

Fragmented Densification and Urban Form in Contemporary Tirana

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Abstract - *The transition from centrally planned systems to market-oriented development has profoundly reshaped the spatial structure of post-communist cities. In Albania, this transformation unfolded rapidly following the collapse of the socialist regime, resulting in profound discontinuities in planning practices, institutional frameworks, and the relationship between architecture and the city. Tirana, as the country's political and economic center, became the primary locus of these changes, experiencing intense demographic pressure, informal urbanisation, and speculative development.*

This paper investigates the relationship between planning instruments, architectural practice, and urban form in post-communist Tirana. Through a qualitative morphological analysis of implementation plans and selected case studies across a spatial gradient from the suburban periphery to the city center, the study argues that fragmented densification is not an accidental outcome but a structurally produced condition.

The findings demonstrate that densification strategies which focus primarily on quantitative parameters—such as height, floor area ratio, and coverage—fail to articulate spatial relationships at the scale of streets, blocks, and public spaces. As a result, urban space is produced as a collection of autonomous architectural objects, undermining spatial continuity, legibility, and collective form. Drawing on theories of urban morphology and urban form, the paper highlights the critical role of architectural quality and the absence of a coherent urban project in the progressive disfiguration of the contemporary city. While grounded in the specific context of Tirana, the conclusions are relevant to a broader range of post-communist and rapidly transforming urban environments.

Keywords - Post-communist cities; Urban densification; Urban form; Planning instruments; Tirana; Architectural autonomy

Introduction

The transition from centrally planned systems to market-oriented development has fundamentally reshaped the spatial structure of many post-communist cities (Stanilov, 2007). In Albania, this transformation unfolded rapidly following the collapse of the communist regime, resulting in profound disruptions in planning practices, institutional frameworks, and the relationship between architecture and the city. Tirana, as the country's primary political and economic center, became the principal laboratory of these transformations, experiencing unprecedented demographic pressure, private investment, and informal construction (Pojani, 2010).

During the early years of the transition, urban growth occurred largely in the absence of comprehensive territorial planning instruments. Informal settlements, unauthorized extensions, and speculative developments proliferated, superimposing themselves onto existing urban structures without shared principles or long-term

coordination (Aliaj, Lulo & Myftiu, 2003). Planning legislation evolved gradually as a reaction to these processes, aiming primarily to regain control over expansion rather than to proactively guide urban form (Hirt, 2012). Within this context, densification has increasingly been promoted as a key planning strategy to counter urban sprawl and optimize land use (Neuman, 2005).

However, when densification is pursued primarily through regulatory parameters and quantitative indicators, detached from an overarching urban project, it risks reinforcing fragmentation rather than producing urban coherence (Secchi, 2010). In Tirana, formally approved architectural projects often develop as isolated objects, complying with planning regulations while remaining disconnected from their urban context. This condition contributes to the progressive loss of urban form, understood not merely as a visual or stylistic issue, but as the erosion of spatial continuity, hierarchy, and collective structure (Rossi, 1982).

The Urban Planning Framework in Albania

Following the collapse of the communist regime, urban planning instruments and building regulations in Albania developed primarily as a response to the urgent need to control the expansion of existing cities. The absence of a comprehensive territorial planning document during the transition period facilitated the uncontrolled proliferation of informal and uncoordinated urban development. This process resulted in the superimposition of new structures onto pre-existing urban fabrics without adherence to coherent spatial principles. Even today, the implementation tools guiding densification frequently overlook the temporal dimension, neglecting time as a fundamental factor in the stratification and layered evolution of urban form.

Under the communist regime, urban development was centrally controlled and characterized by strict functional zoning, standardized architectural production, and limited urban expansion (French & Hamilton, 1979). Although ideologically rigid, this system maintained a relatively coherent relationship between planning and urban form. The collapse of this framework in the early 1990s generated an immediate institutional vacuum, coinciding with intense internal migration toward Tirana and accelerating urban growth under conditions of weak governance (Pojani, 2013).

During the first decade of transition, urban expansion occurred largely outside formal planning mechanisms. Informal settlements and unauthorized constructions spread rapidly, transforming both peripheral and central areas (De Soto, 2000; Aliaj, Lulo & Myftiu, 2003). Planning legislation initially focused on legalization and regularization rather than long-term spatial coordination. The absence of a comprehensive territorial plan encouraged fragmented decision-making and partial interventions, further undermining urban coherence.

In response, planning instruments gradually

evolved to include local master plans and detailed implementation plans aimed at regulating density, land use, and building parameters (UN-Habitat, 2014). Densification emerged as a central strategy to counter dispersed development and optimize land consumption. However, these instruments often operated in isolation, privileging quantitative control over spatial principles and concentrating on individual parcels or limited zones rather than holistically addressing the city's structure.

As a result, planning in Tirana predominantly functions as an administrative apparatus that applies regulatory parameters to building form such as height limits, setback distances, and coverage ratios without articulating a coherent urban vision integrating streets, blocks, and public spaces. This regulatory approach has enabled private developments to proliferate legally

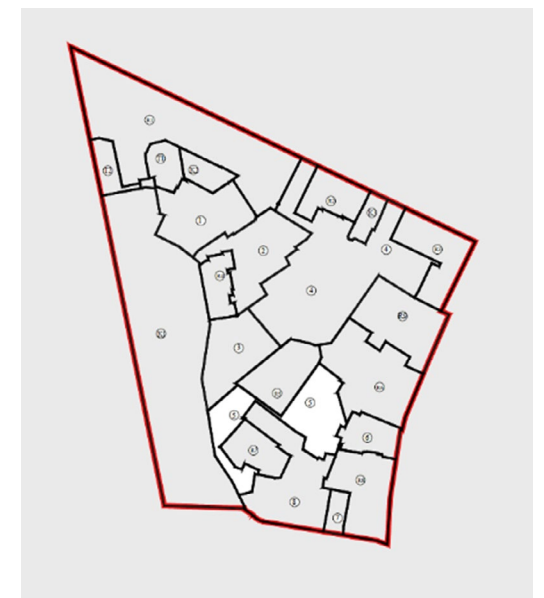


Fig. N. Structural Unit TR 367 According to the Tirana General Local Plan (PPV): Subdivision into Sub-Units

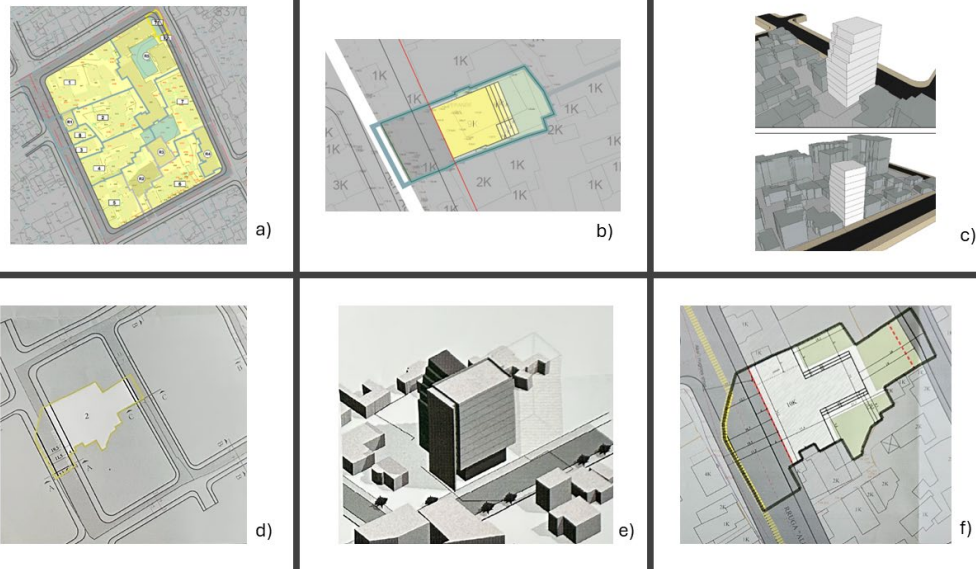


Fig. 1 Structural Unit TR 325 dhe TR 332 According to PPV: development of sub-unit 2 (d,e,f) and 3 (b,c)

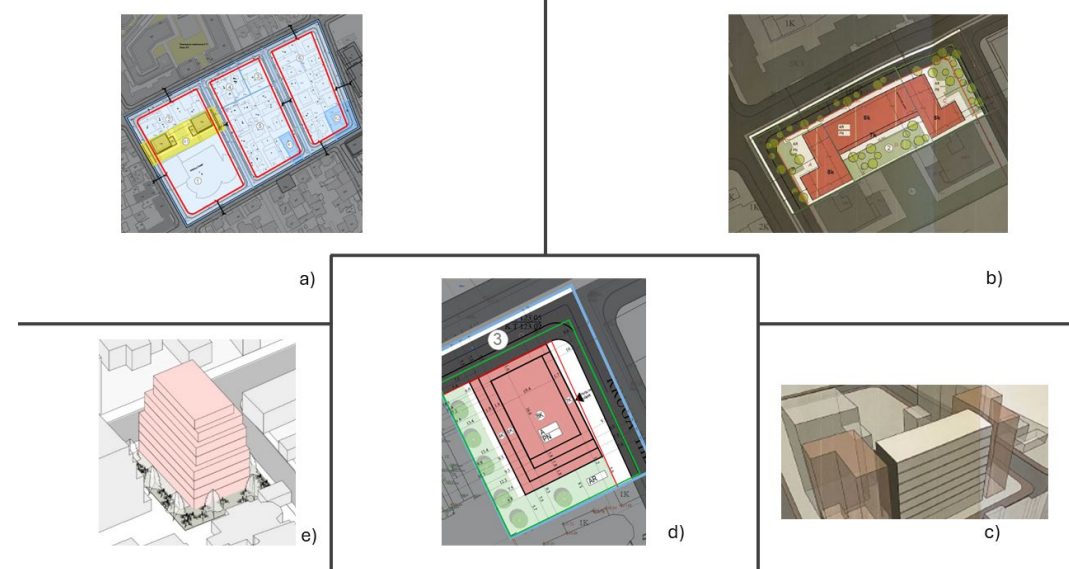


Fig. 2 Structural Unit TR 326 (a) According to PPV: development of sub-unit 2 (b,c) dhe 3 (d,e)

46 without contributing to the collective spatial structure, thereby perpetuating fragmentation and progressively eroding the city's urban form (Healey, 2007).

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative and analytical research design grounded in urban morphological analysis (Moudon, 1997; Kropf, 2009). A series of case studies was strategically selected along a spatial gradient extending from the urban periphery to the central areas of Tirana. This sampling strategy enables a comparative examination of how densification processes unfold across heterogeneous urban contexts and distinct historical strata (Stanilov, 2014).

The primary sources include detailed implementation plans, officially approved architectural projects, planning regulations, and cartographic documentation. The analytical process involved the reconstruction of urban blocks through comparative diagramming, figure-ground analysis, and volumetric modeling. These techniques facilitate a systematic assessment of the relationships between regulatory frameworks, design intentions, and built outcomes, allowing discrepancies between planned objectives and materialized forms to be critically identified (Groat & Wang, 2013).

Rather than assessing individual buildings as autonomous objects, the methodology evaluates their cumulative impact on block morphology, public space configuration, and spatial continuity. By foregrounding the relational and aggregated effects of architectural interventions, this approach conceptualizes urban form as a collectively produced structure. It is consistent with established case study methodologies widely employed in urban and architectural research.

Urban Form, Temporality, and Densification

Urban form is not the immediate outcome of

isolated design decisions, but rather the product of a cumulative and stratified process unfolding over time. Urban morphological theory emphasizes continuity, transformation, and layering as fundamental mechanisms in the construction of the city (Conzen, 1960; Muratori, 1960; Caniggia & Maffei, 2001). Streets, blocks, plots, and buildings interact through temporal sequences, generating coherent structures when guided by shared spatial principles.

When densification is understood merely as an increase in built volume or population density, it risks disregarding this temporal dimension. Quantitative approaches to density frequently privilege short-term efficiency over long-term urban coherence (Churchman, 1999; Berghauer Pont & Haupt, 2010). By contrast, a morphological interpretation of densification considers how new interventions relate to existing structures, reinforce spatial hierarchies, and contribute to the evolutionary logic of urban form (Secchi, 2010).

A central premise of this study is that architecture cannot be conceived as an isolated or purely private act. As Hermann Hertzberger observes, "Every building, no matter how private it is intended to be, has a role to play in the public realm, whether it likes it or not, and God knows it can become a permanent cultural irritant." This statement underscores the inherent social and spatial responsibility embedded in every architectural intervention.

Building upon this premise, the study reconstructs the urban form of selected blocks as the composite outcome of implementation plans and realized architectural projects, intending to identify significant mismatches between the intended urban project and the materialized urban form. This approach enables an examination of how fragmented densification processes and architectural autonomy contribute to the erosion of coherent urban form, reinforcing the understanding that each building—regardless of its private intent—inevitably shapes the public realm.

The relationship between architecture and

urban projects is therefore central to this inquiry. Architecture may either reinforce or undermine urban structure. When buildings are conceived as autonomous objects, responding primarily to market logic or individual expression, they may comply with regulatory parameters while remaining disengaged from their urban context (Koolhaas, 1995). Conversely, architecture that engages with the scale, rhythm, and continuity of the city contributes to the construction of collective form (Rossi, 1982; Rowe & Koetter, 1978).

In contexts where planning instruments fail to articulate a coherent urban project, architectural quality becomes a decisive factor. This study adopts this theoretical perspective to analyze how densification strategies in Tirana have interacted with architectural practice to produce fragmented urban outcomes.

The analyzed case studies reveal recurring patterns of fragmented densification across diverse urban contexts:

- **Urban Peripheries (Fig. 4).** Detailed implementation plans frequently prescribe higher densities without establishing a coherent relationship between new developments and pre-existing informal structures. As a result, large-scale residential or mixed-use complexes emerge as enclaves, spatially disconnected from surrounding street networks and public spaces (UN-Habitat, 2012; Pojani, 2016). Rather than consolidating the urban fabric, densification in these areas often reinforces spatial discontinuity.

- **Intermediate Zones (Fig. 2).** In areas where socialist-era blocks coexist with post-transition developments, densification typically takes the form of infill projects. While such interventions increase built volume, they frequently disregard the original block structure, disrupting established spatial hierarchies and fragmenting open spaces (Stanilov & Scheer, 2019). Although architecturally compliant in formal terms, these projects often fail

to mediate between old and new morphological systems (Hirt & Petrović, 2011). The result is not morphological integration but layered incongruity.

- **Urban Centers (Figs. 1 and 3).** In central areas, densification is driven primarily by high land values and speculative investment dynamics. Implementation plans permit significant increases in height and floor area ratios, encouraging the replacement or overbuilding of existing blocks (Logan & Molotch, 1987). Architectural projects frequently emphasize autonomy, prioritizing iconic form or profit maximization over urban continuity. The cumulative effect is a decline in block legibility and the progressive privatization of formerly collective spaces (Harvey, 2001).

According to national planning legislation and related regulations, the Detailed Local Plan (Plani i Detajuar Vendor – PDV) constitutes a formal planning instrument intended to ensure the implementation of national and local planning frameworks within one or more structural units. It represents the most granular level of statutory planning and functions as the operational mechanism through which development parameters are defined and enforced. Within the PPV framework (General Local Plan), the structural unit serves as an intermediate territorial scale linking strategic citywide objectives to site-specific implementation mechanisms.

During the preparation of a PDV, the study area—typically corresponding to a structural unit (Fig. N)—is subdivided into a hierarchical system of sub-units for detailed planning purposes. This subdivision enables the allocation of development indicators, land-use designations, and regulatory parameters at a more granular level. Typically, the subdivision includes:

- a) Development and restructuring sub-units, which serve as the primary territorial units for spatial analysis and the allocation of development indicators (e.g., density, floor area ratio, land use parameters);
- b) Management sub-units, defined according to the

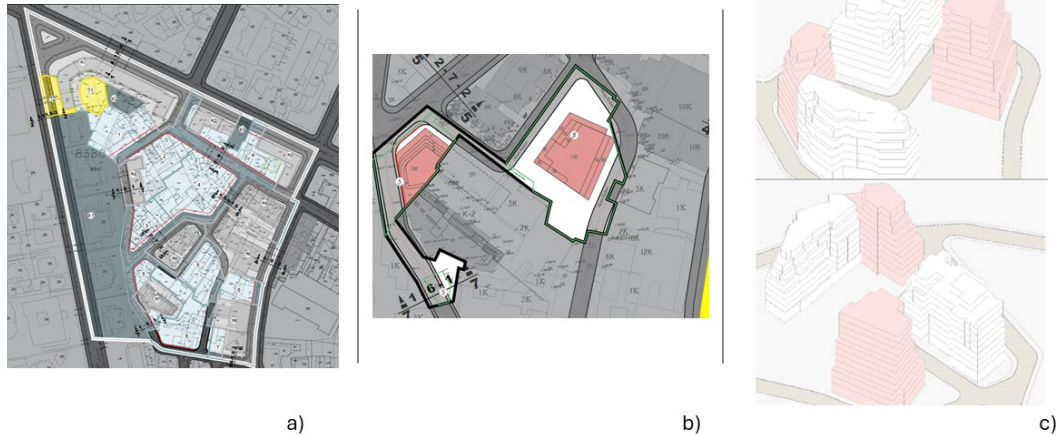


Fig. 3 Structural Unit TR 367 (a) According to PPV: development of sub-unit 5 (b,c)

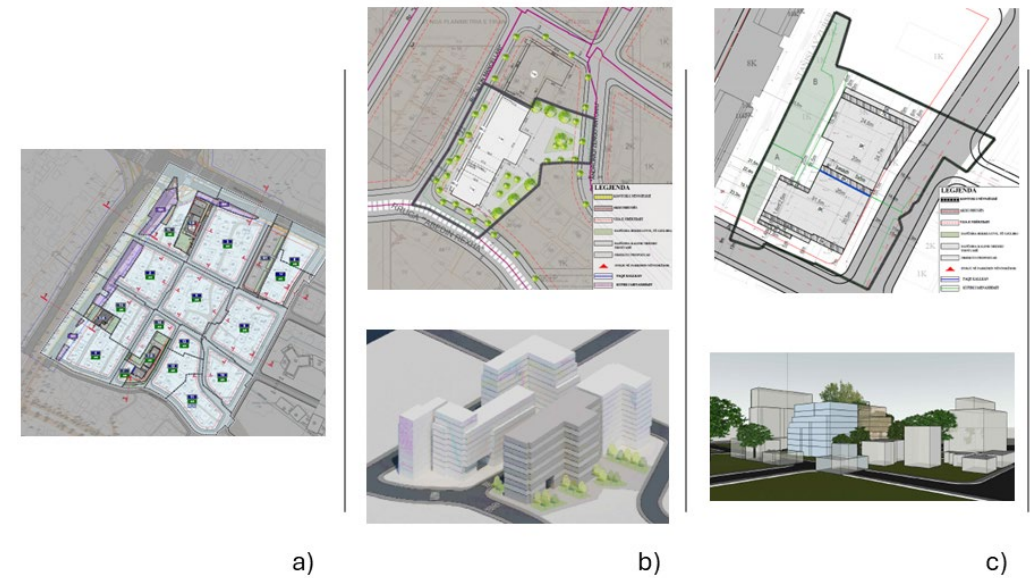


Fig. 4 Structural Unit TR 437 (a) According to PPV: development of sub-unit 12 (b) dhe 17 (c)

urban design framework and property management plan, regulating implementation procedures and ownership-related considerations. While the PDV provides a structured regulatory framework, the case studies indicate that its subdivision logic and parameter-based approach often prioritize quantitative development indicators over morphological coherence. Therefore, the instrument tends to facilitate parcel-based intensification rather than block-scale or citywide structural integration.

The PDV is intended to ensure the proportional distribution of development indicators across all development sub-units. In practice, however, territorial management through these sub-units has operated primarily as an administrative mechanism, focused on procedural requirements for obtaining building permits from the relevant authorities. This approach has led to the fragmentation of the PDV along the lines of private development interests, rather than fostering a shared vision for urban form. Therefore, the PDV has struggled to function as a coherent planning framework. When development is addressed at the scale of isolated sub-units, the relational qualities between buildings—such as spatial continuity, hierarchy, permeability, and collective form—are frequently overlooked. Urban space is thus produced as an assemblage of autonomous objects, lacking coordination in terms of scale, orientation, public space integration, and spatial sequencing. This object-based approach constrains the capacity of urban design to mediate adjacency and continuity between neighboring developments and to generate meaningful public spaces.

From the perspective of urban form theory, these findings conflict with Lynch's principles, which emphasize the legibility and coherence of the city as a product of interconnected spatial elements streets, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks perceived as part of an integrated whole. When

planning instruments fail to incorporate these relational structures, the urban environment risks becoming perceptually fragmented and functionally dispersed. The absence of a unified urban framework within the PDV undermines both the experiential quality of urban space and the city's long-term capacity to evolve as a coherent spatial system.

Comparative analysis of the case studies demonstrates that fragmented densification in Tirana is not an accidental phenomenon, but a structural condition produced by the interaction between planning instruments and architectural practice (Secchi & Viganò, 2011). Implementation plans regulate density without articulating form, allowing architectural projects to operate autonomously within prescribed parameters.

This condition results in a city composed of isolated buildings rather than integrated urban structures. Streets lose continuity, blocks disaggregate into clusters of objects, and public space becomes residual, reflecting broader processes of urban fragmentation observed in contemporary cities. Architecture plays a central role in this dynamic. When architectural quality is reduced to formal novelty or mere regulatory compliance, it fails to contribute to the collective dimension of the city. Mediocre architecture, replicated across multiple developments, has become a powerful driver of urban deformation (Frampton, 1983; Koolhaas, 1995).

Toward an Urban Project

The analysis highlights the need for a fundamental shift from regulatory planning toward a project-oriented urban approach. Implementation plans must move beyond numerical parameters to incorporate clear spatial principles, addressing block structure, street continuity, and the quality of public spaces (Solà-Morales, 1997; Secchi, 2006). Reintegrating time as a planning dimension is essential. Urban form should be understood as

an evolving structure, capable of accommodating transformation without losing its coherence (Secchi, 2010). This requires planning instruments that guide incremental change rather than merely permitting isolated interventions.

Architectural practice must also be situated within a collective framework. Architectural quality should be assessed not only in terms of individual expression but also for its contribution to the shared urban form. In this sense, architecture becomes a civic act, an integral part of the city-building process rather than a separate entity operating independently (Sennett, 2018).

This model suggests several practical steps for Tirana and other post-communist cities:

- Implementation plans should include morphological guidelines, not just height and density limits;
- Flexible instruments for incremental transformation should be developed, allowing continuous growth while maintaining the coherence of urban structure;
- Evaluation of architectural projects should consider their impact on street networks, blocks, and public spaces, recognizing each building as part of a larger urban system.

In this way, the urban project becomes a driver of urban coherence, ensuring that densification does not lead to fragmentation but rather reinforces the city's structure and the continuity of public spaces.

Conclusions

The study of post-communist urban developments in Tirana demonstrates that the city's densification has not occurred randomly but because of the complex interaction between planning instruments and architectural practice. Implementation plans, primarily guided by regulatory limits and quantitative parameters, have failed to provide an integrated urban vision, allowing buildings to emerge as autonomous objects, often disconnected from street networks, block structure, and public spaces. Within this framework, separated architectural building, replicated across multiple interventions,

has played a decisive role in the erosion of spatial continuity and the fragmentation of the city.

The outcome is a city in which urban form is fragmented, streets lose their connective logic, blocks disaggregate into assemblies of isolated buildings, and public spaces become residual. This condition is not merely an aesthetic issue; it directly affects accessibility, social coexistence, and the way citizens experience the urban environment. From this perspective, the loss of urban coherence cannot be understood solely as a regulatory failure but as a complex cultural and disciplinary phenomenon, where market logic, architectural autonomy, and the absence of a shared urban vision exert cumulative effects.

The narrative of Tirana suggests that sustainable and integrated densification requires a fundamental shift in planning and design approaches. Implementation plans must move beyond numerical parameters to include clear spatial and morphological principles that guide the incremental evolution of the city. Architectural interventions cannot be assessed solely by their individual form; they must be understood as part of a broader urban ecosystem, in which each building contributes to collective structure, spatial coherence, and the quality of public space.

This study conveys a clear lesson for Tirana: a city that develops mostly according to market forces and regulatory parameters, without an integrated urban vision, will continue to fragment. Conversely, restoring urban coherence requires integrating time as a planning dimension, constructing structures capable of evolving without losing continuity, and recognizing architecture as a civic act. Such an approach not only recovers the city's lost form but also contributes to the creation of urban spaces that are functional, legible, and sustainable for future generations.

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