

# Mirroring Tirana

## Reflections on Tirana's Urban Context and Perspectives

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### **ABSTRACT:**

The crisis of the city is long been recognized worldwide, and the discussion about finding a form of sustainable urban development continues among professionals. Despite efforts to make simplistic classifications the difficulty to provide prescriptions is directly related to the complexity of each different reality, where the creation and development history, the climate and terrain characteristics, the economic situation, and in particular the culture and the way of living makes it impossible to create prototypes.

The paper reviews current debates on principles of the theoretical urban forms proposed to achieve sustainability of a city. Related to the Albanian context in general and the metropolitan area of Tirana in particular, it analyses the problems and trends of the recent territorial development of this city and the potentialities to apply certain forms of sustainable urban development that may be acceptable and feasible in the local context. Concluding, it's given a new approach to achieving an urban sustainability, arguing that the efforts to this purpose are connected not only to its urban form. Instead, perceiving the city in terms of process gives much more prospect in attaining the goal of a sustainable city.

*Keywords:* urban transforming process, urbanism theory, sustainability

### **1. Introduction**

The trend of the new “urban millennium” is that by the middle of this century out of every 10 people on the planet, 7 will be living in urban areas.(UN-HABITAT, 2012).

This urbanization phenomenon affects our understanding of the contemporary urban areas, which are going through a rapid transformation. But, which is the role of urban planners and designers in this situation? Koolhaas raises the question “whether professional disciplines such as architecture and urban planning still have a role to play”. His critic is directed towards the way these disciplines continues to focus on the ‘classical model’ of the city and the failing to come up with a new approach to face the contemporary process of urbanization. In his essay *What Ever Happened to Urbanism?* he states:

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...How to explain the paradox that urbanism, as a profession, has disappeared at the moment when urbanization everywhere – after decades of constant acceleration – is on its way to establishing a definitive, global "triumph" of the urban condition?(Koolhaas 1995).

Worldwide, considerations on the cities of today are expressed in different ways and are precursors to analysis on issues connected to cities of the future. Talking about Albanian society, the transition periods is directly connected with a strong transformation of territories. Seen from a global perspective: which society is not?

Although the undeniable progress of Albania, the transition from a total isolation, where everything was under a paranoid control of the state, in a free society that tries to establish a healthy democratic basis, apparently is not that easy.

Before the '90, in Albania, every territorial development was planned and controlled in a very rigid way; a known phenomenon in countries with totalitarian governments. Central research institutes were the only actors involved in planning, design and construction which should stay in line with the political ideology of the time. On the national level, there was an anti-urban policy, that aimed keeping in equilibrium the distribution of the population in the whole territory of the country. The free location of people on settlements was not allowed. With the overthrow of the regime people were free to move. As a result of this freedom, a massive demographic migratory phenomenon took place. It was characterized by a population flow from the rural to urban areas; resulting today with a high concentration of population in the central and costal region, mainly Tirana-Durres area. The abandoning of large territories with many dormant potentialities is a problematic issue related to an unbalanced development. Fuga gives a description of the situation in this way:

*... we resemble a sick body that is cold numbness in his extremities, because the blood does not circulate well. It seems like this has to do just with the extremities, but in fact it's the whole body that suffers, including his vital organs. A healthy body, through putting in motion the motor organs, revives and enlivens the entire system, the brain, also the heart.*(Fuga 2012)

The demand for a Network of Territorial Cohesion means a connection and a symbiotic relationship of settlements in the territory, avoiding the concentration in the megacities and giving importance to the smaller towns; is a problematic encountered beyond Albania, even in other developed countries. Improving the infrastructure and making these small towns more competitive is the path towards this territorial cohesion. (EU, TA2020)

The metropolis and the megacities continue to be powerful magnets for the population. They still continue even if today they are accused to be terrible

polluters and consumers. Despite this, we continue to want to live in the city and it looks like the city is the living model that prevails.

Beyond our need to have a connection with the nature, the city is apparently human's ecosystem and therefore deserves to be treated as such. The sustainability of this ecosystem has to be a guide for the present and the future of it. The city deserves to be treated as our common home, a home that accepts all.

After a wide panorama of the discussions on what's happening with the theories of urbanism, the main issues of this paper are to see whether these current discussions on the urban phenomenon could be connected with the transforming situation of the today's Tirana. How the city of Tirana looks like in the mirror? Where is Tirana today and how can urban planning and design contribute with creativity on the urban life of this city?

## 2. The transition towards new city approach

Different considerations and theories of urbanism tend to transform the reading and approaching the city, totally different from the conventional one. In the bases of all this so-called 'transition toward a new urbanism' is the flexibility on the way of managing the complexity of the postmodern city. Now, the authority of a single actor (centralized governance/urban planner) is not possible any more as it was in the modernist urbanism or in totalitarian regimes. More than ever before, each of the many stakeholders plays now an important role on development, all of them struggling with each other to increase their influence. The conventional urban planning has difficulties on responding to the dynamism of the new city life.

Kevin Lynch defines the 'settlement form' as "...the spatial arrangement of persons doing things, the resulting spatial flow of persons, goods and information, and the physical features which modify space" (Lynch 1984). So he refers to it as a continuing process.

Willem Jan Neutelings (Neutelings1992) introduced the idea of the patchwork city, a universal term now. Differently from the 'master plan city' the 'patchwork city' is not based on homogeneous entities called zones. "Patch is self-sufficient system containing all supportive functions at both subtle and dominant level." Patch contains multiuse spaces and multiple activities unlike the conventional zone which contains just a single function. The main idea is of a city composed from series of interacting elements that were once set in motion.

... A city must be read as a carpet of spatial programmatic fragments, as a continuum sequence of changing spatial patterns. The carpet metro pool occurs as an ordered unordered whole of fragments, each with their specific program

and interpretation. Her richness lies in the unprecedented diversity of patterns and the unprecedented options that thereby are generated.

At the *collage city* Rowe and Koetter imagine the city to accommodate a range of miniature utopias that can be set to play with each other. (Rowe, 1984) Graham and Marvin in their *Splintering Urbanism* (Graham 2001) propose to reinvent urbanism based on the *contrasting spatial identities of patches*. The success of a city is how it accepts plurality both in cultural and spatial terms.

Aldo Rossi (Rossi 1984) looks at the city as a layered structure, a composing of these analogical layers. As a protest against Functionalism and the Modern Movement, he expresses his idea of perceiving the city in terms of 'process of urban' where time gives the elements of the city, the power to bring the change. This doesn't mean that the city must be seen only from the historical point of view, but as a field of layers and patches that interact with each other.

... However, permanences in the city are not only pathological. At times they may be 'propelling'. They serve to bring the past into the present, providing a past that can still be experienced.

For Neutlings the patchwork is not a city model, but a tool for approaching complexity; complexity which can no more be treated like in former way of dividing issues:

... Simply expanding the city is therefore out of the question. The desired path is, on the contrary, the globalizing restructuring of its fragments: the patchwork rug isn't a model; it is, rather, a setting for transformations, a field in permanent evolutivity and readjustment in which what matters ultimately are the lines of connection and the landscapes of relation.

The efforts to simplify the above discussion regarding the future development of cities in two polarities: 'compact city' and 'urban sprawl' makes us lose the sense of complexity. The supporters of the idea of the compact city advocate the traditional city, its form and scale and its mixed use of land. The fetishism of the inner city, setting its spatial scale as a model, is seen as problematic in the recent transformations of urban development. Meanwhile, the supporters of the urban sprawl provide arguments that lead to the conclusion that for urban planning is impossible to control the complexity of lifestyle in the era of globalization and use this conclusion as an excuse for a complete *laissez-faire* attitude.

Connected to Tirana, this discussion gives this city possibilities to be a compact city; Tirana is a dense, mixed use city and without a large extension, but is it sustainable? The situation seems to be more complicated since at Tirana the

density is commonly combined with the laissez-faire. The way the compact city is represented as formless statistical number of density, number of uses, or distances (one-dimensional form) makes it out of any context. Therefore, the New Urbanism cannot be just some recipes of pedestrian friendly cities, dense neighbourhoods with mixes of housing and jobs, even if all these are very important elements. We should not see it as a completely technical issue.

When Rem Koolhaas puts in discussion if urbanism has still a role to play, at *'What Ever Happened to Urbanism?'* he states:

... If there is to be a "new urbanism" it will not be based on the twin fantasies of order and omnipotence; it will be the staging of uncertainty; it will no longer be concerned with the arrangement of more or less permanent objects but with the irrigation of territories with potential; it will no longer aim for stable configurations but for the creation of enabling fields that accommodate processes that refuse to be crystallized into definitive form; it will no longer be about meticulous definition, the imposition of limits, but about expanding notions, denying boundaries, not about separating and identifying entities, but about discovering unnameable hybrids; it will no longer be obsessed with the city but with the manipulation of infrastructure for endless intensifications and diversifications, shortcuts and redistributions - the reinvention of psychological space. ... Redefined, urbanism will not only, or mostly, be a profession, but a way of thinking, an ideology: to accept what exists (Koolhaas 1995).

So, urbanism has to reinvent itself, get out of the clichés and confront with the complexity of today and future cities. How difficult it might be for Tirana to be seen with these new eyes? May be that it's the perfect situation that with the dynamic changes of the city changes even the way to act towards. The city plays an important role to make the transition from a closed society to an opened one, and the new urbanism might be a good assistant to achieve this difficult goal.

### 3. Tirana in the mirror

David Graham Shane uses in his book *Recombinant Urbanism* (Shane 2005) the term heterotopia, borrowed by the philosopher Michel Foucault<sup>1</sup>, to explore ideas into the field of urban design. Heterotopia is a term to express the existence of 'the other spaces' that are simultaneously physical and mental, such as the moment of a glance in the mirror; as a metaphor for a duality of reality and the imagination.

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<sup>1</sup>"of the other spaces" is named the essay written by Foucault where the term was used for the first time

The suggestion of Tirana in the mirror is to recall the Foucault's imagination of spaces, which in this case are located in the city. The mirror is a real object that shapes the way to relate to the proper image. So the heterotopia is a spatial mediator of utopias (the ideal way to be) and the real space (the way the city is). The question here is to find places in the city that have dormant potentialities where these heterotopias can be created; that can be used as stimulations for the regeneration of the city life.

Tirana takes more and more the face of a dynamic and complex metropolis, a magnet city, where today and future generations see the realization of their dreams. The projections draw a population of approx. 1 million in the future 20 years.

The discontinuities (fractures) in time of the history of Tirana were the moments that left strong traces, dramatizing its transformation. The reflections shown on this paper are to be read as suggestions for issues that need to be conceptualized and elaborated on further.

The hypothesis to give the city of Tirana the form of a *collage city* created by *avibrantnetwork* that connects *patches*, comes as a vision from the need to get out of the idea of the urban planning as a radical process, as a formal combination of land uses. It comes as an inspiration from the actual situation of Tirana. This is not a technical planning elaboration, instead it tries to offer a way to embrace the dynamistic development of the city, finding the impulses that produce this dynamism, transforming them to a positive energy to create a long-term sustainability. To catch the ability that a city has to change it's needed to think of it creatively, away from the technical manners used until now. Urban planning has to be led by the new circumstances of the contemporary city. Referring to Koolhaas urban planners have to redefine their relationship with the city not as the city makers but as city supporters.

In order to understand the future of Tirana it's needed to give a look at the past processes of its transformation. In the history of Tirana spontaneity and planning seems to alternate with each other. From the 1614 (year of foundation of Tirana) until 1920 the little ottoman town was totally traditionally built, connected to the territory with low buildings constructed with local materials, minarets of mosques as orientation points and Old Bazar. The master plan of 1925, made by Italian architects, marks the start of a rational urban planning, a moment connected with the rule of the Albanian Kingdom. The strongest trace of this period is the Brasini's axis, also referred as the 'cosmic axis' because of its alien nature compared to the existing town. The plan of Bosio for Tirana (1940), in the period of Italian occupation, was the one that mostly influenced the shape of the city. This is the plan that gave Tirana the image of a "garden city" with the radial roads converging to the center and the circular rings. Although the Italian architecture of the fascist period was totally alien to the existing city, Bosio's aim

was to give Tirana the image of a Western city, but at the same time he tended to preserve elements of the existing city integrating in the monumental ensemble of the axis the mosque of Et'hem Bej and the Old Bazaar. The plan of the 1940 ironically influenced the plans of the entire half century period of communism, that combined with the rigid planning methodologies borrowed from the Eastern countries, produced nothing more than a Tirana with more or less rings. The "violence" towards the organic old town (ex. The elimination of the Old Bazaar to build the Palace of Culture) was made with the idea of creating a "new flourishing socialist city". The dominant planning model has been a kind of modernism model stuck in the framework of a socialist rationalism, reducing the role of urban planners in technicians that could give the absolute idealistic solutions.

After so many years of frustration seems like "the city found its way to show its rebellion" and the power of the state was too weakened to keep the control. The rational model of approaching the city continues to have its impact on the way of today's city management and as the Tirana's reality shows, it didn't have the ability and flexibility to respond the new political and socio-economic conditions. The migration phenomenon significantly increased the need for housing. As a response the city became denser in the center, with new high buildings out of any order, and expanded on the outskirts with low residential houses constructed outside the formal market. Unexpectedly the shape of the city came out of control. Its image was distorted.

Tirana has an impermanent urban form. Is a city living in twin fantasies of order and chaos, rationalization and hybridization. Order that comes from the historical desire of forcing a structured urban form and hybridization generated from the economic forces of a rapid growth.

Today, Tirana results to have an amoebic form. The strongest expansion trend is in the direction of the north-western part, because of the morphology of the territory, but in other directions also are undergone expansions. As previously said, in this transition period Tirana has turned into a dual city, with inner city and the informal areas on the outskirts. The newcomers are still seen as outsiders. They are not a part of Tirana and are seen as living outside of the 'Yellow Line'. The 'Yellow Line' that limits the expansion of the city, as a concept inherited from the totalitarian period, has now totally lost the first meaning. It was the line that defined the end of the city. Now, beyond this imaginary line the city doesn't end, it is continuous. New dense pieces (or patches) of city are attached to this line, pieces that actually are part of the city but are not in its administration. Immediately next to these pieces ends the formal city and starts the informal one. Historically Tirana has never been a wall-city, this due to its new age. Only in the communism period a piece of the city called "bllok"

(blocked area) was isolated and dedicated to the leadership elite of the time. The fall of communism also symbolized the victory of democracy against separation; “the right to the city” for everyone. The phenomenon of the expansion of the city resembles a patchwork puzzle, the patches here are separated and suffer in their vulnerability and lack of identity. The yellow line is transformed in a social wall that separates these components of the city.

This segregation phenomenon is not just a center-periphery polarization. Tirana’s urban sprawl does not consist only in newcomers. Tirana’s sprawl cannot be classified as a phenomenon that resembles the developing countries sprawl of people coming from rural areas, because it also has the phenomenon of developed countries (specially North American) of residents preferring to live in the suburbia (the rich people). This makes Tirana a city composed of flows of people coming from outside that want to be part of the city and flows of people going outside that doesn’t want to live in the city anymore. Also there is a tendency to move isolated functions out of the city, like offices of industrial areas or commercial areas like malls, typical also of American cities. While the developed world is mobilizing to combat the urban sprawl as the most unsustainable way of living (separation of functions, big waste of energy for transport, inefficient land use) as an admitted mistake, trying to find modes of concentration, Tirana is continuing to make the same mistakes with this unsustainable way of territorial development. If in Westerns are trying to “put back the genie in the bottle”, Tirana that has “the genie in the bottle”, should be worried to “not let it get out”. The key is to integrate the informal city and to increase people’s desire for a city life, in order to stop their removal. By integrating these patches of the puzzle in a convenient network there is hope to create a more sustainable Tirana in all the aspects of sustainability.

It makes no sense to escape from the city since it is the triumphant model where people want to live. The solutions to the problems of the city have to be searched and found inside the city itself; modes of concentrations that do not sacrifice the quality of life. The feature of still being a dense city in a surface that even if it doubled, still lays more or less within the outer ring with a radius of approximately 2,5 km equal of 30 minutes walking (the inner ring of approx. 1 km equal to 12 min) is a positive predisposition for a sustainable Tirana.

In respond to the social segregation urban planning and design can give an important contribution by breaking the myth of the center, giving value to the periphery. In his description of the Generic City Koolhaas reinforces the need of the city to come out of the rigidity of the past up to the point of accusing identity and the insistence on the center of the city as a barrier for its holistic development. He states:

... in our concentric programming (author spent part of his youth in Amsterdam, city of ultimate centrality) the insistence on the center as the core of



value and meaning, font of all the significance, is doubly destructive – not only is the ever-increasing volume of dependencies an ultimately intolerable strain, it also means that the center has to be constantly maintained, i.e.. modernized. As “the most important place”, it paradoxically has to be, at the same time, the most old and the most new, the most fixed and the most dynamic; ... (Koolhaas 1995).

Tirana needs to immediately get out of the cramp of the center, creating other powerful and vital centers spread in the city, the inside and outside one, using this as a way of balance and avoidance of social segregation. The patchwork city of Tirana can be a mosaic of pieces which represent the districts of Tirana, pieces created in certain moments of its history, but even new pieces that can be seen as special patches. The characteristic of the patches, their transformation and spatially the relation between them is the key of this new vision of the city. The patches can be seen as active urban enclaves or districts with multiple uses. Each of them has its own identity, its own autonomy, is self-sufficient but maybe not totally, with a high quality of life based on sustainable ways of transportation, mixed land use and diversity buildings, all with a strong focus on local communities. These patches are the embodiment of the heterotopia that makes tangible the vision for the future Tirana. They require a set of a network system to operate in a given situation.

Some selected patches can be the ‘specialized patches’(Shane 2005), which play a significant role in the whole city life. These specialized heterotopias can be chosen based on their specificity. Tirana has many parts where the idea of a heterotopic space can be seen as embodied in ‘specialized patches’. The poles proposed from the latest master-plan of Tirana can be considered as some of them, but at the same time there might be other potential localities to be considered, located at the same time at the ‘outer city’ to include it inside the collage city of Tirana. These ‘specialized patches’, which are selected by the criteria of having some element-plus in comparison with the other ones, have the ability to change their surroundings, but at the same time the surroundings can change their characteristics.

The so called arterials or armatures(Shane 2005)are components of this system that make possible the flow of physical and non-physical elements. About Tirana there are many sustainable solutions to this issue. Tirana was always planned as a city based on walkability (at communism period the use of the car was almost inexistent). The new lifestyle changed completely the image of a quite city towards a city full of traffic and noise, since the growth of the economy provided many Albanians to realize the dream of the car. Multimodal arterials, environmental friendly, but efficient at the same time are to be considered. The

combination of a multimodal way of transportation plays an important role on the creation of a sustainable urban ecosystem.<sup>2</sup>

Tirana has an impermanent image. The hybrid architecture is the one that prevails because of the congested uses and multi-functionality that the new reality needs imposed to the architecture. The image of this city is in constantly change, not only in its neighborhoods, but also in the most consolidated parts of the city. Even in the boulevard axis, which is considered as the most solid part, there have been recent interventions. In most cases these hybrid architectures have impacted negatively on the structure of the city, however, seen from another perspective, it can be considered as a good feature of the city for not being rigid, for accepting the change, for not being a slave of its identity. Koolhaas:

... Identity is like a mousetrap in which more and more mice have to share the original bait, and which, on closer inspection, may have been empty for centuries. The stronger identity, the more it imprisons, the more it resist expansion, interpretation, renewal, contradiction.(Koolhaas 1995).

Koolhaas estimates the metabolism spirit of a city which makes it a model of continuing change, compared to the complexity, dynamism, ever-changing and multifaceted nature of natural organisms. This metabolism of the city of Tirana must lead the approach towards its transformation.

The poor physical condition and the invasion of the public space is a still opened wound at Tirana. Here there are heterotopias to be constructed. The spaces that Koolhaas calls *Junkspaces* (Koolhaas2002) with a negative connotation, have and important role to play. In the vulnerability of these spaces could be identified potentialities of catalysts for the revitalization of the city.

## Conclusions

The city is an “unfinished project” that never ceases transformation and it’s important to considerate that it’s hard to control it. The story of Tirana illustrates it perfectly. Tirana in the mirror resembles to a patchwork city, as a reflection of thefluctuating process of its transformation in time. The proposed vision for the futureis giving these patches identity, autonomy and self-sufficiency, making them part of an inclusive collage city through a rich network as a mechanism to structure a sustainable development of the city.In the essence of this vision stays the emphasizing of the ability that Tirana has to change and

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<sup>2</sup>The example of the BRT (Bus Rapid Transit) adopted at Curitiba, Brasil can be seen as a solution on a cost efficient way of resolving the transport issue.

transform itself, to accept as part of its life the dynamism, the flows of people, information and culture. The aim of perceiving the city in terms of urban process rather than urban form gives more perspectives to achieve a long-term sustainability. This is an approach towards a city that today suffers a low quality of life; the approach of a new urbanism that is led by creativity and the need to create an urban life that flows smoothly in an urban environment which is sustainable, vibrant and flexible to accept the diversity.

Tirana is taken as a case study because of its complexity of urban phenomenon and for the fact that has always been a model of development for the other cities in Albania. The collage city, proposed in this paper as a mechanism of structuring the urban form can be seen as adoptable in the urban process of these other cities, specially the cities of the coastline which show the same syndromes of Tirana, as a respond to their rapid urbanization.

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