumination, and other pieces of urban furniture.

## 7. Conclusion

Tirana has been facing the transverse process of vertical development in a fragmented planning environment with weak institutional control when compared to cities with more established traditions for enforcing regulatory controls. This paper has elucidated how the mushrooming of high-rise towers in areas such as Skanderbeg Square, the Lana River Corridor,

and Blloku has disrupted the pedestrian-friendly historic urban fabric of the city, introducing spatial lapses and ultimately privatizing parts of the public domain.

In the absence of any proper height zoning, design review mechanisms, or view corridor protections, the skyline of Tirana is similarly becoming fragmented. Speculative towers ignoring the urban character have now concealed iconic cultural assets, such as the Clock Tower and Et'hem Bey Mosque. At the same time, ground levels are largely inert in many high-rise developments, diminishing public accessibility and undermining the street culture of the city.

This paper argues that high-rise development is not intrinsically objectionable, its success rests on its proper integration with the existing morphological layers of the city. Tirana must prioritize skyline management, enforce active street frontages, and embed public benefit into vertical projects.

There is no prospect for Tirana to put off height; rather, the future must be open to regulating height-intentionally, justly, with deep sensitivity to the historical fabric. Verticality must become a tool of urban cohesion, not fragmentation.

## References

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