Title: Tirana Between Spontaneity and Design: Recurring Urban Elements in the Development of a City in Search of Identity
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Tirana Between Spontaneity and Design: Recurring Urban Elements in the Development of a City in Search of Identity.

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Abstract
This research investigates on the relationship between spontaneity and design in the formation of the urban fabric. The case study on which the research is implemented is Tirana. The development of Tirana has been shaped by changing relationships between spontaneous urbanization and planned intervention. The core of the research is constituted by the rapid transformations occurred in Tirana starting from the 1990s urban transformations. This paper investigates this relationship through the recurring urban elements that have persisted, disappeared, transformed or re-emerged during the development of Tirana. Through a historical reading of the city from its early formation to contemporary planning, the study examines the transformation of the urban elements across different phases of development. The research is based mainly on historical documents and plans. The analysis shows that Tirana's development cannot be understood as a simple transition from spontaneity to planning and back to spontaneity. Rather, each phase has incorporated, modified and/or reinterpreted elements produced under previous conditions. The study argues that the urban identity of Tirana is not a fixed historical character, but a continuously transformed condition produced through the interaction between spontaneity and design.

Keywords: *urbanism, urban morphology, modern urbanism, urban structure, identity*

Introduction

The transformation of Tirana after 1990 represents one of the most significant changes in the recent development of the city. The political and economic transition from a socialist dictatorship where the movement of people was controlled by the state to a capitalist neoliberal system was accompanied by intense demographic internal migration. In this panorama Tirana becomes an attractor of people from rural areas which brought a rapid increase in the urban population. This rapid expansion has taken place mostly unchecked or at least without a general vision of development. The expansion of the last thirty plus years has brought radical qualitative changes in the conformation of a new city, different from the consolidated communist one. The concentric-radial structure of Tirana, which had been progressively defined through different phases of urban development, was confronted with new forms of urbanization that were only partially integrated in the structure of the city.

The transformation of the city brought to a change in the relationship between urban development and planning. During the socialist period, until 1990 Tirana was predominantly developed through centralized planning, while the first decade of the transition was characterized by spontaneous development. This have brought to the creation of informal settlements in areas that had previously remained outside the consolidated urban structure. Planning institutions progressively responded to this transformation through a series of interventions, with various degrees of success, in order to reorganize the expanding city.

The traditional planning sequence, planning – enabling – building – living, followed during the evolution of Tirana during the communist period, as well as in all cases of-urban design at any scale, is distorted. At this stage of urban development Tirana is initially being at the same time inhabited and built. Development throughout the first decade of transition has always preceded design and planning in the micro and macro scale.

This process has often been associated with a loss of urban identity. The rapid expansion of the city, the fragmentation of the urban fabric and the emergence of new forms of construction have modified the city itself, and altered the relationship between city and its surrounding territory. At the same time, however, the transformation of Tirana cannot be understood simply as the disappearance of a previous urban identity. At the very least, even during the communist era the planning was implemented in a complex stratum of existing urban fabric. Different urban elements have persisted, disappeared, transformed or re-emerged in different historical phases. And it is precisely in these historical developments that the identity of the city resides. A result of a continuous elaborations and re-elaborations of different urban themes and elements through the years, oscillating between the spontaneous development of the city and the designed one.

The relationship between spontaneity and design is particularly relevant in this regard. Urban development does not always proceed according to a linear sequence in which planning precedes construction and inhabitation. In the case of Tirana, especially during the period of transition, construction and inhabitation frequently preceded or developed independently from planning intervention. Planning subsequently attempted to respond to an urban condition that was already partially established. The relationship between planning and urbanization was therefore reversed: rather than planning simply determining the form of the city, planning was also required to confront, organize and transform forms of urbanization that had already taken place.

This condition makes Tirana particularly relevant for investigating the relationship between spontaneous urbanization and planned intervention. The city can be read as the result of these two modes of urban production, in which elements generated under different political and planning conditions continue to influence the contemporary urban structure. Rather than considering spontaneity and design as two mutually exclusive conditions, this article understands them as interacting processes that have contributed to the formation and transformation of the city.

The research, therefore, investigates the interaction between spontaneous urbanization and planned intervention that have shaped the urban identity of Tirana, through the urban elements that have persisted, disappeared, transformed or re-emerged during this process.

To investigate this process, the article follows the transformation of selected urban elements across different phases of the city's development. These elements are not considered as fixed expressions of an established urban identity, but as indicators through which changes in the urban structure and its identity can be observed. Their persistence, disappearance, transformation and re-emergence provide a way of reading the relationship between different forms of urban production.

Reading Tirana through recurring urban elements

Tirana's urban identity is not understood here as a fixed historical character, but as a condition continuously transformed through the interaction between different forms of urban production. The city has been shaped by successive interventions, planning decisions and processes of spontaneous development, each of which has introduced new elements while also modifying or incorporating elements inherited from previous phases.

The recurring urban elements are used as indicators through which transformations of urban identity can be observed. They may be physical elements, such as paths, axes, streets, urban blocks, gardens, rings or areas of expansion, but they may also refer to broader spatial structures that reappear under different conditions.

There are four conditions that are particularly relevant to this reading. The first is **persistence**, when an urban element survives through different political or planning regimes and continues to structure the city. The second is **disappearance**, when an element associated with a particular phase of urban development loses its physical or spatial presence. The third is **re-emergence,** when an element or spatial logic that had been interrupted returns in another form, and lastly **transformation** when a previous urban element reappears under different connotations or circumstances. Instead of considering each planning phase as an isolated moment, the analysis observes how different phases overlap

through the urban elements that they produce. A new plan does not necessarily replace the previous city; it may reinforce an existing structure, modify it, partially erase it or give it a new meaning. In the same way, spontaneous urbanization does not necessarily produce an entirely new city. It may reproduce older spatial patterns, occupy spaces left outside previous planning interventions or generate new structures that are subsequently incorporated into planned development.

The issue that we are interested in highlighting is not a simple transition from a city designed, planned and managed before 1990, to a period of spontaneous urbanization during the first decade of transition, and then to a new phase characterized by a renewed prevalence of design. The transformation of Tirana is better understood as a continuous interaction between planned and spontaneous forms of urban production. Different forms of planning and spontaneous development have overlapped, interacted and transformed one another over time.

This relationship can be observed through several elements that recur throughout the development of the city. The radial routes and concentric structure established through earlier phases continue to influence later expansion. The central axis of the city has been repeatedly reinterpreted through different planning interventions. Elements introduced or transformed during specific historical periods, such as geometric gardens or planned urban spaces, may subsequently disappear or lose their original role. Conversely, forms of spontaneous urbanization that developed at the margins of the planned city may later become incorporated into the consolidated urban structure. An element may persist physically while its function or meaning changes; it may disappear from the urban landscape while its spatial logic remains; or it may re-emerge through a new planning intervention. In this sense, recurrence does not necessarily mean repetition.

The analysis follows the transformation of these elements rather than treating them as isolated historical objects. Their significance lies in the way they connect different moments of the city's development. For this purpose, we have individuated different historical periods with prevalence of spontaneity or design as an analytic device to better comprehend the evolution of the city.

The spontaneous formation of the city

From the fourteenth century until 1912 when independence was declared, Albania, like all the Balkans, was part of the Ottoman Empire. The birth of the city, although the settlement is difficult to date, dates back to about 1614 with the construction of a mosque, a hamam, an oven and an inn by Sulejman Pashe Bargjini (Frasheri 2004, p.67), which subsequently led to the creation of the bazaar. Tirana was born as a crossroads interregional merchant trade that had been consolidated since the sixteenth century. From

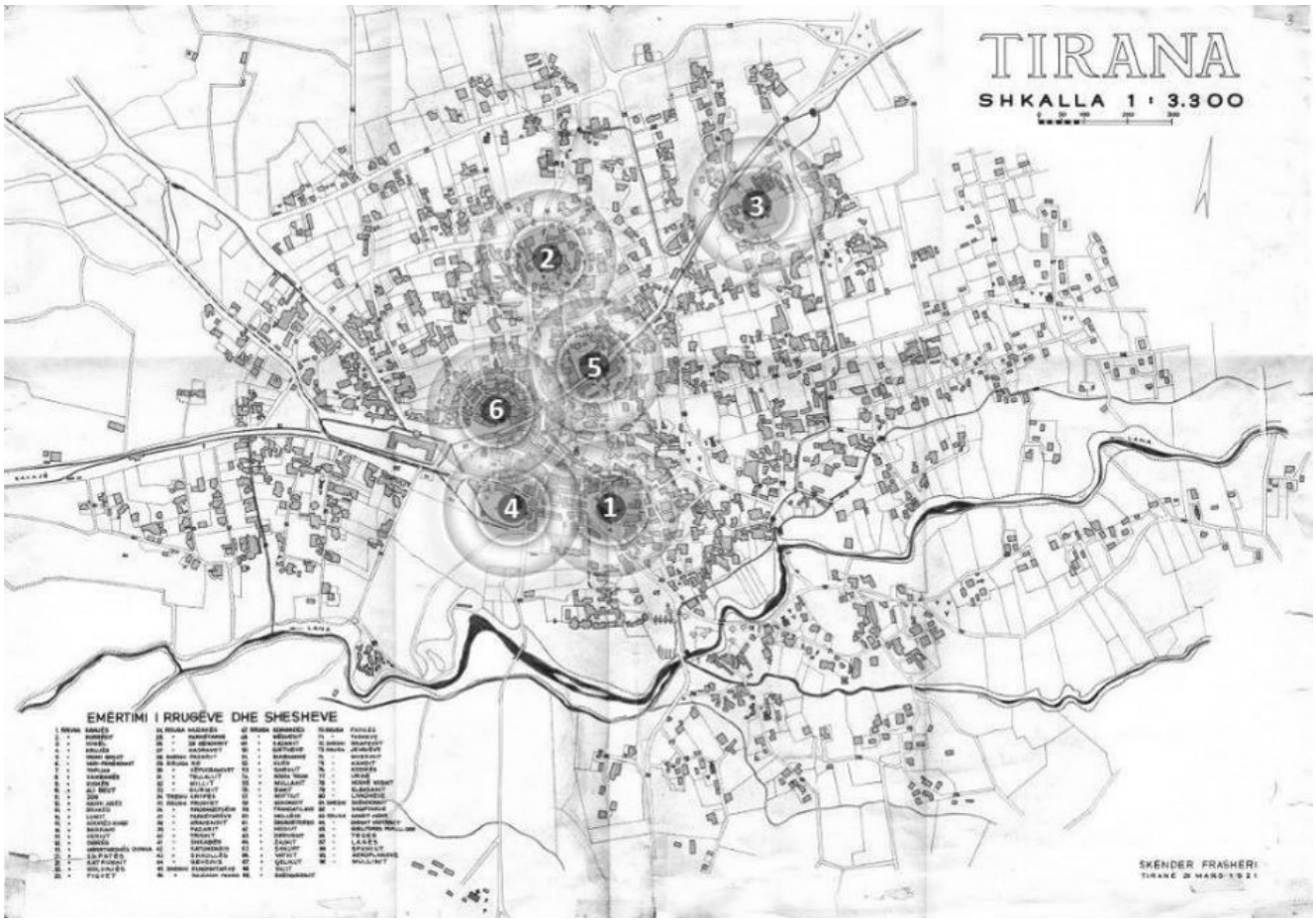

Figure 1. The first six nuclei of the expansion of Tirana on the 1921 map: 1) old mosque; 2) Fira; 3) Zajmi; 4) Ethemi; 5) Stermasi; 6) Karpaci. Source: Elaboration of the author on AQTN map.

Durres and Vlora, which were the two port cities, they led inland. From Dibra, Shkodra, Lezha in the north, they passed through the southern regions but also to reach Istanbul, Thessaloniki and Northern Macedonia (Frasheri 2004, p. 71).

In the historical analysis of the settlement, Miho (1988, pp. 50-53) and Frasheri (2004), identify several nuclei in the formation of the historic center of Tirana until the beginning of the twentieth century. The first one of foundation by Sulejman Pashe Bargjini; a second nucleus created at the beginning of the eighteenth century with the construction of the mosque of Fira; a third that is created at the same time as the construction of the mosque of Zajmi in 1775; a fourth nucleus with the mosque of Haxhi Et'hem in the center which is located on today's Central Square of Tirana, and so on (fig. 1). During this period, the city expands in a centrifugal manner starting from these nuclei until they meet and clash. (Lambertini, Poggi, 1943).

Throughout this period Tirana developed morphologically through spontaneous non-geometric fabrics. The houses consist of single-family houses for extended families that never open onto the street but are mediated by fences. The streets and lanes are formed randomly as the nuclei expand. During this first spontaneous phase of development, we can recognize two characteristic modes of development. On one side there is the strong morphological character of the development, and on the other, there is the successive formation of the nuclei that characterize the formation of the city.

This phase establishes an urban structure, and a morphological core, that later planning interventions did not simply replace. The radial routes and the spatial relationships between the different nuclei became part of the existing city over which the plans of the twentieth century were subsequently superimposed.

Planning over an existing city (1923 – 1943)

In 1923 the first Master Plan was drawn up by Austrian engineers and architects with the participation of the Albanian counterpart. The radial layout of the main streets on which the city had been formed was preserved, providing for widening, and the orthogonal layout was introduced for the first time, superimposing it on the pre-existing structure. In 1925 Tirana was definitively proclaimed the capital. Ahmet Zogu became prime minister and, for the nascent capital, commissioned the Italian architect Armando Brasini to develop a project for Tirana. Brasini proposed the introduction of a monumental axis on which to arrange the functions of the capital (fig. 2). The project presented by Brasini was never implemented but the idea of the axis remained in the structure and in the projects of the city until 1931 and was re-proposed in later periods. The following year, a new plan was drawn up on the basis of the 1923 plan, making improvements and integrating Brasini's idea of the axis.

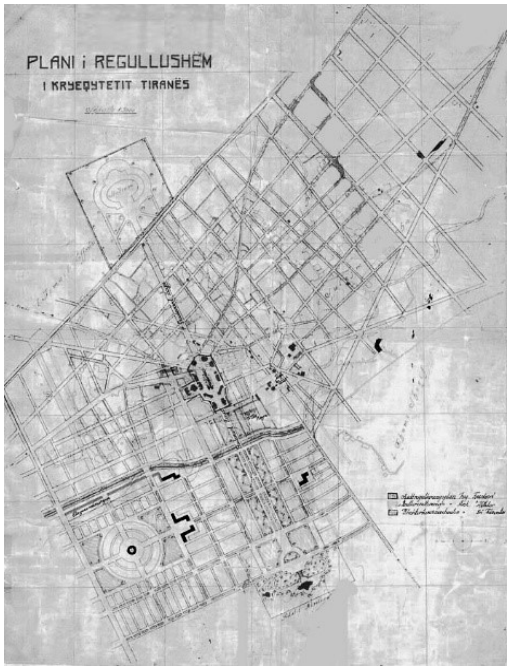

Figure 3. Plan of Tirana 1929. Source: AQTN



Figure 2. The first proposal of Brasini for the boulevard. Source: AQTN.

In 1928 Ahmet Zogu proclaimed himself King of Albania and commissioned the Austrian Kohler and the Albanian Frasheri to revise the 1926 plan by expanding the territory. To these was added the Italian Di Fausto in 1929, when a further version of the master plan was presented (fig. 3). The structure of the plan was worked on by the engineer Eshref Frasheri. Kohler was in charge of planning the southward extension of the city beyond the Lana stream, and Di Fausto of the planning of the centre of Tirana. Subsequently, in 1930 and 1931, two other improved and more extensive proposals were prepared based on the 1929 plan.

The urban interventions of this period introduced several elements associated with nineteenth-century urban planning into Tirana: the boulevard' the grid, and the geometric garden. The idea of the boulevard, widely used from Haussmann onwards, can be revealed from the first interventions of widening the main arteries of the creation of the city, and in the idea of the central axis of Brasini. The grid, which had been used in different forms since antiquity but had lost importance during the medieval period, returned as a major instrument of urban planning during the nineteenth century. The Manhattan plan in 1811 and Cerdà's project for Barcelona in the mid-1800s are two examples. The grid has been proposed since the intervention of 1923 and later, as an overlay on the existing fabric and planning territorial expansions. The geometric garden originating in the late Renaissance, known as the Italian garden, and subsequently its more sumptuous reworking in the French garden persisted throughout the 19th century even after the development of the more bucolic English garden. In the projects of Brasini and Kohler, both not realized, we find the geometric garden used.

In 1939, in line with the expansionist policies of the time, Italy invaded Albania. Under the Italian administration, huge investments were made, especially in Tirana, with the intention of being accepted by the locals and starting a process of colonization. A few months after the invasion, a new master plan for Tirana was thought of and the task was entrusted to the Florentine architect Gherardo Bosio. The plan was completed in 1943. In 1941, due to Bosio's death, Ivo Lambertini and Ferdinando Poggi took his place.



Figure 4. Urban plan of the core of Tirana in 1943 by Bosio, Lambertini, Poggi. Source: AQTN

Bosio's plan was to be the most advanced and complete plan made for Tirana, both for the in-depth study phase prior to the plan (fig. 4), and for the breadth and general unitary vision (fig. 5), and for the temporal extension of programming. Great attention was paid to private property, to the development of the city without undermining the already existing economic centers and therefore the investments of citizens. The plan envisaged planning for the next sixty years, and in light of the increase in population, the existing nucleus was not considered suitable to accommodate the population.



Figure 5. Territorial Plan of Tirana in 1943 by Bosio, Lambertini, Poggi. Source: AQTN

Howard's garden city was taken as a model for the new Tirana. The authors' considerations started from the love for nature of the citizens reflected in the courtyards of all the houses of Tirana with their vegetation that gave a picturesque character to the city (Lambertini, Poggi, 1943). Consequently, the plan provides for an environmental system with large parks on the edges and a system of small parks within the city.

Structurally, the plan maintains the existing radial roads, to which enlargements were made in previous years, connecting them with a very large infrastructural ring with a diameter of about 3km. The axis proposed by Brasini is maintained, conceived as the representative backbone of fascism and the structure of the plan recalls the typical layout that we can find in newly founded cities of the fascist period such as Latina. Bosio will personally take care of designing in meticulous detail the buildings overlooking the axis, many of which will be built and still represent a significant cultural legacy.

Stylistically, unlike Brasini who had a neoclassical approach to the project, Bosio prefers the lictorian style, stylistically a mixture of monumentality and formal simplification and of the elements. The plan was not implemented due to Italy's defeat in the Second World War after which it had to withdraw from Albania, but the concentric-radial structure with a marked central axis was the starting point of the urbanization of the communist period.

The planning of Tirana between 1923 and 1943, divided in itself in two phases, illustrates a first major interaction between the existing spontaneous city and elements of urban design. The plans

did not begin from an empty territory. In the first phase (1923 – 1933), we have the introduction of the grid, the boulevard, and the geometric garden. Also, an important aspect is the delineation of the border of the city in the form of an abstract polygonal shape. In the second phase (1939 – 1942), there is the introduction of a territorial scale of intervention based on the principles of the Garden City. Regarding the urban scale of planning, we can see a ring that delineates the core of the dense urban development, and the typological insertion of the courtyard, maintaining only the main traces of the old town and erasing the existing villas.

Ideological transformation and morphological continuity (1945 – 1989)

The establishment of the communist regime in 1945 introduced a radical political and ideological transformation of Tirana. The city was progressively reorganized according to the principles of socialist urbanism, while architecture and public space became instruments for representing the new political order. This transformation also involved the removal and modification of elements of the existing city. The demolition of the old bazaar and its replacement by the Palace of Culture, and the demolition of the 1930s town hall in 1982 to make way for the National Historical Museum are examples of this process. The transformation of the urban image was therefore not only a consequence of new construction but also of the modification and removal of elements of the existing city. During this period, we can see the continuous struggle to impose a determined way of thinking embedded in the urban fabric. From the planning standpoint there are three main plans proposed, 1953, 1957 – 1958, 1985 – 1989, though they are only partially realized, or at all as is the case of the 1989 plan. Communism in Albania, at least in the first twenty years, developed in the wake of Soviet communism. Urbanization and modernization were among the main objectives of the Soviet Union in the 1920s and will also become so of Albania in the 1950s. The urban population of Albania has increased notably during the first years. With the increase in the urban population arises the need to plan for growth. The development of industry in Tirana began in 1947. In 1953 the Albanian architect Gani Strazimiri with the collaboration of Soviet specialists drew up a first draft of a master plan where the satellite industrial zones around the city stand out (fig. 6). There is therefore the introduction of detached urban polarities that form satellite poles, which in this case are industrial ones.

Between 1957 and 1958 the first master plan for Tirana was drawn up by Misto Mele, supported by the Bulgarian Angjellov. This plan will be the basis of the urbanization of Tirana on which the subsequent detailed plans will also be developed until 1990. The 1958 plan maintained and structurally implemented elements of Bosio's plan. The ring was built in the following years on the same track as the previous plan, adding another internal ring. The cardo-decumanus system composed of the central axis and the straightening of the course of the Lana stream was also maintained (fig. 7). The idea of the large park south of Tirana, now the Lake Park, was implemented. The building types, on the other hand, which in the 1943 plan mainly included courtyard buildings and villas, changed and the buildings were arranged in a punctiform manner more akin to modern Soviet urban planning. The division by classes proposed in Bosio's plan is not compatible with the communist doctrine that preaches equality and collectivization which will be reflected both in the distribution and in the urban typologies. The villas will make room for collective buildings and, at least in intentions, the distribution will be equal for all citizens**.**



Figure 6. 1953 Regulatory Plan. Source: AQTN



Figure 7. Tirana Master Plan of 1957-1958. In yellow you can see the improvements to the city's infrastructure. In red, on the other hand, the new infrastructure planned for the inhabited nucleus. Source: AQTN

Inside the inner ring there are buildings of 4-5 floors while close to the outer ring of 1-3 floors. The zoning provides for the expansion of the residential areas towards the east close to Mount Dajt, the industrial areas detached from the urban core to the north and west, and the large urban parks to the north, south and territorially dispersed. The preservation of the historical parts is closely linked to the significant places in the history of the PKSh, and in an attempt to erase history to rewrite it starting from 1945 the monuments to be safeguarded are the mosque of Et'hem Bej, the Clock Tower and a few traditional houses. It is no coincidence that there were not many problems in demolishing the bazaar in the central square and that the new buildings are

arranged between the streets and the medieval city as if to hide it. Among the buildings maintained by the regime there are also the buildings in the center designed by Di Fausto and the buildings designed on the axis by Brasini, where especially the latter, thanks to the sober lictorian style, lend themselves very well to a semantic resignification by the regime.

If the 1958 plan "pushed for the development of the city towards an almost ideal and unrealistic situation with respect to the condition of Tirana at the time" (Dhamo et al. 2016, p. 269), the 1989 plan: "tried to give concrete solutions to some of the most worrying problems of Tirana at the time, which were: the problem of housing ...; the creation of a structure with clear functional zones ...; the arrangement of the standard of green spaces per inhabitant in the existing city and in new buildings ...; the completion of the road network scheme ...". (Dhamo et al. 2016, pp. 296-297)

This plan, thanks to its restorative approach, represents the crystallization over time, at least in intentions, of the urban transformations of Tirana during the communist period. The plan marks on the concentric-radial structure of the city by providing for an outer ring that demarcates a sort of boundary of expansion. A total of five concentric rings are planned where the outer ring of the 1958 plan becomes the third ring. According to the plan, the city was to develop in a compact manner with the industrial zones close to or inside the outer ring (fig. 8, 9). In this way, we move definitively away from the idea of the garden city with possible satellite urban agglomerations.



Figure 8. PRG zoning of Tirana, 1989. Source: AQTN



Figure 8. PRG zoning of Tirana, 1989. Source: AQTN

The prevalent modality of development during this period is the planned one. There is a consolidation of the structure of Tirana, a typological shift to linear buildings, and the ring infrastructure as a delimitation of urban development. An interesting element is the initial idea of a multipolar city proposed in 1953, which has been naturally refuted in a radial continuous expansion. This will be the framework on which the imminent spontaneous urbanization will take place.

From planned urbanism to spontaneous urbanization (1990 – 2000)

During this period of informal construction, there is a rupture between the planed urban development which leads to conditions that are clearly detached from the very conception of the traditional urban development. This is a direct consequence of the political and economic. system change.

Changes during this period are implemented by individual citizens, without coordination and with almost no intervention from above. This brings with it two implications: individuality prevails over the collective; processuality, in a certain sense it becomes the result since there is not an expected result. This produces a city with open and uncertain outcome. There are two main implications of this development. The densification of the existing urban fabric and the expansion of urbanism mainly through individual detached houses.

Local administrations, especially in the first decade, found themselves in great difficulty as they were not equipped to manage the flows and were unable to act at the legislative level. The lack of experience and resources did not even allow the extent of the changes to be recorded in time. Interventions at the urban level, in this first decade are characterized by a substantial immobility of administrations, and are focused mainly, if not entirely, on the city center.

The continuous changes in urban forms and typologies and territorial expansion also make obsolete several territorial studies and analyses on different scales made in the past, where reality often no longer corresponds to the map, and above all the boundary conditions have changed as the quantitative increase in the population has led to a qualitative change in the conformation of the city.

The Implications of Urban Development of Tirana through this new way of building involves different aspects such as: territory; public space; infrastructure.

From a territorial point of view, the expansion and the transformation of Tirana was accompanied by the deterioration and homologation of the territory. The urbanization process in itself implies an invasive intervention on the territory, but the attention to the territory during the communist period was significantly higher. The diversification of the territory in natural, productive and built areas or also the diversification within the same built. The creation of the national park on the Dajt mountain, a few kilometers east of Tirana, or the care of the edges or vegetation of the Lana stream and Paskuqan and Farka Lakes at the protection and enhancement. The creation of new agricultural areas and greenhouses north and west of Tirana or

the creation of the artificial lake in the Lake Park to enriching the territory are some examples of the communist policy of safeguarding the territory.

The public space of Tirana during the transition period can be divided into the public space of the city built up to 1990, and that of the expansion areas. The public space in the established city has been literally stormed by additions to existing buildings within the neighborhoods and by kiosks in the main arteries of the city. Not only has public space decreased in quantity, but with urban densification through the construction of multi-story residential buildings within the built city, the public space per inhabitant also decreases. In the areas of expansion, on the other hand, the absence of public space can be detected. The conformation of these areas is very reminiscent of the first phase of development of Tirana. The new city is built morphologically (rather than through typology as was the case in the communist period), and public space is not taken into account. The fragmentation of urban interventions of the time, and the tendency towards individualization are certainly other reasons why public space during this period is reduced to a minimum.

The issue of infrastructure is particularly problematic in the years of transition. The network of primary infrastructures (secondary roads, parking lots, water system, electrical system, sewage) was not designed to cope with the massive migrations that occurred in Tirana and maintenance after the fall of communism was minimal. The inhabitants of the illegal settlements in many cases illegally connect to the infrastructure causing damage and losses, and in some cases, they do not connect at all, creating health problems. The secondary roads of the illegal settlements are not designed and are created as a result of occupied lots. These are irregular in shape and almost entirely unpaved and without lighting. In this development context, secondary infrastructures (schools, community centres, sports facilities, markets, religious centres) have developed with great difficulty or have not developed at all in the expansion zones, which have simply relied on existing infrastructures and overloaded them.

Typologically during this period, the whole process of densification and expansion is actualized with individual villas, and multistory high rise residential buildings, both of them constructed punctually in a sparse way on the territory.

It is curious that the development during this period happened morphologically, as in the beginnings of the city. The only notable exception is the Astir neighborhood, which is an extensive area east of Tirana, just outside the Great Ring. Due to the agrarian parcelisation during the socialist period, maintained a grid structure.

It is important to note that spontaneous urbanization did not simply produce an absence of planning; it produced a new urban condition that subsequently became the object of planning. The spontaneous production of the city should therefore not be understood exclusively as a deficiency of planning. It has also generated forms of spatial differentiation and local specificity that have become part of the contemporary urban identity of Tirana.

The return of design in a transformed city (2000 – on going)

During the first decade of transition there are several attempts to systematize the urban transformation of Tirana. All these attempts are based on the PRG of 1989 trying in some way to update it in the light of socio-economic and urban changes. In 1995 the Austrian group Regional Consulting in collaboration with the Municipality of Tirana presented the Study of the Development of the City of Tirana.

The Zoning Regulation of the City of Tirana was born in 1996 as a tool for the containment of illegal buildings in Tirana. The regulation is worked on by the Institute of Urban Planning with the support of USAID (US Agency for International Development) directly on the tables of the 1989 PRG.

These interventions are of containment rather than proactive. Not only do they fail to anticipate and plan the urban changes in Tirana, but in the case of the urban planning law and the Zoning Regulation they also prove to be harmful as they are unable to give specific indications for urban changes. The coupling of the inadequacy of these interventions with the inadequacy of the means and/or the unwillingness of the administrations to apply them adequately contributes to the chaotic development of Tirana during the first years of transition.

The theme of spontaneous urban fabrics emerged at the end of the 1990s. For the first time, specialists began to think about the damage at the urban level that uncontrolled development was producing and to think of concrete solutions to stop illegal building. In this period the first demolitions of illegal buildings began, which can also be interpreted as an attempt by the administrations to reaffirm control over the territory. The firmness of the authorities in this period put a stop to illegal building in Tirana (Aliaj et al., 2003, p. 70).

During this period there was an important and decisive campaign of demolition of the buildings along the Lana stream and in the Rinia Park. The economic damage of the demolitions is considerable. If the initial investments had been made wisely, the profits for the state and individual citizens would have been considerable. The cost of the demolitions amounts to 6 million USD, plus 2 million for the possible removal of the rubble, not counting the economic damage caused to the economic activities involved, employment and tax revenues. Another example of how the institutional vacuum has failed to meet the energies put in place by individual entrepreneurs (Aliaj et al., 2003, p. 71).

Starting from the early 2000s, we see for the first time different attempts to re-establish planning as a practice to deal with the existing informal urban fabric just as the demolitions in the city center pave the way for a new season of planning for the center of Tirana. The design dimension took on an increasingly central role in urban development. The two most incisive interventions are: the 2012 Tirana Northern Corridor & River, and the 2016 PRG of Tirana.

Towards the end of 2011, the Municipality of Tirana announced the Tirana Northern Corridor & River international competition by invitation. The program of the competition is very ambitious

both in scope and objectives. The intervention area, with varying degrees of depth, is 1400 ha, which is about a quarter of the urban territory of the city. The project is divided into different zones (fig. 11). The municipality's request regarding the types of intervention in these areas is structured as follows:

- strategic development of the entire project area (zone 1 – 5)
- Masterplan project for the extension of the boulevard (zones 2 and 3) and for the bank of the Tirana River (zone 4)
- Implemented project of zone 2
- Strategic concept for the future development of zones 2a, 2b, 3a and 3b.

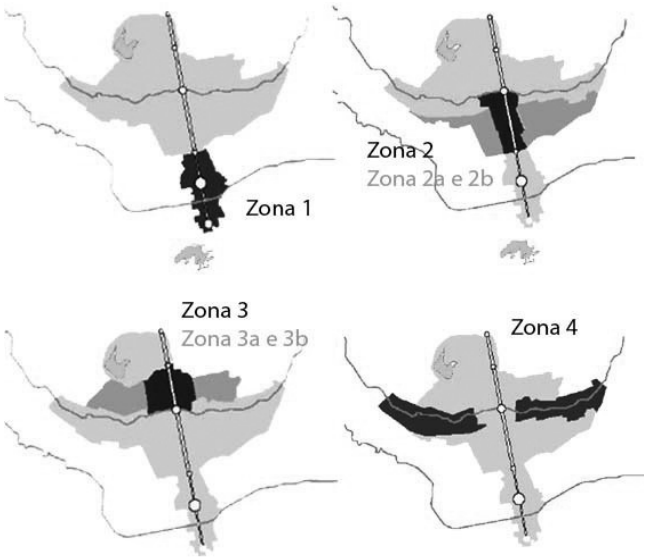

Figure 11. Zone di intervento Tirana Northern Corridor & River. Source: Forum A + P, nr. 14.

The two most important parts of the project are: the extension of the boulevard and the rehabilitation of the Tirana River (fig. 12). Particular emphasis is placed on the environmental and ecological system, and on recreational spaces given the congestion of the consolidated city. In the competition brief, the boulevard and the river are classified as ecological corridors. The objectives and requests are specified in a concise and comprehensive manner. In the requests made, and therefore also in the vision for urban development, sustainability plays a crucial role.



Figure 12. Building Tirana's GREEN Future, General Masterplan. Source: Forum A + P, nr. 14.

As a starting point of the masterplan there is the creation of integrated pedestrian districts each with its own basic local services on a micro scale. The city's development system is oriented towards public transport (Transit Oriented Development) and provides for the creation of what are called Urban Stays in the proposal. At the basis of urban stays and local services there is a formulation made by the authors of the plan, based on the Experiences of Humanity, according to which the acceptable distance that can be covered on foot is 600 meters. (Grimshaw 2012, pp. 40-41)

As far as the central part of the assignment is concerned, first of all it can be noted that the axis of the boulevard and that of the river are respectively characterized by the high density and prevalence of the built environment one, and the prevalence of the environmental system the other.

In this case we can see two major themes tackled. One, relates to the expansion of the city, that begun spontaneously, but in this case is returning through the theme of the boulevard. The other theme relates to the ecological approach, that was present during the socialist period, but this time we see it developed more explicitly in a contemporary way.

The 2016 PRG of Tirana comes as the culmination of a multi-year effort to modernize the administrations. Following the administrative reform of 2014 which significantly reduced the administrative units, the PRG for all the new regions of Albania is being formulated at the same time. In the case of Tirana, the task is entrusted to Stefano Boeri.

The analysis phase is very thorough, extensive, multi-faceted and is the result of the joint efforts of many institutions, departments and people. As well as Boeri's proposal, which is structured in a complex way and holds together many urban, social, technical and legislative aspects at different scales. The complexity of Tirana highlights "the impossibility of giving an interpretation of the city through simple models" (Plani i Zhvillimit te Territorit, p. 11). In our context, we will focus on the aspects considered most significant for the urban development of Tirana, extrapolating specific parts and substantial elements of the plan that will be exposed mainly by referring to the 13 strategic projects proposed in the PRG (fig. 13). We can divide the proposals of the plan into proposals of a territorial and urban nature.

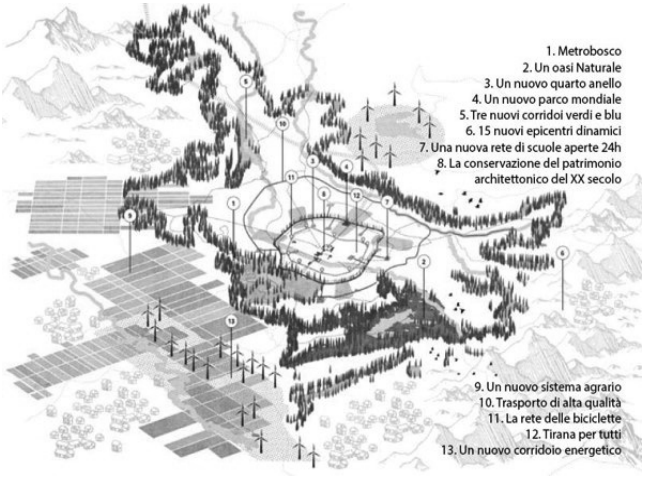

Figure 13. TR030, Strategic Projects. Source: TR030

At the territorial level, the main interventions concern the environmental system. A point on which the PRG is very important is the rehabilitation of the agricultural system in the framework of the installation of a new relationship between city and countryside. Therefore, the plan proposes the creation of four new agricultural corridors, combining these investments in infrastructure and logistics "for the construction of a sustainable value chain to support small and large farmers" (Plani i Zhvillimit te Territorit, p. 71). The agricultural system is seen in a broader environmental framework, which is not limited to productivity, but wants to systematize recreational and ecological components together with productivity around the most important urban center of the region which is Tirana.

In the limit between the territorial and urban dimensions we find the first strategic project proposed in the PRG which is the Metrobosco. The plan provides for the creation of a forest of varying sizes from 20 to 200 meters that treads the administrative border of the city of Tirana. The Metrobosco, as well as the Fifth Ring in the last PRG of the communist period, demarcates the boundary of urban expansion.

What we are interested in emphasizing is the conceptual change after 15-20 years. The urban boundary in the communist PRG is made up of an infrastructure while in the current plan of nature. This can represent an evolution in the way of understanding urbanity that took place in a short period. In some ways the evolution leads to the topic of the border but with different boundary conditions.

From an urban point of view, the authors of the plan recognize the monocentric character of Tirana developed over the years and opt for the development of a polycentric city. Polycentrism in the PRG is understood on three levels: territorial, urban and local (Plani i Zhvillimit te Territorit, p. 101). At the territorial level, the poles consist in the strengthening of rural centers while also highlighting their respective archaeological, cultural and naturalistic values. At the urban level, on the other hand, 5 macro-areas of urban transformation have been identified that will constitute the starting point for the new multipolar city. The poles are located in the peripheral areas and are characterized by a dominant function and implemented with primary services. Within these, specific areas of transformation with special statutes are planned to facilitate the creation of these poles. At the local level, the strategy proposed by the PRG is very unique and consists in the creation of a network of schools that can eventually become multifunctional centralities in order to fulfill another of the objectives of the plan, which is the 24-hour city where services are open and accessible day and night.

The urban structural system refers to the 1989 PRG. Boeri re-proposes the 5 rings of this plan by adding his own conception of the city. The most ambitious project of the plan from an infrastructural point of view and beyond, which is also one of the strategic projects, is the creation of a Fourth Green Ring. The strategy implemented for intermodal mobility provides for exchange nodes in critical points located in the Fifth and Third Rings favoring public transport, sharing and soft mobility (Plani i Zhvillimit te Territorit, pp. 136-139).

An important factor in the development of Tirana is the change in scale. The size of Tirana, since its creation, has always been small. When we talk about size, we are not only referring to the territorial extension, but also to the urban fabric, the size of the buildings and in general the feeling you have walking through the city. In a certain sense, Tirana looks more like a medieval city than a modern city. Even the introduction of modernism during communism has maintained a particular urban profile, partly due to technical impossibilities but partly also due to urban and historical conditions.

Currently, the development of the city, though planned, is happening in a fragmented way. The main typologies used are the towers, that we can interpret as the evolution of the singular multistory buildings appeared during the 1990s, and the residential complexes. Both of them are of another scale compared to the existing Tirana. There is a progressive erasure of the existing urban tissues of the city, which are in themselves fragmented.

Structurally and morphologically with the completion of The Great Ring in 2024, there is a consolidation of the structure strongly based on the 1989 plan but the Ring itself, with a section of around 50 meters, together with the towers and high-density residential complexes finalize the change of scale, envisioned in the 1943 plan.

Though planning has returned as a main instrument for city making, it is no longer planning the city that existed before 1990. It is planning a city already transformed by spontaneous urbanization. Furthermore, there are continuities, discontinuities, and recurrencies that contribute to the construction of the city as a whole. Consequently, earlier urban elements are not simply reproduced; they are reinterpreted.

Discussion

The historical analysis shows that Tirana's development cannot be understood as a succession of radical interventions that act in a successive manner operating ex novo in the urban fabric. Specifically, the transformation does not go linearly from spontaneous formation to planned urbanism, then back to spontaneity and finally to planning. Different forms of urban production have, and should, continuously interact, with each period transforming and reinterpreting the elements inherited from the previous one.

There are several recurring elements demonstrate this process. The early nuclei and radial routes established a morphological structure that persist through later planning interventions, and morphologically even today, and re-emerge in a different form, during the spontaneous expansion of the 1990s. The boulevard and central axis repeatedly return as structuring elements, while the grid, introduced but never implemented through planning in the 1920s, reappears casually through the parcel structure of areas such as Astir. The ring system shows an even stronger continuity, progressively changing from an element structuring the planned city into an infrastructural boundary and later, a metropolitan infrastructure.

The urban boundary also illustrates how recurrence involves

transformation rather than repetition. It moved from an abstract geometric border in the 1920s, to an infrastructural boundary in the Fascist and Socialist development, and more recently toward an ecological interpretation through the Metrobosco. Similarly, the relationship between the city and its territory reappeared at different scales and through different planning concepts, from the Garden City approach to contemporary agricultural and environmental systems.

The transformation of building typologies reinforces this interpretation. Courtyard houses and villas were progressively replaced by collective and linear housing, while after 1990 individual villas returned alongside multistory buildings and, more recently, towers and large residential complexes. The recurrence of the villa or the multistory building does not represent a return to an earlier city, but their reappearance under different economic, social and spatial conditions.

These examples suggest that recurrence is not repetition. What persists is often not the physical form of an element, but a spatial logic, structural role or territorial problem that is repeatedly reformulated and reinterpreted. Spontaneous urbanization therefore should not be understood only as the absence of planning: it produced a new urban condition that later became the object of planning itself. The tendency of the current development of Tirana, demonstrated in many examples, is the erasure of the traces of the past. Through the transversal analysis of the evolution of the constituting elements of the production of the city, we can eventually render an operative field of work, that operates through a synergy of interventions that valorize, instead of indiscriminately erasing, the existing condition and employes the critical/historical analysis as an instrument.

Tirana's urban identity can consequently be understood as a continuous process of transformation. It is produced through the persistence, disappearance, transformation and re-emergence of urban elements rather than through the preservation of a fixed historical character.

Conclusions

The analysis tries to demonstrate that Tirana's urban identity has developed through the continuous interaction between spontaneity and design. A city is a complex organism shaped through recurring ideas in an extended period of time. In our case Tirana has not simply moved from one mode of urban production to another. Each new phase has transformed and reinterpreted, even involuntarily, elements inherited from previous periods.

The recurring urban elements identified in the study reveal continuities beneath apparently discontinuous transformations. Their recurrence is not a repetition of previous forms, but the reappearance of spatial structures, logics and problems under different conditions.

Tirana's contemporary identity, which is still in the making, can therefore be understood not as a fixed morphological character, but as the result of continuous transformation, in which planned and spontaneous processes remain interconnected, in a transversal way.

The main contribution of this approach is consequently to interpret Tirana's urban transformation through the recurrence of its urban elements rather than through the opposition between planned and spontaneous city. Reading these elements across different periods makes visible the continuities underlying apparently discontinuous transformations and shows how each new phase of urban development inherits, modifies and reinterprets the structures of the previous one. The underlying goal of the research is to frame, methodologically and critically, the constituting urban elements that can be used operationally for the future development of the city, in continuity with the current development.

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