

REFLECTIONS ON TIRANA'S URBAN IDENTITY (1146)

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Abstract. This article examines the concept of identity related to public places. In post socialist cities, the rush of urban development signed the loss of peculiar characters of places and of what Pierre Nora called *lieux de mémoire*. The Albanian concept and perception of urban public space have undergone through radical transformations which have affected the identity of the place – neglecting and sometimes canceling it – and the process of place-making. The paper discusses the effect that recent projects have had on the memory and the tradition of public places. The aim is to look at the local level for various forms and manifestations of elements of urban identities. In this perspective, the paper tries to rebuild the evolution of public places of Tirana to understand the past transformation phenomena and the ones in progress, identifying the specific features of places such as morphological identity, uses and culture. It argues that development of amnesia in urban space was intentional and proposes guidelines for future developments.

Keywords: memory, place, amnesia, identity, tradition.

1. Introduction

The importance of public spaces as vital places in the urban life of the contemporary city is undiscussed. They constitute the foundation of public life (Dogan, 2021) and play an important role in sustaining the city (Mehta, 2014). From a social and economic point of view, public spaces improve the quality of life, and the urban image. They also encourage economic development. Public Space Charter states that the community must recognize itself in public space. These open spaces represent an opportunity for social interactions, community events, and recreational activities. To be successful and liveable they must produce a sense of identity and belonging to users and enrich the lives of those who use them (Gaventa, 2006). The Public Space Charter defines public space as accessible and usable all for free or non-profit purpose. The improvement and transformation of the urban structure and the creation of new public spaces have influenced the lives of citizens through provision of opportunities for entertainment and thus stimulating new forms and institutions of urban life and culture. The opening of new wide streets and avenues, as well as private activities close to the main roads of the

city has created the most appropriate public space and a safer environment to also increase the presence of women in the public realm.

The urban identity of Tirana has been shaped by its turbulent history and rapid transformation over the last century. Tirana was founded in 1614 by Sulejman Pashe Bargjini and it exhibited the urban patterns of an Ottoman town until it became the capital of Albania in 1920. Since then, Tirana has undergone several phases of urban development and change, influenced by different regimes and ideologies, such as fascism, communism, democracy, and neoliberalism. These phases have left their traces on the physical component of the city, creating a diverse and eclectic urban fabric that reflects the cultural and political diversity of Albania.

Tirana is a city in constant transformation. This transformation is reflected in the urban form as much as in the spatial configuration and perception of the public spaces. It is important to measure the performance of public spaces, but it is also important to avoid one-size-fits-all as Carmona states while pointing out principles for public space design (Carmona, 2018). When public spaces have no quality, the activities that can be carried out are limited and they are transformed into connection spaces. Quality spaces invite people to stop, sit, etc., transforming the public space into a livable, usable space (Gehl, 2011, p.13).

Another aspect of public space in Tirana is the occupation and privatization of space by various actors, such as informal vendors, cafes, restaurants, parking lots and construction companies. This phenomenon has been criticized as it reduces the accessibility and quality of public space for the citizens, especially for low-income groups, women, children. The city of Tirana is facing a challenge to balance the interests of private development and public welfare, and to create more inclusive and democratic spaces for its inhabitants.

2. Methodology

The aim of the research is to investigate at a local level for various forms and manifestations of elements of urban identities. In this perspective, the paper tries to rebuild the evolution of public places of Tirana to understand the past transformation phenomena and the ones in progress, identifying the specific features of places such as morphological identity, uses and culture.

This research investigates how public spaces succeed in creating a sense of belonging and creating places. This approach shows the bond that is established between the individual and the public spaces. To address this research question, we can highlight the qualities of Tirana's public space, through a thematic approach. It argues that development of amnesia in urban space was intentional and proposes guidelines for

future developments. The investigation is based on direct observations on sites and literature review.

3. Memory and Identity of Public Space

The Global Public Space toolkit represents an outcome of a consultative process. It was organized by UN-Habitat and INU with representatives of different countries and disciplines, to draft this toolkit, in 2015. The aim is to support local governments in creating and promoting inclusive, integrated, connected, sustainable, and safe public spaces. The term space/place alludes to the quality that all public spaces must have. This toolkit identifies the qualitative aspects of public space. The study of hundreds of public spaces, located throughout the world, noted that the most successful public spaces had these qualities: they are accessible, the users may conduct various activities, the space is comfortable, it is a social space, and people meet.

On the other hand, the 2030 Agenda seeks to reach the SDGs. Target 11.7 aim to provide inclusive and accessible green and public spaces by implementing policies toward inclusion, resource efficiency, adaptation to climate change ect. The New Urban Agenda envisages human settlements that 'engender a sense of belonging, prioritize safe, inclusive, accessible, green and quality public spaces that are friendly for families, enhance social and intergenerational interactions, cultural expressions and political participation, as appropriate, and foster social cohesion, inclusion and safety...' (UN, 2017).

Carr et. Al (1992) suggests that good public spaces are responsive, democratic and meaningful. Mehta (2014) while assessing the quality of public spaces in different case studies located in the US, Tampa examines empirically inclusiveness, meaningfulness, safety, comfort and pleasurable. He claims that societies need to shift from town squares to good public spaces that fulfill the needs of modern communities. The focus remains on the usability of spaces and how much people engage (Mehta, 2007).

Public space identity is a concept that relates to how people perceive, experience, and interact with public spaces. Public spaces are areas that are open and accessible to everyone, regardless of their background, identity, or interests. Public spaces can serve as places for social interaction, expression, recreation, learning and civic participation (Kent, 2016). Public space identity can be influenced by various factors, such as the physical characteristics of the space, the social characteristics of the users, the cultural meanings and values associated with the space, and the personal experiences and memories of the users. Public space identity can affect how people feel attached to a place, how they identify with a place, and how they behave in a place.

Public space may have great significance to people depending on events that happened

throughout human history. They become part of collective memories and images. Every transformative intervention in public spaces may affect the perception of the space. Smith (2006) affirms that heritage is a tool for building memories and developing identities. Identity and memory are two fundamental concepts on the contemporary city widely discussed in literature. Memory loss and identity crisis are threatening the city and our behavior in public spaces.

The memory arises from societies and is always open to dialectics, being in continuous evolution. If, on the one hand, history represents a reconstruction, the memory warps unconsciously, it is vulnerable to manipulation. Memory is not part of the past because it is perpetuated in the present (Nora, 1989:8). 'The identity of a place and the sense of belonging which manages to general can be said to be effective when the place feels really right, when you manage to establish a non-inhibitory relationship with subjects and with spaces, when possible, to participate together with the first and to reinvent the latter' (Brugellis P., Pezzulli F., 2006).

As Crinson (2005) affirms, there are two approaches to memory: memory as a heritage of past experiences and the ability to collect and recall past events. He also claims that 'Urban memory can be an anthropomorphism (the city having a memory) but more commonly it indicates the city as a physical landscape and collection of objects and practices that enable recollections of the past and that embody the past through traces of the city's sequential building and rebuilding' (Crinson, 2005, xii).

4. Development of Tirana's urban structure

The Albanian architect and Mayor of Tirana during 1935-1936, Qemal Butka points out on a daily newspaper, that in Albanian cities one cannot speak of one tradition in urban planning, since the birth and growth of cities has always been spontaneous and characterized by the desire to always be in a hurry. The result is all chaotic works with divergent directions that they could not aim for a common vision. There was no street, square or complex of buildings of which you could be fascinated by the harmony of the project same (Butka, 1938).

The urban structure is chaotic due to the dispersion of houses that do not follow ordering principles but adapt to the orography of the territory with forms open to the good sunshine. An extensive typology that opposes the Mediterranean organizational mode (Cerasi, 1998). The public spaces generally did not have the shape and composition of European public spaces. The square did not exist as a concept and as a way of external space configuration. It was about open spaces like widening of main arteries or vacant lots bordered by roads, not from buildings, at least public, without precise shape and size (Aliaj B., et. al., 2003).

After the Second World War, under communism, the new way of doing urban planning followed indications from the Soviet Union. It started with interventions of major interest aiming the industrialization of the country. A first example of the application of socialist ideology was town planning as a tool to grow the economy. The housing units were born as needed to accommodate workers and laborers. Since internal immigration was controlled and private property did not exist, the government, referring to the Party brought workers from other cities and settled them in the residential area built near the industrial buildings. Over the years, this nucleus has marked a housing growth and was equipped with all services needed by a city.

The city was designed on an orthogonal network, with a main street of connection with other cities and other secondary roads that cross it. The compositional unit, the block, had the shape of a rectangle and large size, the buildings within floated free. The proposed building typology was linear. Almost all the buildings were arranged on the territory in such a way that create a continuous alignment with the main road or those secondary. The poor development of building technologies did not allow the construction of several levels above the ground. The central square plaza was located at the entrance to the industrial complex to highlight the architecture of the buildings.

Architectures were produced from amount, architectures strained with ideological violence and the voice of the architect, according to Kolevica, it was a vox ciamans in desert. The use of capitals, frames and decorations were external to the tradition of the country (Kolevica P.,1997).

In Tirana, the anti-sprawl "movement" was born spontaneously, after 1990. After an initial period in search of free land in the city limits, the interest of the builders is directed to the land near the center, to take advantage of the differences in the land rent. This long process was triggered by both privatization of publicly owned lots and the re-appropriation of private properties. The lack of programming document territory has favored the expansion of legitimized urban planning practices. The result of this process is the overwriting of existing fabrics without principles e rules.

5. Investigating Urban Identities in Public Spaces

The Scanderbeg Square was designed in an empty area near Ethem Bej Mosque in 1926. The Italian architect Armando Brasini wanted to preserve the existing structure of the city and developed the expansion of Tirana towards the west and south. It was called Ministry square because of the new governmental building facing it. It became the main piazza of the Capital. The recent project for Scanderbeg Square was completed in 2017 with multi-coloured paving made with stones from different parts of the country. The square is surrounded by several emblematic buildings, such as the National History

Museum, the Palace of Culture, the Et'hem Bey Mosque and the equestrian statue of Skanderbeg, the national hero. The square is also a symbol of Albania's complex and convulsive history, as it reflects the influences of different regimes and ideologies that have ruled the country. The renovation of the square aimed to create a generous pedestrian area and a local ecosystem that fosters urban biodiversity and microclimate control.

The Mother Teresa square was completed in 1940 and designed by the Italian architect Gerardo Bosio. The square has a rectangular shape and the area occupied is almost 14 thousand square meters. It represents an extension of the main boulevard that connects Scanderbeg square with the Casa del Fascio. The shape of the square, the use of the stairways, the continuity of the facade, the rhythm, and the sculptural projects are clear references to monumentality as an expression of political power. The square and the buildings are subject to protective restrictions. In the center of the square, there was a fountain but after its removal, the space is occupied by "Tirana sixhade". It is a colored painting on the surface representing the traditional texture of Shengjergj area near the capital. The buildings facing the piazza have only public functions.

Piazza Italia was built as part of the Litorian complex, between the stadium and ODA, connecting the main piazza to the stadium through a colonnade. The square was conceived as an extension of the park with greenery. The space was not well delimited as the other public spaces proposed during that period. The new intervention on the stadium also brought a renewal project for the public space. Archea associate designed the project of the stadium, maintaining a part of the existing façade.

In 1926 two Italian architects, Becciarri and Giuliani were called to design a new complex dedicated to trade and retail near the center of Tirana. A few years after, near the sales area, it was also designed a piazza. The tradition of selling meat, fish and vegetables is preserved nowadays. The new Bazaar continues to live thanks to the reconstruction and restoration project of 2015. The reconstruction of the fruit and vegetable market follows traditional motifs. The roof shape is proposed to be in line with existing buildings. Wood represents the material used in the initial project of the 1930s. The pavement of the market square is made of stones shaped like the typical flooring of the Albanian culture *kalldrem*. In the areas of the park, benches were made using traditional materials such as stone and wood. Since 2015 the public space is lived from the morning to late hours for the presence of bar and restaurants.

The Runaway Park is a themed public space strongly desired by the residents and by the local government to recover an abandoned airstrip for several decades. The project proposed by the Athena studio in 2008 deals with two parts of the city, the existing context on one side and the proposed unbuilt structure on the other, by connecting them using greenery. The project approaches two different scales: the urban scale and

the human scale. The measurement unit used in the composition of the park is 1 km. The length was divided into 10 creating spaces dedicated to greenery or sports with dimensions of 100m. Every area differs from the others on the base of function, color, and use. It was designed to refer to the human scale. The materials used are different to highlight this concept.

6. Conclusion

Le Febvre and then Harvey (2008) argue about who has rights to the city, pointing out the fact that it is far more than the individual liberty to urban resources. We have the freedom to shape and remake our cities following our values. In a hundred years of interventions in Tirana as a Capital, some architects have neglected the past, considering Tirana a city without an identity. But the urban identity of Tirana is also influenced by its phenomenological component, which is more subjective and dynamic. The phenomenological component reflects how people perceive, experience, and relate to the city, based on their personal and collective memories, emotions, values, beliefs, and identities (Aliaj et.al, 2003). The phenomenological component can vary depending on different factors, such as age, gender, ethnicity, education, income, lifestyle, and preferences (Aliaj et.al, 2003).

Some of the most relevant aspects of the urban identities of Tirana's that should form the basis for future interventions in public spaces are:

The sense of place: This is the feeling of attachment and belonging that people have towards a specific place in the city, such as a street, a square, a park or a neighbourhood. The sense of place can be influenced by factors such as familiarity, history, culture, aesthetics, and social interactions.

The image of the city: This is the mental representation that people have of the city as a whole or of its parts. The image of the city can be influenced by factors such as visibility, legibility, identity, and structure.

The urban culture: This is the set of values, norms, behaviours, and expressions that characterize the way people live in the city (Ziyae, 2018). The urban culture can be influenced by factors such as history, geography, religion, politics etc.

To avoid risking intentional amnesia, all the three components should be readable in public spaces of Tirana.

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