

# The Role of Urban Mobility in Shaping City's Image and Boosting Tourism

## The Case of Tirana

DOI: 10.37199/o41011114

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**Abstract** - *Urban Mobility has a crucial role in shaping the image of the city and affecting its attraction as a tourism destination. To make a vibrant, sustainable and habitable city an effective urban transportation is needed. The performance of economy, environmental sustainability, tourism, and the general standard of life are all significantly impacted. Adequate congestion and transportation management is crucial in rapidly growing cities like Tirana, both to improve everyday urban living and to increase the city's attractiveness to tourists. This paper deals with the connection between Tirana's urban mobility, tourism growth, and the city's image. It evaluates the negative consequences that reduced mobility systems, traffic congestion and insufficient infrastructure might have on tourists' experiences and the city's perception. As a result, it explores how strategic changes to urban mobility—like the development of a favourable city image, draw more tourists, and support sustained economic growth. A major problem that needs to be addressed in the case of Tirana is the establishment of an appropriate road network that links the city's main tourist attractions with adequate urban transport. By addressing these issues, Tirana can improve its image internationally, increase accessibility, and make the city a more sustainable and pleasant place for both locals and tourists. This study highlights the benefit of an integrated approach to urban planning that takes into consideration city branding, tourism management, and infrastructure as interconnected components that work together to establish the city's future. It takes a comprehensive approach to address present issues and build the city for long-term success.*

**Keywords** - City Branding, City Image, Urban Mobility, Tourism

### Introduction

#### Urban Development of Tirana

To understand how the traffic and infrastructure problem arose in the city of Tirana, we need to go back in time, from the first planning projects to the present day. This is because by analysing the work during the implementation of its regulatory projects, we will try to identify the cause of the real problems already reflected. At the time of its declaration as the capital, Tirana had a spontaneous, organic structure with medieval characteristics. It had no modern enterprises and was dominated by separated crafts such as textiles and metallurgy, which employed one to three apprentices. (Dhamo & Thomai, 2016) The economic crisis was resolved and the rate of industrial and economic growth was accelerated with the coronation of Ahmet Zog as king of Albania's constitutional monarchy. Following 1939, Tirana was overrun by Italian fascist and later German forces, ushering in a new era of local projects and implementations. The first plan for the new capital's center was designed in 1925 by renowned Italian

architect Armando Brasini. In his early versions of the boulevard, the Royal Palace was planned to be built on the dominating hill in the southern half of the axis, with the lands along the axis were given to high-ranking government officials. For this reason, this area became a manifestation of Tirana's new architecture, expressed in different languages: from the most traditional ones or those influenced by Italian architecture from the fascist period, to those representing the newest movement of European modernity. Meanwhile, during the communist period, along this same axis, the government established its own hierarchical structure. The offices of the Central Committee of the PPSH were built along the so-called "bllok", where the highest-ranking figures of the party hierarchy resided. Although the Boulevard is an abstract geometric scheme, it best visualizes and reflects the local features of the Tirana valley. A more thorough design for Tirana was created in 1926;

it was essentially an extension of the 1923 plan. A further thorough plan for Tirana was developed in 1926. Kohler and Frashëri later created a more comprehensive plan for Tirana in 1928, which required the city to expand south-westward in the area of New Tirana. It was more of a modification of the idea from 1923. We find a re-establishment of Tirana's transition from an organic city to an organized city in the years 1939–1943 in the city's regulatory plan. Continuing in 1957–1958, the city witnessed a period of transition during which the historic center was demolished and an artificial lake park was constructed. Over these years, Tirana had developed an industrial zone and started to lose its small-crafts identity. It was suggested that the road network scheme operate in a "circular" manner, with outer and inner rings, radius that reached the city center, and two bypasses that ran parallel to the city's central axis and traversed the city in north-south directions. This would ensure that traffic was distributed evenly throughout the various parts of the city at the time. The establishment of several types of small routes that would enhance the network's overall performance also fulfilled this aim. With a length of roughly 8 km, the radials—which included Durres Road, Kavaja Road, Dibra Road, and Elbasan Road—were connected to both the inner and outer rings, intersecting with the latter in the regions that were then suburbs in its broadest sense, this road conception heavily referenced the proposal set forth in the 1943-approved regulation plan, particularly for the section inside the outer ring road. The implementation of this road system established the foundations for the more structured operation of Tirana's road network, as well as the framework for the city's structural expansion and the modification of construction typologies to conform to this new framework. Unfortunately, parts of the outer ring road's projected segments were never built, which has caused circulation and connection issues across a significant part of the city. The Bërryli district up to Elbasan Road, which is currently heavily inhabited and suffers from the

absence of a major transportation route, is typical of this phenomenon. It would be quite expensive to open nowadays. Time demonstrated that some of the inner ring's elements would never be constructed. Since the 1937 cartography surveys had not been updated and were not included in a separate plan, it was challenging to get a clear picture of the collapses that would result from the construction of new roads and green areas. (Fig. 1) Traffic congestion is still a big issue because of the way the present infrastructure is set up, which was encouraged by the 1957–1958 (Fig. 2) and 1985–1989 plans as well as the proposed unfinished traffic scheme of the "Greater Tirana" Strategic Plan (2001).

#### Transportation in Tirana

Road infrastructure in Tirana was one of the issues we discussed earlier, but public transportation is another crucial component that has a negative effect on this phenomenon. From 1944–1990, Albania was under the rule of a communist regime that prohibited the ownership of a private vehicle. In addition, a substandard public bus system, bicycles, a few motorcycles, and a few taxies for special occasions provided passenger transport. A small fleet of horse-drawn carriages was in use for goods transport. The poor quality of public transport in Tirana during communism stood in sharp contrast with other communist capitals, which often had very good bus and rail systems. Since the fall of communism, Tirana has experienced a population explosion from 300,000 to well over 800,000, owing to rural-urban migration (Fig 3). (Pojani, 2010) A dual city has developed as a result of this process. New high-rise apartment complexes, usually ten to twelve stories, were constructed in the inner city at great densities, squeezed into the available space between existing buildings. Unable to afford conventional accommodation, new migrants occupied private or public agricultural property and constructed large, unpermitted dwellings on the outer edges of cities. The occupied land had limited

access to official public transportation routes and frequently lacked roads and other infrastructure. Big box stores and light industrial sprawl along the major interstate routes came after this trend. Compared to other communist capitals in East Europe, Tirana's public transportation system, which only included buses, was of deplorable quality during the communist era. (Fig. 4).

A modest fleet of 114 buses, covering 12 routes with an average distance of 12 km each, was left to Tirana from the Soviet era. The bus stock was in poor condition. Only roughly half of the buses were in operation on any given day. Typically, the buses were packed and lacked a set timetable. Station wait times were frequently longer than thirty minutes. A conductor collected fares on board and issued tickets using a manual ticketing system (monthly passes were also utilized). Following the fall of communism, the land uses and density structure of the city changed, making many routes and stations inconvenient.

The hygienic, maintenance, and service standards of buses were inadequate. The air inside the buses was unbearable during the sweltering summer months in Tirana. Overcrowding was really bad on rainy days and around rush hour. In addition, busses were rather slow. Frequently, buses remained in the stations until they had enough passengers on board, instead of leaving and departing on a scheduled basis. There was no shelter at bus stops. Throughout the 1990s, the public transportation industry remained highly centralized in terms of management. (Fig. 5).

A single public enterprise offered both urban and suburban public transportation services in the city, despite the fact that there was no legal monopoly on the sector. This company, which belonged to the Ministry of Transportation, had no working capital and no debt. By the mid-1990s, bus ridership had fallen by half compared to communist times. Public transportation's modal share of trips had decreased to 16 percent by the late 1990s, with over half of those trips being to and from work. The users' transition to cars was accelerated by the subpar bus services. In a vicious circle, reduced revenue led to further deterioration. During the mid to late 1990s, the dilapidated bus fleet that had been in use throughout communism had been replaced with a colorful, mismatched fleet of used vehicles that had previously been employed in other European cities with the entrance of foreign help. Not much was done to modify their look for Tirana use. Buses frequently featured "out of service" signs in foreign languages along with the logos of the foreign businesses that had donated or sold them for low costs. Additionally, all instructions were given in foreign languages. Despite being in far better shape than the fleet they replaced, these buses did little to enhance public transportation's reputation.

Around 1999, a significant number of unofficial minivans, sometimes known as "furgons," entered the market as a result of the formal public transportation system's crisis. In fact, this type of unofficial transportation is common in underdeveloped nations all over the world. In addition to competing with the public enterprise on all public bus routes, inner-city furgons (10-seat minivans) also provided service to locations that buses did not reach. Furgons were thought to be the

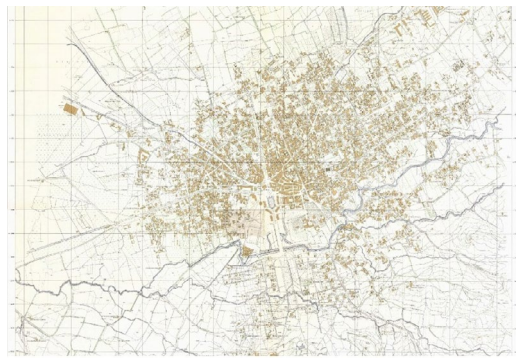


Fig 1/ Map of Tirana 1937.  
source/ Endritzeneli, Wordpress (2012)



Fig 2/ Map of Tirana 1958  
source/ Flickr (2013)

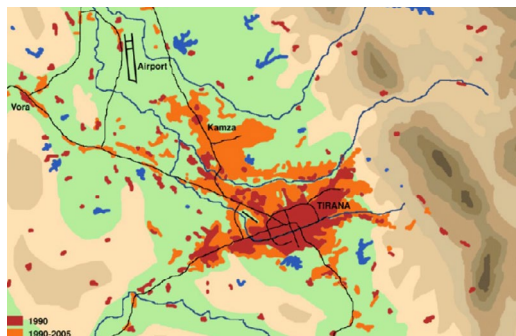


Fig 3/ Urban expansion in the post-1990 period. (Most squatter settlements are around Kamza).  
source/ Tirana Expansion, Wikipedia (2007)



Fig 4/ Public bus in the 1980s.  
source/ Shqiperia në Vitet e Socializmit



Fig 5/ Transportation in Tirana in 1991.  
source/ Christian Jungeblodt (1991)



Fig 6/ The carelessness of the public transport staff.  
source/ Gazetasi.al (2022)

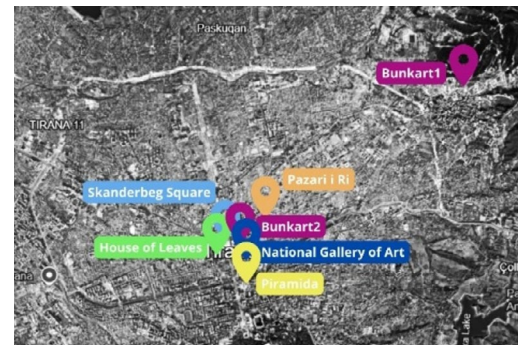


Fig 7/ Map of Attractions in Tirana.  
source/ Retrieved from Google Earth (2025)



Fig 8/ Guided Sightseeing and Cultural City Tour.

source/ Get Your Guide (2025)



Fig 4/ Micromobility example.  
source/ By author (2025)

city's quickest form of transportation. In actuality, furgons' tiny size made them easier to manoeuvre in the traffic. Along the way, furgons also made "elastic" trips, picking up and dropping off individuals as needed; if police were visible at junctions, furgons changed where they stopped to evade police restrictions. The City of Tirana made the decision to privatize the public transportation system in 2001, following the example set by other East European towns. By 2006, four private businesses ran nine of the ten urban lines, which had been effectively privatized. (Pojani, 2010) These days, the City of Tirana primarily serves as a watchdog over private businesses rather than as a transportation provider. The city determines policies about how public transportation is distributed around the city, how many lines are added, where bus stops and terminals are located, how much money is given to businesses that are still in the public sector, and the conditions of agreements with private businesses. Bus users in the suburbs complained more about high fares, frequent stops, frequent changes in bus stop locations, the fact that passengers are permitted to transport trading goods on buses, and the suburban lines' lack of access to the city center than urban bus users did about overcrowding, slow speed, and low frequency. The primary factors compromising the quality of bus services are the negligence of public transportation employees, the high volume of traffic, the small number of buses, and the absence of government oversight. (Fig. 6). Given the city's high population, moderate size, and level topography, Tirana's transportation issues and negative transport externalities might be significantly reduced without the need for extraordinary public investments. Because of this, a lot of urban travel can be done on foot, by bicycle, or by taking quick bus trips. One of the people's main concerns is the calibre of public transportation services. By conducting this analysis over the years regarding infrastructure and transportation services, this directly affects the tourism sector and the image of the city that may be created.

### Aspects of Tourism in Tirana

The tourist industry has recovered well from the pandemic, as seen by the ongoing growth in both numbers of tourists and profits. Tirana has profited from this trend by drawing more visitors to its historical and cultural sites. In 2023, there was a notable surge in cultural tourism, surpassing even the 2019 numbers. The Ministry of Culture reports that 391,608 domestic and foreign visitors visited national museums, 342,824 visited archeological parks, and 271,383 visited fortresses and other historical sites. Given the growing number of tourists, the city's mobility and infrastructural issues need to be fixed. According to Tripadvisor and Visit Tirana, some of the top tourist attractions are:

- Skanderbeg Square
- Bunk'Art 1 & 2
- National Gallery of Arts
- Pazar i Ri (New Bazaar)
- Pyramid of Tirana (Piramida)
- House of Leaves – Museum of Surveillance

With the National History Museum, Et'hem Bey Mosque, and the Clock Tower all nearby, Skanderbeg Square is a prominent landmark in

Tirana, according to TripAdvisor. Located in a huge subterranean bunker, Bunk'Art 1 is a historical and artistic facility that provides information about Albania's communist era. The history of the Albanian Ministry of Internal Affairs from 1912 to 1991 is the main topic of Bunk'Art 2. The primary venue for showcasing and preserving Albania's visual arts legacy, the National Gallery of Arts is home to more than 4,600 pieces of art, according to Visit Tirana. According to Tripadvisor, Pazari i Ri is a newly renovated market with a range of sellers offering locally made goods, souvenirs, and fresh vegetables, all of which add to the lively atmosphere. The House of Leaves, a museum devoted to Albania's surveillance history, resides in a structure that was formerly the National Intelligence Service headquarters. The Pyramid of Tirana, which was first constructed as a mausoleum for Enver Hoxha, is now a popular tourist destination and a representation of Albania's controversial past, according to Visit Tirana. In the following map (Fig. 7) is shown the location of these attractions.

### Micromobility as a solution

To attempt to cope with problematic urban issues driven by an increase in the usage of private transportation, many tourist locations are focusing more on "micromobilities." (Fig. 8) The term "Micromobilities" is still up for debate, but it generally encompasses the non-motorised modes of walking and cycling in addition to several fast-growing new forms of mobilities. (Davies Nick, 2020). For Tirana and tourists visiting these alluring locations, this might be a fantastic option. The last few years have witnessed significant improvements to Tirana's urban planning, especially in the area of encouraging sustainable travel. Dedicated bike lanes, scooter-sharing services like GoGreen Albania and Tirana Ecobike, as well as expanded pedestrian zones, have all been implemented by the municipality. Because of such developments, micromobility in Tirana's city core is particularly accessible. (Fig. 9) The heart of Tirana is Skanderbeg Square, which is conveniently accessible by bicycle, scooter, or foot. It is perfect for walking excursions because it is a pedestrian-only area. There are parking spaces for bikes and scooters on the nearby streets. The National Gallery of Arts is about a 5- to 7-minute walk northeast of Skanderbeg Square. On Bulevardi "Dëshmorët e Kombit", a designated bike lane provides a secure path for scooter and bicycle users. Skanderbeg Square is only a short stroll west of the House of Leaves (Museum of Surveillance). Walking is the most convenient choice because it's situated in a small, historic street. Bunk'Art 2, located in the pedestrian zone behind the Et'hem Bey Mosque next to Skanderbeg Square, is only accessible by foot. It takes 8 to 10 minutes to walk east from Skanderbeg Square to the New Bazaar. Bicycles and scooters are permitted in this area, which is reachable by "Rruga Hoxha Tahsim" or "Rruga e Barrikadave". Parking spaces are accessible at the entrance. The Pyramid of Tirana is most straightforward accessed by foot or micromobility via Bulevardi Dëshmorët e Kombit, and it is roughly ten to twelve minutes from Skanderbeg Square. This mode of transport is made convenient by bike lanes and scooter lanes. Bunk'Art 1 is situated close to Mount Dajti on the outskirts of Tirana, in

contrast to the other attractions. Taking a city bus to the Dajti Ekspres Cable Car station is the most convenient way to get there. After taking a cable car to the location, visitors can take a quick stroll.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

The city we perceive, not just the city that is. (Lynch, 1960) The story of a city is often told through its monuments and museums, but it is lived and felt in the spaces between them—on its streets, sidewalks, and public squares. (Cullen, 1961) In Albania's vibrant capital, Tirana, a quiet revolution in urban movement is reshaping how both residents and visitors connect with its layered narrative. The city, with its favourable topography and a growing commitment to rebalancing its public spaces, is emerging as a compelling laboratory for sustainable tourism. By threading its key historical sites together with a network of bike lanes and pedestrian zones, Tirana invites us to experience its past and present not through the insulated window of a car, but from the intimate vantage point of a bicycle seat or a leisurely stroll. This shift towards micromobility does more than just lower carbon emissions; it fosters a slower, more sensory engagement with the urban environment, allowing the rhythm of the city to become part of the visitor's experience. To truly grasp this synergy, one can imagine a journey beginning at the city's reinvented heart: Skanderbeg Square. This vast, car-free civic space is far more than a crossroads; it is a statement of intent. Here, the cacophony of traffic has been replaced by the hum of human interaction, creating a democratic plaza where the city's architectural soul—a palpable mix of Ottoman, Italian, and Soviet influences—can be contemplated at a human pace. The equestrian statue of national hero Skanderbeg gazes out over a city consciously redefining itself. From this central axis, the recent history of the Albanian nation unfolds within a short, walkable radius. A cluster of sites offers a profound, if at times unsettling, immersion into the 20th century. At Bunk'Art 2, housed in a former anti-nuclear bunker, the chilling narrative of the communist regime's surveillance state is made visceral. Just steps away, the delicate beauty of the Et'hem Bey Mosque, with its rare frescoes of trees and waterfalls, provides a poignant counterpoint, speaking to an older, spiritual heritage. This dialogue between the oppressive and the sublime continues at the National History Museum, where a grand mosaic, The Albanians, attempts to visually consolidate the nation's long and complex story. The journey then pushes further, tracing the paths of memory etched into the city's fabric. A brief ride on a bicycle or e-scooter leads to the House of Leaves. This unassuming building, once the central listening post of the Sigurimi, the secret police, has been transformed into a museum of espionage. Its quiet corridors compel visitors to reflect on the architecture of fear and the fragile nature of privacy, making the newfound freedom of movement outside feel all the more significant. This theme of transformation finds its most potent architectural symbol a short distance away: the Pyramid of Tirana. Originally a mausoleum for the dictator Enver Hoxha, this concrete form is now being repurposed, its slopes a canvas for the city's youthful energy, slated to become a hub for technology and education. It stands not as a static

relic, but as a living testament to a society actively repurposing its most difficult monuments. After such intense historical engagement, the senses find respite at the Pazari i Ri (New Bazaar). This revitalized market is a feast of colours, smells, and sounds—a place to taste local specialties, hear the cadence of daily conversation, and witness the seamless blend of tradition and modernity that defines contemporary Tirana. It is a destination that feels naturally discovered, rather than simply visited, when approached via the city's human-scale transport. For those whose curiosity extends beyond the city centre, an optional excursion to Bunk'Art 1 offers a deeper, more remote dive. Accessed by a public bus ride and a breathtaking ascent on the Dajti Express cable car, this massive bunker tunneled into a mountainside is a stark reminder of the nation's isolation. The journey there, offering panoramic views of the city below, physically and metaphorically frames Tirana's past within its wider geographical and historical context. In conclusion, Tirana's ongoing investment in pedestrian and green infrastructure is more than a practical urban policy; it is a form of storytelling. By prioritizing the mobility of people over vehicles, the city is not only enhancing its tourist appeal but also actively crafting a new identity—one of accessibility, sustainability, and resilience. As visitors and residents alike weave through its streets on two wheels or on foot, they become active participants in this narrative, co-authoring a future where the journey between the past and the present is as enlightening as the destinations themselves.

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