BOOK OF PROCEEDINGS

# 1st International Conference on Built Environment

# ICBE 2026

MAY 08th-09th, 2026
POLIS University, Tiranë

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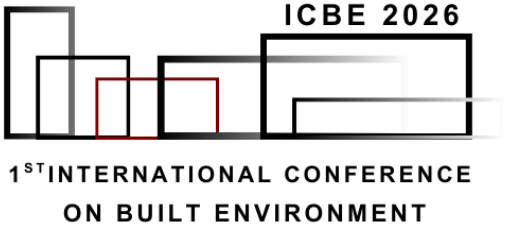
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# 1st International Conference on Built Environment

# ICBE 2026

## Conference Theme and Rationale

The 1st International Conference on Built Environment (ICBE 2026) was conceived as an international and interdisciplinary forum for advancing knowledge, critical discussion, and innovation across architecture, urban planning, engineering, construction, materials, design, and the wider built environment. Organized by POLIS University in collaboration with the National Agency for Scientific Research and Innovation in Albania (AKKSHI), the Academy of Sciences of Albania and the University of Ferrara in Italy, the conference brought together academics, researchers, practitioners, students, and industry representatives to exchange research findings, professional experience, and emerging perspectives on the transformation of contemporary cities and territories.

The conference theme reflected the increasingly complex challenges shaping the built environment, with particular attention to sustainability, resilience, technological innovation, heritage preservation, and socially responsive design. Contributions addressed sustainable architecture and green building, innovative construction technologies and materials, climate-responsive and energy-efficient design, disaster risk reduction, circular approaches to construction, and the integration of renewable energy. Equal emphasis was placed on digital transformation through Building Information Modeling, Geographic Information Systems, artificial intelligence, data analytics, automated solutions, digital fabrication, and advanced manufacturing.

ICBE 2026 also recognized that the future of the built environment cannot be approached through technological innovation alone. Urban transformation, cultural heritage, adaptive reuse, inclusive design, ecological thinking, art, and interdisciplinary research were therefore integral to the conference rationale. The scientific sessions examined topics ranging from seismic resilience, geotechnical engineering, and structural safety to urban fragmentation, public space, heritage conservation, adaptive environments, and new relationships between human and non-human systems.

Through keynote lectures, scientific presentations, case studies, and interdisciplinary debate, the conference encouraged connections between research and practice while promoting approaches capable of responding to environmental, social, cultural, and technological change. The breadth of contributions demonstrated the value of bringing engineering, architecture, urbanism, design, heritage, and emerging technologies into a shared academic framework for more resilient, sustainable, adaptive, and human-centered environments.

Held on 8-9 May 2026 at POLIS University in Tirana, with in-person and online participation, ICBE 2026 welcomed guest speakers and participants from Albanian and international universities, research institutions, professional organizations, and industry. Its sessions established a platform for presenting current research, exchanging expertise, strengthening meaningful collaboration, and identifying future directions for the built environment.

## The event

The **1st International Conference on Built Environment (ICBE 2026)** is an interdisciplinary academic and professional forum dedicated to exploring contemporary challenges, emerging research, and innovative approaches shaping the future of the built environment. Bringing together researchers, academics, architects, engineers, urban planners, designers, practitioners, and industry professionals, the conference promotes the exchange of knowledge and encourages collaboration across traditionally interconnected disciplines. Its thematic scope encompasses sustainable and resilient construction, technological innovation, advanced building materials, urban transformation, cultural heritage, and interdisciplinary design approaches. Particular attention is given to the growing role of digital technologies, data-driven methodologies, intelligent design processes, and advanced analytical tools in supporting more informed and responsive approaches to architecture, engineering, and urban development. At the same time, ICBE 2026 recognizes the importance of environmental responsibility, cultural identity, social needs, and human-centered design in shaping contemporary cities and territories. Through keynote lectures, scientific sessions, case studies, and interdisciplinary exchange, the conference provides a platform for presenting current research, discussing professional experiences, and developing new perspectives capable of contributing to **safer, more sustainable, adaptive, inclusive, and resilient built environments**.

## Objectives

- Promote interdisciplinary collaboration among researchers, academics, practitioners, and professionals in architecture, engineering, urban planning, construction, design, heritage, and related fields of the built environment.
- Advance the use of digital technologies and innovative methodologies, including BIM, GIS, artificial intelligence, data analytics, digital fabrication, and parametric approaches, in research and professional practice.
- Encourage sustainable, resilient, and climate-responsive approaches to architecture, construction, and urban development through innovative materials, energy-efficient strategies, and environmentally responsible design.
- Address contemporary challenges affecting cities, buildings, and infrastructure through scientific research, applied case studies, evidence-based approaches, and innovative design solutions.
- Promote the conservation, transformation, and adaptive reuse of cultural heritage, balancing cultural identity, contemporary needs, structural safety, and responsible urban development.
- Support human-centered and socially responsive urban transformation, considering public space, mobility, ecological systems, community needs, and the wider social and economic impacts of the built environment.
- Provide a platform for knowledge exchange and emerging research, enabling scholars, young researchers, professionals, and students to present innovative ideas, strengthen international collaboration, and contribute to future directions in the built environment.

## Main Conference Themes

- Sustainable architecture and green building practices.
- Innovations in construction technologies and materials.
- Heritage preservation and adaptive reuse in the built environment.
- Digital tools and smart technologies in architecture and construction (e.g., BIM, GIS).
- Climate-responsive and energy-efficient design.
- Disaster risk reduction and resilience in the built environment.
- Circular economy approaches in construction and material usage.
- Integration of AI and data analytics in building design.
- Acoustic and thermal performance in building design.
- Renewable energy integration in building systems.
- Advanced manufacturing techniques in construction, such as 3D printing.
- Innovations in construction technologies and materials.
- Heritage preservation and adaptive reuse in the built environment.
- Disaster risk reduction and resilience in the built environment.
- Digital tools and smart technologies in architecture and construction.
- Advanced manufacturing techniques in construction.
- Geotechnical Engineering for Sustainable Development.
- Cartography and Geographic Information System.
- Computer Automated Solutions for Built Environment.
- Reliability in Civil Engineering.
- Urban planning strategies for resilient cities.
- Climate-responsive and energy-efficient design.
- Regulatory frameworks and policies impacting construction and urban development.
- Design in the Era of Anthropocene (Rethinking the Relation between Human and Non-Human Species)
- Speculative Design (with Attention to “Discursive” and “Critical” Design)
- Design and Cross-Disciplinarity (with Emphasis on Processes rather than Design Outputs)
- Inclusive Design
- Art and Urban Regeneration (Focus on Participatory, Collaborative, and Research-Based Practice)
- Relational Art and Architecture
- Monuments and ‘Anti-Monuments’ (Particular Attention to the Process of Designing and Building the City)

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The conference is structured around six thematic sessions, each addressing a specific area of research and practice within the built environment.
Each session is coordinated by experts in the relevant disciplinary field and is open to professors, researchers, PhD candidates, and other scholars and professionals contributing to the conference themes.

### SESSION I
### Urban Planning and Societal Impact

**Chair:** Dr. Gent Avdija

This session examines the relationship between urban transformation, spatial development, and their social implications within contemporary cities. Contributions address rapid urbanization, urban fragmentation, the transformation and loss of public space, informal and spontaneous development, and the challenges associated with balancing growth and modernization with human-scale urban environments. Particular attention is given to the evolving conditions of Albanian cities and to planning approaches capable of supporting more inclusive, sustainable, socially responsive, and livable urban environments.

### SESSION II
### Sustainable Materials, Resilient Construction & Smart Design

**Chair:** Dr. Endri Duro

This session explores innovative approaches to sustainable construction, resilient structural systems, and environmentally responsive design. Particular attention is given to sustainable materials, energy-efficient and climate-responsive strategies, prefabricated and lightweight construction technologies, and human-centered approaches to structural and architectural design. The session investigates how material innovation, technological development, and responsible design practices can contribute to safer, more efficient, adaptable, and environmentally sustainable built environments.

### SESSION III
### Technological Advancements and Seismic Design for Resilient Places

**Chairs:** Dr. Seyyed Behrad Emadi & Dr. Ornela Şen

This session examines the role of technological innovation and advanced engineering methodologies in developing safer, more resilient, and adaptable built environments. Contributions address seismic hazard and risk assessment, digital fabrication, parametric and computational approaches, transformations of building envelopes and prefabricated housing systems, and emerging concepts for future urban mobility. The session highlights how the integration of engineering knowledge, digital technologies, and resilience-oriented design can strengthen the capacity of buildings, infrastructure, and urban environments to respond to contemporary and future challenges.

## SESSION IV

### Cultural Heritage

**Chairs:** Dr. Nikolla Vesho & Dr. Marsela Demaj

This session addresses the preservation, interpretation, and transformation of cultural heritage within contemporary architectural and urban contexts. Contributions explore conservation strategies for historic buildings and sacred architecture, seismic assessment and strengthening of heritage structures, adaptive reuse, and the social implications of urban regeneration and heritage loss. Particular emphasis is placed on achieving a responsible balance between conservation ethics, cultural identity, structural safety, and the evolving functional requirements of historic buildings and urban environments.

## SESSION V

### Spaces of Connection: Art and Design for an Interspecies and Interdisciplinary Environment

**Chair:** Dr. Francesco Scasciamacchia

This session explores the intersections of art, architecture, design, technology, and the built environment through interdisciplinary and experimental perspectives. It investigates changing relationships between human and non-human systems, spatial perception, adaptive reuse, post-industrial landscapes, urban representation, digital heritage, and environmentally and socially engaged design practices. Through critical, speculative, participatory, and research-based approaches, the session examines how art and design can generate new forms of connection, reinterpret existing environments, and contribute to emerging cultural and spatial narratives within contemporary cities.

## SESSION VI

### Next-Generation Pioneers of the Built Environment

**Chair:** Dr. Flogerta Krosi

This session provides a dedicated platform for emerging researchers and students to present innovative, experimental, and forward-looking approaches to the built environment. Contributions span architecture, engineering, urban planning, environmental resilience, design, and related creative disciplines, reflecting the interdisciplinary character of a new generation of researchers and practitioners. Through projects addressing topics such as bioclimatic design, flood-risk management, structural technologies, architecture-inspired design, and critical interpretations of objects and social space, the session encourages critical inquiry, experimentation, and new perspectives on the future of the built environment.

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# SESSION I

## Urban Planning and Societal Impact

Urban transformation and growth: Rapid urbanization / Urban expansion / Contemporary city transformation / Growth and modernization.

Urban form and spatial quality: Urban fragmentation / Human-scale development / Public-space transformation / Spatial continuity and connectivity.

Society and the city: Social impact of urban development / Community needs / Inclusive urban environments / Quality of urban life.

Planning challenges in changing cities: Spontaneous architecture / Informal development / Sustainable urban planning / Transformation of Albanian cities.

# The Fading Public Realm:
## From Expansive Open Spaces to Morphological Compression in Durres' Rapid Urban Growth.

**DOI:** 10.37199/c4100032

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**Abstract**

*Durres, located in Albania's western lowlands, has always been the main destination for internal immigration. From the early years after the Second World War, especially after the 90s, thousands of families from rural areas moved to the cities, transforming them into some of the fastest-growing areas in Albania. This wave of migration simulated rapid, mostly uncontrolled urbanization that changed the cityscape at its roots.*

*This study aims to analyze how open public spaces are increasingly being compressed as a result of rapid growth since the 90s. As we compare the historic map of the city of Durres, dating from 1928, with the more recent ones (2020-2025), one can notice a dramatic decrease in the percentage of open public space for inhabitants (Figure 1). This has created a strong sense of overload in the historical centre.*

*In 1928, Durres still had large public spaces: large squares and commercial streets that invited people to conduct their activities while serving as social spaces. These elements gave the city its identity and made it function as a city. But after the 90s, things changed rapidly; the boom of the buildings, tourist pressure, speculative real estate development, and the uncontrolled urban expansion reduced the open space ratio. And the result was a fragmented urban landscape, overloaded and increasingly less friendly to residents.*

*While using morphological analysis and GIS tools, this research calculates the quantitative transformations and identifies the most affected areas. This morphological compression has not eroded only the social and cultural role of the squares as public spaces – it has weakened the city's resilience to the climate challenge and demographic growth.*

***Keywords:*** *Rapid Urbanization, Public Space, Urban Fragmentation, Urban Resilience, Spatial Compression.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Public spaces are considered the most important elements of the city. They are not only areas that serve for walking in, but they are also important places for social interaction, collective memory, and places to stay.

In Mediterranean cities, like Durres, these spaces have always had a central role. Public spaces and commercial roads have served as meeting nodes, but also as urban structures that organized urban life. In these areas, economic activities were held, but in the meantime, the identity of the city was being built.

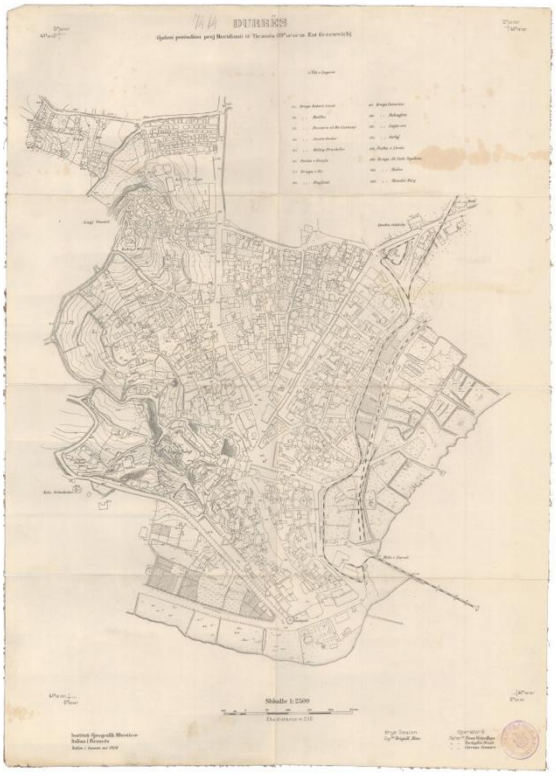



Figure 1: These two maps serve as the basis for the analysis. The first map (on the left) shows the map of the year 1928 of the whole city of Durres. The second map (on the right) shows the map of the city of Durres in 2020-2025 (the exact year is unknown).Source: AQTN

However, in the last few decades, this relation has changed, leading to a disbalance between urban elements. Rapid urbanization, especially after the 90s, has brought about a significant increase in the urban density. The buildings are being built, while the free spaces (once serving as public ones) are being shrunk. And often even without a plan.

In this context, Durres represents a significant case study. Rapid demographic growth and uncontrolled development have changed the relationship between free unbuilt spaces and those being built. But this is not a case about the urban form; this is a change that affects how the city functions and is being perceived.

This study tends to analyze this process, which here is determined as morphological compression of urban spaces. The analysis is focused on the historical center of Durres and its transformations over the past 100 years.

In this context, it is important to understand that public spaces are not only free spaces left between buildings, but they are also active parts of urban structure. They organize the movement, but also the posture (figure 2). In many cases, they create the rhythm of the city and directly affect the manner in which it is perceived by the inhabitants and visitors.

When these spaces are reduced or fragmented, the impact is not only visual, but functional and social. The city becomes more dense, but not necessarily more livable. The movement might be faster, but the stay becomes difficult. And with that, also the possibility for spontaneous interaction in public space.

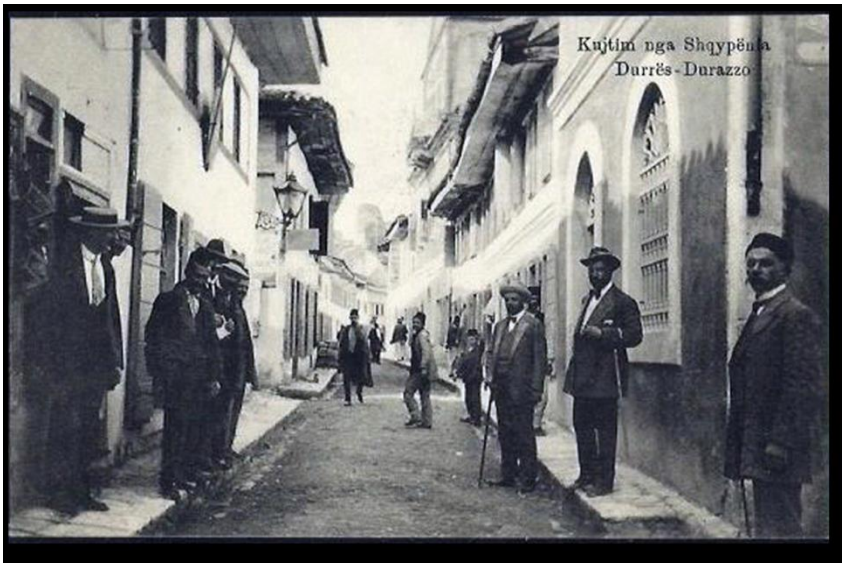



Figure 2: In this image, one of the main axes of Durres city, the Boulevard in 1917, is shown. Image from Kozma Borova.
We can notice the people gathering in the Boulevard, giving this space a social dimension.

In the city of Durres, this dynamic is also linked with the pressure coming from the tourist and economic development. The areas once serving as meeting nodes and other activities are transformed gradually into built areas or transit zones. This has changed the balance between the public and private spaces.

At the same time, the absence of a clear planning structure has made it possible for these transformations to happen in a fragmented manner. We do not have a linear process, but a series of interventions distributed in time and space. Exactly this makes it necessary to read the city morphologically to better understand not only what has changed, but also how and why this change has happened.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Public spaces represent one of the most important elements in the urban structure, directly influencing the way cities are perceived, used, and lived. In this sense, Kevin Lynch highlights that urban elements such as streets and squares are part of the image of the city and affect its readability and orientation (Lynch, 1960). In a similar way, Camillo Sitte argues that the quality of public spaces is directly linked to their organic organization and to the relationship between the built and unbuilt space (Sitte, 1889), while Jan Gehl puts the human dimension at the center, highlighting that the public spaces must support social interoperability and urban life (Gehl, 1987).

These approaches are fundamental, especially to better understand the transformation of Mediterranean cities like Durres, where historically public spaces have always been integral parts of social and economic life. In this context, urban squares are not only considered as morphological elements, but also as structures that bear the identity of the city (Altay et al. 2023; Szövényi et al., 2025). In the case study of Durres' city, this could be understood and noted in the historical maps, where open spaces and squares consisted of a linked network with commercial and social functions.

However, the literature shows that rapid urbanization has changed this rapport between the built environment and the free space radically. The increasing urban pressure, the development of modern infrastructure and mobility, and the growth of the city itself have led to the dominance of the transitional function over the social function (Hao, 2021). This phenomenon is especially evident after the '90s, when the uncontrolled development has fundamentally changed the city's morphology.

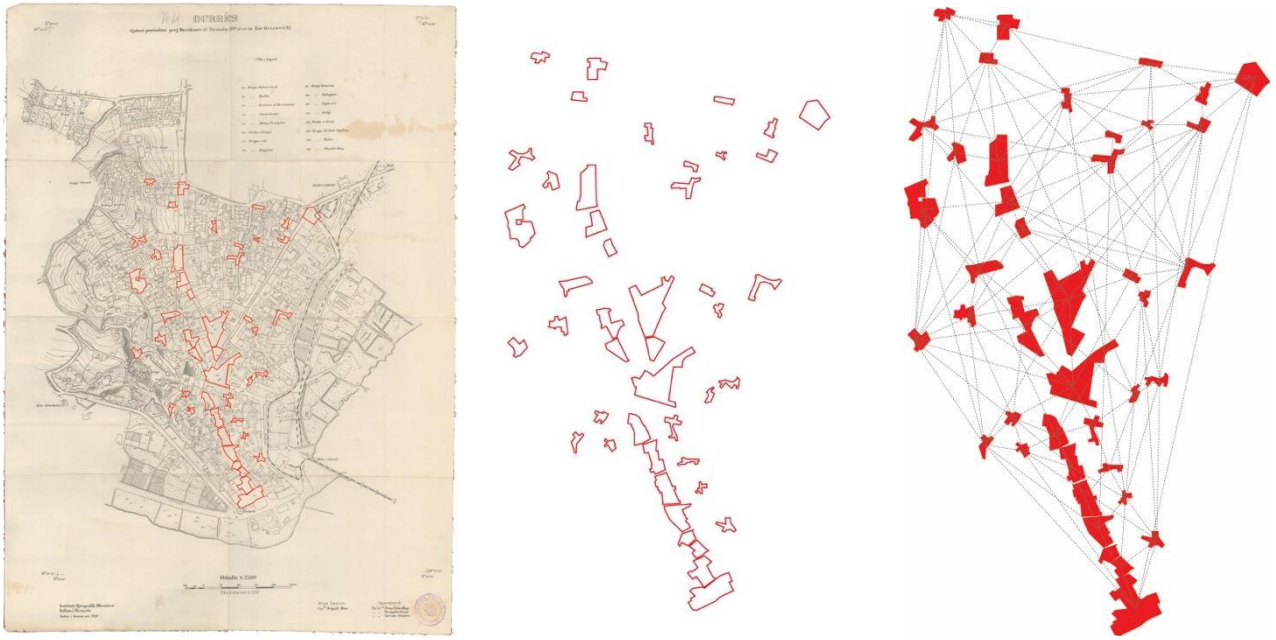


Figure 3: Analysis made on the 1928 map, showing the spread of the public squares in the whole city and functioning as a mesh. Source: AQTN, Analysis made by the author A.Sava (2026).

On the same line, studies over coastal cities show that rapid urbanization, which induces the reduction of public and ecological spaces, undermines urban sustainability (Huang et al., 2023).

This situation is also reflected in the city of Durres, where the reduction of open and green spaces has created a compressed and less resilient urban environment. As studies show, green spaces, these areas play an important social and economic role, but often they are sacrificed for other rapid urban developments (Odhengo et al., 2024; Scheiber et al., 2026).

An important contribution to this study comes from the previous analysis of the "Epidamn" Boulevard in Durres, where the morphological transformations of this axis are treated in relation to urban identity and historical changes of the city (Sava, 2026). This study evidences the transformation from an organic structure (Figure 3), characterized by small squares integrated in the main axis, toward a more linear and rationalized one, reflecting political influence in different periods of time. In this way, the boulevard is interpreted not only as an element for people to walk in, but as a structure that builds and transforms the collective identity of the city. This interpretation is used as a basis for the actual analysis, expanding the focus from only a linear axis toward the whole public squares within the city of Durres.



Figure 4: Analysis made on the 2020-2025 map, showing the disjunction of the public squares. The mesh looks less dynamic, representing the drying of the identity of the city. Source: AQTN, Analysis made by the author A.Sava (2026).

Another important dimension to consider is the social one. Squares are essential for the social

capital and for the creation of sustainable communities (Guang & Wang, 2023). In Durres, the gradual disappearance of squares and small public spaces has led to the weakening of social interactions and also a new way of perceiving the city as more of a transit space than a living space.

This transformation could also be understood through the concept of urban fragmentation. According to Kärrholm and Wirdelöv (2019), public spaces in contemporary cities are frequently divided into isolated fragments, losing in this way the continuity and their social function. This situation is also evident in Durres, where the public spaces do not function as a linked system, but as scattered and weakened elements (figure 4).

At the same time, the transformation of public space is also linked to political and economic factors. Mela (2014) and Narciso (2017) argue that public spaces are a result of power relationships and economic processes, often leading to control, privatization, and territorial reconfiguration. In Durres, this is reflected in the developments after the '90s, where the public interventions have directly affected the reduction of public spaces.

From a morphological perspective, the transformation of squares and public spaces could be analyzed through the changes in form and function.

Different studies show that these spaces switch from organic and flexible configurations into more regular structures, but more limited (Shobeiri, 2018; Milani & Assarzadeh, 2025). This process is clearly evident in the city of Durres, where the historical maps show a more open and diverse structure, whereas the latest developments show a compression and uniformization of urban form.

At the same time, contemporary approaches propose ways to re-establish urban continuity and to reorganize fragmented spaces. The concept of spatial-stiching suggest the recreation of the links between divided spaces to return urban coherence (Li, 2024). This approach is important in Durres, where a strategy like this could help in the restitution of the role of public spaces as structural elements of the city.

The existing literature offers a wide theoretical framework to understand the transformation of public spaces in the context of rapid urban growth. In Durres, these processes are manifested in a clear manner through reduction, fragmentation, and transformation of urban spaces. This makes the city of Durres an important case study to analyze the passage from an urban structure based on open spaces and social interaction, toward a more compressed form dominated by other urban functions.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

This study is supported by an integrated research approach that combines urban morphological analysis, historical comparisons, and the use of digital tools for spatial analysis. The methodology is conceived to understand in a profound way the transformations of public spaces in the city of Durres, while analyzing the changes in form, function, and the relationship

between the unbuilt space and the built one in different periods of time.

The focus is on the comparative analysis of urban maps, starting from the 1928 map, toward a more recent one. The 1928 map represents a moment of the organic development of the city, where the urban structure is characterized by a balanced rapport between the built areas and those open free spaces. Meanwhile, the more contemporary maps show the effects of rapid urban growth, uncontrolled evolution, and urban tension. Through this comparison, one can notice the changes in the spatial configuration and also in the morphological structure of the city.

The morphological analysis is realized using the Gestalt figure-ground principle (Figure 7), which makes possible the visualization and interpretation of the relationship between the free space and the non-free space. Through this method, it is possible to identify not only the reduction of public spaces, but also the transformation of their typologies, from open and integrated in urban structure squares, into fragmented places and often unclear in function. In this way, this analysis is not focused only on the quantity of the public realm, but also on the form, dimensions, distribution, and the connection with surrounding elements.

Simultaneously, the study also comprehends a quantitative component, through which the measurement of the percentage of public spaces in rapport with total urban area is made possible. Also, the identification of the areas where the spatial compression is more evident is seen through these quantitative analyses. These findings support and verify the morphological results, while offering a stronger basis for interpretation.

Another important component of methodology is the functional analysis of public spaces. Through the comparison of the usage of these spaces in different periods, this study draws attention to the transformation from areas that once served as places to stay, commercial and social interaction, toward places dominated by the movement and transition. This change in function could be interpreted in relation to socio-economic developments and urban politics that have affected the shape of the city.

The methodology also takes into consideration a critical analysis of existing literature, while linking the empirical findings with theoretical concepts elaborated by different authors about the public space, urban fragmentation, and sustainability. This theoretical-epirical approach allows Durres not to be seen as an isolated case study, but to be put into a more global context, where the rapid urban growth and the transformation of public spaces are common.

In general, this methodology tends to combine visual analysis, quantitative measurements, and theoretical interpretation to create a full overview of the transformation of public spaces (Figure 5) in the city of Durres. While combining these analyses, this study evidences not only physical transformations in the urban form, but also their implications in the social functionality, identity, and sustainability of the city.

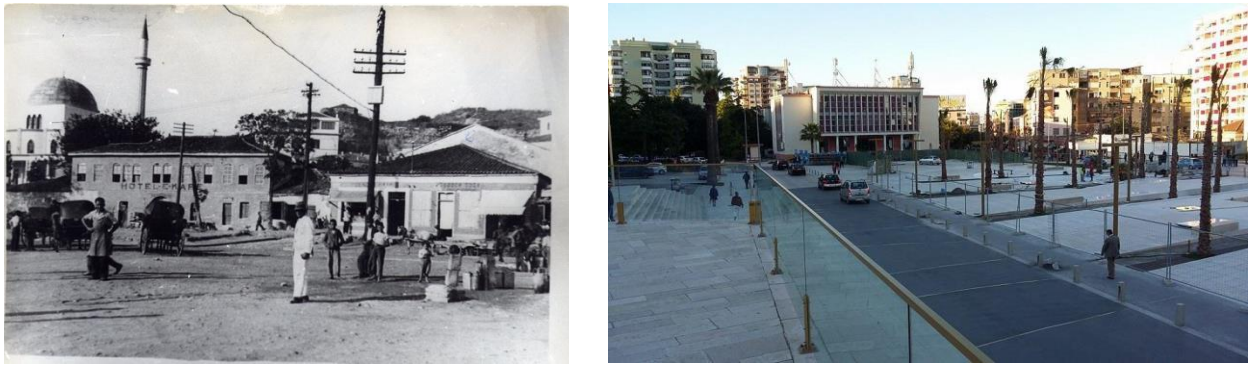


Figure 5: Images of the Square "Liria" in the center of the city of Durres. On the left (1917), the square serves other activities like commercial, gathering, and social. On the right (2024), the same square in the city center, but it is evident the loss of activities and the space is used only by trespassers. Source: AQTN.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The core of this analysis is the findings that suggest that the city of Durres, in different periods of time, shows a deep transformation in the ratio between the public squares and the built environment, reflecting in this way the transition from an organic urban structure toward a more compressed and fragmented form. The comparison of two maps (1928 and 2015), spanning about 100 years of changes, shows a significant reduction of open and free public spaces and also a major change in the way these spaces are organized and function as a whole in the city.

In the first phase, represented by the map of 1928, the urban structure is characterized by an organic configuration, where the public spaces are spread throughout the whole urban structure.

The squares and public spaces are not isolated urban elements; they act as an important core of a continuous spatial system that includes social functions, economic, and commercial ones. These spaces operate as urban nodes, while creating meeting points and interactions that contribute to the social capital and shape the city's identity (Guan & Wang, 2023; Altay et al., 2023). The proportion between the built and the open space is represented in a sustainable balance, reflecting a controlled development and strongly connected with the human dimension of the city, in accordance with Sitte and Gehl principles.

However, the contemporary analysis shows an evident transformation toward a spatial compression and urban structure fragmentation. The public spaces no longer function as a web in the whole city, but rather as small elements that do not become part of the whole. The public spaces that were once part of this system have been reduced significantly, often losing their social activity. This reduction is accompanied by a growth of built structures and also by the dominance of transit and mobility functions (such as roads, etc.) over those of gathering and meeting. As Hao (2021) suggests, the social spaces are transformed into functional corridors in the rapid urbanization context, while limiting their usage for public interaction.



Figure 6: Geometrical analysis of the public squares in 1928 (on the left table) and one more recent in 2020-2025 (on the right). Geometric forms seem to have lost their identity and are simplified. Analysis made by the author A.Sava (2026).

An important finding of this study is also the gradual abolition of squares as urban typologies. Different from the 1928 structure, where the squares had a diversity of geometrical forms (Figure 6) and multiple functions, in the actual situation, they no longer exist or are transformed into residual spaces, without a clear public function. This finding is in accordance with the study of Shobeiri (2018), who highlights that urban squares have transitioned from a flexible and free form toward more controlled and limited configurations.



Figure 7: Analysis made on both maps (left: the map of 1928, right: the map of 2020-2025), based on the Gestalt principles, on behalf of the study of the built areas and voids. Source: AQTN, Analysis made by the author A.Sava (2026).

At the same time, quantitative analysis confirms a decrease in the percentage, approximately they are halved (Figure 7) of public spaces in raport of the total urban area. The most affected areas are those located in the center of the city and along the main roads, where the pressure of urban growth and economic interests has been stronger. This situation is not occurring only in Durres, but also as Huang et al. (2023) and Odhengo et al. (2024) recommend in their studies; the rapid urbanization has led to the reduction of ecological and public spaces.

The public space fragmentation is another result of this study. The spaces that once formed a continuous network are nowadays divided into isolated fragments, often detached from one another and from the urban structure around them as well. This situation reflects that of Kärrholm and Wirdelöv (2019), who describe it as “public space fragmentation”, where the urban continuity is substituted by a series of independent and weakly functioning spaces. In Durres, this fragmentation is evident in the absence of clear connections between public squares and the dominance of sporadic interventions.

From another point of view, the social perspective, these transformations have a wider impact on urban life. The reduction of public spaces and their transformation into transit areas has led to the weakening of social interactions and a lowering of the quality of urban life. As Arriazu-Ramos et al. (2025) argue, the absence of public and green spaces negatively affects the mental and physical health of inhabitants, making the city, in this way, less livable.

Meanwhile, the transformation of the public space is closely related to the economic and political processes that, at the same time, developed the city. Although the uncontrolled boom in the building sector after the ‘90s, accompanied by private interventions, has brought a new configuration in the urban space, it has often been at the expense of public interest. This situation is compatible with the analysis of Mela (2014) and Narciso (2017), who highlight the fact that the existence or nonexistence of the public space is constantly a result of the relationship between jurisdiction and economic interests.

However, regardless of these transformations, some elements of the urban structure continue to play a crucial role in the spatial organization and collective memory as well. These elements could be remembered as landmarks, as Lynch (1960) suggests, offering a great potential for urban regeneration and the bringing to life of old and new public squares.

In this context, the results of this research suggest the need for a new approach in urban planning, which includes public spaces as important elements in the well-being of a city. Contemporary concepts of “spatial stitching” (Li,2024) offer possibilities to link the divided parts and make them part of the whole city, while shaping a cohesive and more sustainable city.

Last, these analyses represent the fact that the transformation of these squares is not only a physical change, but a complex process that affects the manner in which the city functions. From an urban structure rich in open spaces and social interoperability, the city has transitioned toward a more rigid form, fragmented and less oriented toward its users. This process puts the city of Durres in a wide debate about the rapid urban growth challenges and the need to maintain and reappraise the public spaces as key elements of urban life.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS/ IMPLICATIONS

This study shows that the transformation of public spaces in the city of Durres is not a random and neutral process, but a result directly linked with the manner in which the city has been developed over the last decade. From an urban structure characterized by a sequence of open spaces that work well with one another, the city has transitioned toward a more dense form, fragmented and less oriented toward the user or its inhabitants.

The loss of public spaces must not be interpreted as only a physical reduction of free areas within the city, but as a crisis of the public function of the city. The spaces that once served as interoperability nodes and commercial squares are being replaced by movement corridors and isolated interventions, changing the city into a structure that gives priority to transit rather than stay (Figure 8). In this way, Durres is no longer the city of public squares, but the city of interruptions and inarticulate gaps.



Figure 8: In this image, one of the main doors of the entrance inside the castle walls (historic center of the city) named “Porta e Jallise”, with the city hall on the left side, 1900-1910.
This area served as a public space, even if it was located outside the reinforced city walls. Source: Unknown (Web).

The urban space fragmentation is one of the most clear results of this study. The public spaces are not articulated as a continuous system, but as fragments, often without a correlation with one another and without a clear role in the urban organization. This fragmentation is not only morphological, but also social, as it affects the possibilities for interoperability and the creation of a social collective life directly.

In this context, the way the city is developed after the ‘90s raises serious questions about the role of urban planning and about the priorities taken in environmental development. The dominance of economic interest and uncontrolled growth has led to a situation where the public space is seen in the second position, and not as a basic structure of the city. This approach has brought an urban form that functions to meet economic needs, but is poor in the social and spatial dimensions.

However, this study suggests that there still exists the potential for intervention to recover the lost identity. The presence of some urban elements and the historical structure of the city offer possibilities to rebuild the spatial connections and bring back an urban coherence. But this asks for rapid changes in the manner in which the public space is thought, conceptualized, treated, and lived.

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