

Navigating Conflicts and Paradoxes: Analyzing the Interaction of Urban Regeneration, Local Governance, and Public Policy in the Tirana Riverside Project

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the Tirana Riverside Project as a paradigmatic case of post-disaster urban regeneration in Albania, unfolding amidst the dual crises of the 2019 earthquake and the COVID-19 pandemic. These emergencies catalysed a shift toward centralized governance and fast-track planning, enabling the implementation of large-scale projects with limited community consultation. Drawing on five intersecting theoretical frameworks—rational planning, advocacy planning, collaborative planning, the just city paradigm, and post-disaster urbanism—the study interrogates the paradoxes between technical innovation and social justice. Using a mixed-methods approach, which includes policy analysis, spatial documents, grey literature, and resident's interviews, the study reveals deep disjunctions between the project's smart-city vision and the lived experiences of displacement, exclusion, and institutional opacity. The findings demonstrate that resilience-oriented planning, when detached from democratic governance and procedural fairness, risks reinforcing inequality and transforming into an alibi-urbanism. The paper advocates for a post-crisis urbanism grounded in transparency, participation, and equitable recovery, particularly in contexts of fragile and contested governance and transitional countries like Albania.

Keywords: Post-disaster urban regeneration, centralized planning, Tirana Riverside Project, governance and community engagement, urban complexity and policy innovation.

Introduction

Albania went through two crises in a row only a few months apart from each other: the earthquake on November 26, 2019, and the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown in March 2020. The human tragedies triggered by these dual crises and their post-disaster consequences, significantly transformed the policies toward the urban environment. Justified by the necessity of rapid responses in governance decision-making, the rebuilt process forced rapid innovation in governance structures and regeneration strategies. The reconstruction of the earthquake-affected areas and the strategy to expand into new territories, required a new *ad hoc* legislative framework. The new norms and regulations, approved by the Council of Ministers, as action plans were issued by the *ad hoc* Ministry of Reconstruction, working closely with local governments and the National Territorial Planning Agency (AKPT). Its *ad hoc* creation, transitioned decision-making on the urban environment into a more centralized, top-down planning model. Justified by the urgency of the situation and articulated within an exceptional legal system, the *ad hoc* norms and instruments utilized fast-track urban planning tools for disaster recovery and public necessity, establishing also a precedent for managing emergencies related to urban growth in the future.

One of the first decisions of the Council of Minister after the earthquake of 2019, was passed on December 24, 2019 (DCoM No. 887), aimed to expedite the formulation and ratification of the “Mandatory Local Plan (PdyV)”¹ in the targeted regions chosen as post-disaster rebuilding zone. This legislation enabled authorities to bypass existing planning procedures, prescribed by the Planning and Development Law 107/2014 (Kuvendi, 2014) identify new development zones (even on private land), and sanction urban designs without public consultation or municipal council approval.

The “5 Maji” area renewal masterplan, was approved on March 3, 2020. The Municipality of Tirana altered the zone's classification from “development” as approved by Tirana 2030 General Local Plan, to “redevelopment”. This redesign of the general local plan, designed as a green isolated neighbourhood disregarded the city infrastructure, network, history and identity. Individual property rights were disregarded also, while compelled residents to relinquish their homes via a non-negotiable contract, frequently lacking transparent information regarding compensation or subsequent housing arrangements.

This research examines the Tirana River Project case study, the renewal project that was designed to replace the existing neighbourhood. Located in the northern part of the city, alongside the river of Tirana, the “5 Maji”

¹ The Mandatory Plan was an *ad hoc* new instrument, that was added to the Planning legislative framework after the Earthquake of 26 November 2019.

neighbourhood, was organically created after the 90s, and was home to communities that migrated in the capital after the communist regime fell (Aliaj et al., 2003) which is continuous, and incorporates mixed structures and historical events. Tirana is a symbol of urban culture between the sea and the mountain, preserving Illyrian, Roman, Byzantine cultures in a Oriental atmosphere;... between European elements and those typical Mediterranean' and Balkans' ones; surviving from the most authoritarian urban planning discipline of fascism and communism to the most anarchist chaos of medieval and modern times of 21-st century...

In short, Tirana is actually one of the most dynamic cities in Europe and obviously represents a city of a typical and prolonged transition, which remains still the main and most dramatic challenge of the present days.

Starting from 1920, Tirana city has been always subject to studies and works to improve its architectural and urban development. Several studies are carried out recently also since 1994 and today, the most significant to be are "The Strategic Plans for the Greater Tirana and Kamza Municipality", which constitute a full set of documents including the complexity of the numerous social-economical issues, land use principles as well as future activities, infrastructure needed for normal development, what represents so far, the most recent urban research work for Tirana and Albania.

In the eve of the new millennium Municipality of Tirana initiated important urban operations that are completely changing the image of the Albanian capital. Tirana Municipality's goal is to prepare a vision of development that is flexible and adaptable to the rapid changes of the city. This necessarily requires the complete reformation of the town planning legislation as a process that should go side by side with the development of the city. The new urban regulation of Tirana can serve as good starting point for the new package of laws on Town Planning, which the country needs desperately. The drafting of this new regulatory plan as a process and in partnership with many specialized institutions and other interested groups and communities, regardless of the differences that might exist, is likely to be efficient and not prone to raise contestations or create obstructions and urban chaos as it's been the case so far. Let us hope for a positive change in the future.

It bears stressing also that authorities of Tirana Municipality have realized that developing a new urban development plan should not be over estimated, for this plan cannot resolve automatically all the complicated problems of Tirana, except for it will raise transparency and will guide better the municipal administration in the process of outlining a clear vision for the city's development by considering improving the logic of development in the hope that distortions similar to those we have witnessed so far will be minimized and prevented.

Following the lessons learned from the urban planning in the past, taking into consideration the current urban phenomena, as well as the new proposed urban plans for Tirana Region (what is described in this Guide. Approved as a mandatory local plan (PdyV), the ambitious 29-hectare urban regeneration project (Figure 1), designed by the Italian architect Stefano Boeri, aimed to transform this low rise, low density, into a dense and smart city district, "an accessible and self-sufficient district from the point of view of clean energy, water, food, and all urban public services" (Boeri, n.d.). According to the architect, this renewed district would be self-sufficient in energy and would have the necessary infrastructure to guarantee supply and quality of life even during lockdown periods (Boeri, n.d.) (Figure 2).

As part of the new development plan, the Municipality of Tirana required residents to sign a compulsory agreement to relinquish their property without acknowledging their properties development rights. Residents strongly opposed the demolition of their homes, citing a lack of trust, as accused the municipality for non being transparent on the aims and decisions made, particularly regarding the property "exchange" agreement, which lacked clear information about how the re-allocation would happen. Many reported they were only notified about the evacuation date, without any further details on where they would live in the meantime, their housing arrangements or even the procedures of their displacement.

To the government, this large-scale urban renewal project was necessary because it would house more than 12,000 people, many of whom were homeless due to the earthquake, while the others would be the new families and social housing (Figure 3).

The public interest discussion made room for the arguments used by both local and central governments to justify the project. Suddenly in December 2021, the municipality gave a short notice to the residents to empty and leave their houses while inviting them to apply for a rent bonus, but without success, as the residents refused to leave their houses and didn't agree to the budget for rent, which was half of what an apartment rent used to be in Tirana at the time. This situation triggered a daily protest from the residents, gathering at the entry of the main road reaching their neighbourhood.

"The Masterplan, planned to accommodate 12,000 people, is a 29-hectare green neighbourhood, equipped with all the technologies of a Smart City and able to guarantee the safeguards and health safety requirements necessary to face contemporary seismic and pandemic emergencies." (Boeri, n.d.)

The Tirana Riverside Masterplan case study, is one of the 43 designated post-earthquake rebuilding and redevelopment zones declared by the Council of Ministers. It is chosen as through it we could analyse the interaction between technical planning, (presented as smart planning), and political policies during intricate recovery phases. It aims to answer the question of how centralized planning instruments in post-disaster contexts affect procedural justice and community agency in urban regeneration projects.

The article draws on a range of critical urban planning theories to frame the analysis of post-earthquake renewal and rebuilding in the case of the Tirana Riverside project in Tirana. The theoretical framework used for this research is organized around five main ideas that helped us think critically about the Tirana Riverside project. First the rational planning, then followed by advocacy planning, collaborative planning, the Just City concept, and the post-disaster urbanism. Jane Jacobs' critique of orthodox planning's is also part of the discussion. It addresses a significant deficiency by examining how post-crisis rebuilding in Albania, an EU-aspiring yet governance-challenged state, serves as a platform for *ad hoc* urban planning, democratic manipulation, and controversial regeneration. It contributes to a nascent yet underexplored domain that examines how disasters function as both spatial disruptions and political catalysts, particularly within weak democracies.

These situations, characterized by weak institutions, mixed governance practices, and informal land tenure systems, hinder fair and democratic recovery in these countries where achieving democracy is both a struggle and a challenge. There is a notable gap in research regarding post-disaster urbanism in transitional and post-socialist states, despite extensive studies in developed and institutionally stable countries like Italy and the United States. There is limited understanding of how crisis-driven regeneration interacts with political instability and spatial inequality, primarily due to the lack of focused studies in these contexts. Therefore, the case of Tirana, Albania, following two significant post-disaster events, is particularly relevant to the discussion on post-disaster urbanism.

The study employs a mixed-methods approach to investigate the complex dynamics of post-disaster urban regeneration, with a focus on the Tirana Riverside Project case study. Combining qualitative insights with quantitative analysis and documentary evidence, the research aims to provide a multi-layered understanding of governance practices, spatial transformation, and community impact. The governance practices are studied through the examination of institutional practices and decisions, while the spatial transformation is investigated through planning documents and site observation. To address the challenges of the community impact, interviews were carried out with the members of the community and urban activists involved in the process. Media articles from that period, public declarations by government officials have all served as sources of information for the research. The content analysis was the main framework used to analyse documents, and responses of the interviews.

Theoretical Framework

The philosophy of urban planning has changed a lot in the past hundred years. It was once technocratic and rationalist, but during time shifted to be now, more dialogic, participative, and justice-focused. The transitioned from the rational planning paradigm, which was popular after World War II, and saw planning as a linear, scientific, and expert-led process, to participatory raised a wide debate in the West scholars and researchers. This paradigm emerged as predominant in the post-war decades, influencing both the role of planners and expectations of planning outcomes.

According to Taylor (1998), objectivity and technical efficiency were essential to rational planning, as it was based on the positivist philosophy, which made it all about looking at data, setting clear goals, and finding the best solutions. The rational plan helped things recover back to normal quickly after the war, as it changed the way people thought about planning, especially when coming up with quick fixes after war-related disasters. The rational planning decision-making was a logical and rational series of steps based on facts, evidence, and a clear goal. This model of planning leads people to believe that only planners can engage in the planning process, viewing it as a scientific and technical endeavour.

Planners were seen as value-neutral (see Davidoff, page); as a result, they were in charge of finding the best and most practical solutions by gathering information and using logical reasoning. This planning model used to look at numbers and scientific facts, disregarding other problems like injustice, oppression, gentrification, and marginalization (Taylor, 1998). In the years following WWII, the 1960s-1970s, more and more people spoke out against this way of thinking, as it didn't include people in the process, which meant it didn't take into account real-life problems and local knowledge.

Jane Jacobs, in 1961, wrote an important critique in her book "Death and Life of Great American Cities" of what she called "orthodox planning" (Jacobs, 2002). She attacked rational planning at the very first pages of the book as a top-down model that ignores the complexity, spontaneity, and social life of real urban neighbourhoods. Jacobs criticized planners for being too abstract and for being detached from the day-to-day realities of city life. To the author, forced redevelopment often destroys the real things that make cities alive, like community networks, informal economies, and social diversity.

In 1965, another scholar, Paul Davidoff, came up with the idea of "advocacy planning. He stated that planners should speak up for groups that are underrepresented and disadvantaged instead of staying neutral. To the author, the planner has to take a normative statement, like a lawyer does for his client, to push for fairness and diversity in the process of making public decisions (Davidoff, 1973). Thus, planners should help groups that don't receive enough attention by changing the way the project is set up to ensure that to include their voices and to make sure everyone can participate and by making rules and changes.

To Davidoff, it is impossible to suggest appropriate planning from a value-neutral perspective because "*values are inescapable elements of any rational decision-making process.*" (Davidoff, 1973, p. 423), and to do its job well, "*the planning profession must engage itself thoroughly and openly in the debate surrounding political determination.*" (Davidoff, 1973, p. 423). To the author, fair notice and public hearings, which are meant to gather supporting evidence for further cross-examination, are important ways to find the truth and make sure that the decision is not biased (Davidoff, 1973).

After that, planning became more collaborative and communicative. According to Patsy Healey, *communicative planning* is a planned and cooperative process meant to help stakeholders reach an agreement with the inhabitants. Patsy Healey's collaborative planning theory changed the approach to planning from instrumental rationality to communicative rationality (Healey, 2003). It was based on Habermas's idea of communicative rationality but used in a real-world planning system, dealing with normative objections, building on them, and coming up with a new way of looking at planning as a communicative and negotiated process. To Healey, the planning process should be open, clear, and ongoing, and it should take into account local values and knowledge (Healey, 2003). The author put more value on talking, being open to everyone, and learning from others than working only on technical knowledge. This model of planning is especially important in communities that are broken up because it's easy to question the legitimacy of authority (Healey, 2003).

Fainstein's "Just City" thesis extends beyond the planning process to encompass the outcomes of such planning (Fainstein, 2010). According to the author, we should evaluate urban development based on fairness, democracy, and diversity, particularly when evaluating "green" or "smart" initiatives. When dealing with these initiatives, we should look at how well they redistribute resources, reduce unfairness, and extend power to marginalized groups. The author believes that this model is especially useful when dealing with a situation after a disaster because redevelopment can hide social and spatial exclusion by using progressive language. Susan Fainstein's "just city" view makes the collaborative framework better by saying that urban planners should work hard to achieve their goals, which should include diversity, fairness, and participation in democracy. According to Fainstein's lens, we need to look at smart cities and sustainable master plans and see if they really do promote fairness and give everyone the same chances (Fainstein, 2010, p. 117) democracy, and diversity are important considerations. This is in contrast with the city as growth machine. Fainstein examines three cities: New York, London, and Amsterdam. She provides a history of post-World War II planning and then focuses on fairly recent cases of development in each. Her goals, though modest, are important if growing inequality in urban areas is to be reversed. Recommended."— ChoiceFor much of the twentieth century improvement in the situation of disadvantaged communities was a focus for urban planning and policy. Yet over the past three decades the ideological triumph of neoliberalism has caused the allocation of spatial, political, economic, and financial

resources to favor economic growth at the expense of wider social benefits. Susan Fainstein's concept of the "just city" encourages planners and policymakers to embrace a different approach to urban development. Her objective is to combine progressive city planners' earlier focus on equity and material well-being with considerations of diversity and participation so as to foster a better quality of urban life within the context of a global capitalist political economy. Fainstein applies theoretical concepts about justice developed by contemporary philosophers to the concrete problems faced by urban planners and policymakers and argues that, despite structural obstacles, meaningful reform can be achieved at the local level. In the first half of *The Just City*, Fainstein draws on the work of John Rawls, Martha Nussbaum, Iris Marion Young, Nancy Fraser, and others to develop an approach to justice relevant to twenty-first-century cities, one that incorporates three central concepts: diversity, democracy, and equity. In the book's second half, Fainstein tests her ideas through case studies of New York, London, and Amsterdam by evaluating their postwar programs for housing and development in relation to the three norms. She concludes by identifying a set of specific criteria for urban planners and policymakers to consider when developing programs to assure greater justice in both the process of their formulation and their effects.

,"event-place":"Ithaca","ISBN":"978-0-8014-7690-7","language":"English","number-of-pages":"224","publisher":"Cornell University Press","publisher-place":"Ithaca","source":"Amazon","title":"The Just City","author":{"family":"Fainstein","given":"Susan S."},"issued":{"date-parts":["2010"]},"locator":"117","label":"page"},"schema":"https://github.com/citation-style-language/schema/raw/master/csl-citation.json"} . The author believes this is crucial when people are forced to leave their only homes or are pushed out of society.

Vale and Campanella's (2005) theory of post-disaster urbanism provides us a new way to think about how the Tirana River Project came to be. This model of planning shows how disasters in cities can be both political triggers and physical barriers at the same time and space. The authors of the book *"The Resilient City: How Modern Cities Recover from Disaster"* (Vale & Campanella, 2005) argue that disasters are more than just physical breaks; they are "critical junctures" in the history of cities. (Vale & Campanella, 2005, p. 7) Disasters are rarely neutral; instead, they act as catalysts that bring out and worsen existing inequalities, making it easier for political and spatial agendas to be put into action quickly, even if they would have faced opposition otherwise (Vale & Campanella, 2005). To the authors, post-disaster governance, often under the pretense of urgency, enables bypassing regulations and consolidating authority through centralized control. In these situations, it can even employ emergency powers to change the urban configuration in ways that favor strategic or commercial interests. Thus, reconstruction is not merely about putting things back together the way they were before; it is selective, strategic, and often exclusionary, and the governmental actors and urban elites often use the crisis narrative to redesign and rebrand long-standing programs as essential for recovery. Their approach is called "opportunistic urbanism" (ibid.).

In addition to the five main planning theories, the case of Tirana's Riverside reflects also some elements of Austerity Urbanism (Peck, 2012) selectively targeting the social state, is a long-established trait of neoliberal governance, but it has been enforced with renewed systemic intensity in the period since the Wall Street crash of 2008. The paper develops the argument that these conditions are defining a new operational matrix for urban politics. Examining some of the leading and bleeding edges of austerity's 'extreme economy' in the USA, the paper seeks to locate these developments in the context of mutating processes of neoliberal urbanism, commenting on some of its social and spatial consequences.

,"container-title":"City","DOI":"10.1080/13604813.2012.734071","ISSN":"1360-4813","issue":"6","note":"publisher: RSA Website\n_eprint: https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2012.734071","page":"626-655","source":"Taylor and Francis+NEJM","title":"Austerity urbanism: American cities under extreme economy","title-short":"Austerity urbanism","volume":"16","author":{"family":"Peck","given":"Jamie"},"issued":{"date-parts":["2012",12,1]}}},"schema":"https://github.com/citation-style-language/schema/raw/master/csl-citation.json"} which finds its place when urban crises legitimize extraordinary governance and reduce citizens' participatory rights in decision-making. Originally characterized by the transformation of cities in the US and Europe during periods of financial constraints, today it can be used to refer to the impact of emergency narratives on urban governance, which potentially undermine democratic norms, instruments, and principles accepted before the emergency. Although Albania's situation does not arise from fiscal cuts, the political logic of using the crisis as an opportunity for governance closely resembles how austerity regimes function in Western cities. These regimes often bypass democratic norms and impose technocratic control under the guise of innovation and recovery.

This notion was particularly relevant in the areas recovering from disasters or crises, where it is essential to employ both analytical methodologies and participatory decision-making. Patsy Healey's collaborative planning pays attention to inclusion, conversation, and accessibility and shows us how important communicative rationality and the persuasion of many stakeholders are. Participatory planning inherently conflicts with technocratic, top-down approaches to planning, while Susan Fainstein's concept of the "just city" provides a framework for assessing whether democratic outcomes are equitable and diverse and that planning should be evaluated not only for its effectiveness but also for its impact on underrepresented groups.

The state of the art triggered some more questions regarding the case under study. Is the mandatory rebuilt master plan technically effective and at the same time socially equitable? Does the Tirana Riverside master plan embody inclusivity and participatory engagement by local stakeholders, replacing traditional top-down planning, or does it represent a form of "authoritarian greenwashing" that is justified by post-disaster emergencies?

These theories helped us to understand how community members navigate urban complexity after a post-disaster and the conflicts generated through the crisis in transitional countries like Albania. The investigation allowed us to assess whether the Tirana Riverside project represents a democratic paradigm of post-disaster urban planning, or functions as a mechanism for centralized governance under the pretext of sustainability and innovation.

To ground these theoretical reflections in a real context, the following section examines the Tirana Riverside Project as a representative case study of post-disaster renewal in Albania.

Case Study: Tirana Riverside Project

The Tirana Riverside Masterplan is one of the 43 post-earthquake rebuilding zones, part of the governmental strategy to tackle post-earthquake disasters. The masterplan aimed to create a resilient and smart urban area that included smart mobility infrastructure, affordable housing, green spaces, high density, and integrated public transport access (Boeri, n.d.). The project was presented as a state-led initiative with centralized oversight, yet its success depended (and still does) on navigating the local governance environment and inhabitants' expectations.

The master plan, designed by Stefano Boeri Architetti and SON-Group, planned to accommodate 12,000 people in a 29-hectare *"green neighbourhood, equipped with all the technologies of a Smart City and able to guarantee the safeguards and health safety requirements necessary to face contemporary seismic and pandemic emergencies,"* according to the architect's masterplan description (Architetti, 2020). Its concept advocated mixed use, mixed housing, cultural integration, public administration buildings, schools, playgrounds, and even cult buildings (Figure 1). Public services were organized into three pedestrian-friendly hubs, creating a zero-emission, polycentric community that included schools, administrative offices, and a university center (Architetti, 2020). The project also sought to achieve the involvement of local SMEs, facilitating economic revitalization and setting new benchmarks for urban excellence (Architetti, 2020).



Figure 1: Tirana Riverside Master Plan Layers and functions. Source: Stefano Boeri Architetti <https://www.stefano-boeri-architetti.net/en/project/tirana-riverside/>

Presented as a post-disaster innovative project, the new redesigned neighbourhood promoted smart urban design capable of withstanding both seismic events and health crises. The new plan emphasized the creation of open green spaces, intelligent infrastructure, low-emission transportation, and sanitary facilities, which collectively reflect an advanced approach to urban planning (Figure 2).



Figure 2: The top view area of the plan being built; Source: Stefano Boeri Architetti <https://www.stefano-boeri-architetti.net/en/project/tirana-riverside/>

Pandemic Governance and Its Influence on Urban Planning

Albania was already in a state of emergency due to the earthquake of 29 November 2019 when the COVID-19 pandemic emerged in early March 2020, exacerbating the situation. The Albanian Parliament declared a national state of calamity, imposing a lockdown on public life. This empowered the government to implement specific measures on health, territory, and administration, while the prolonged emergency persisted for several months, grounding terrain for facilitating expedited urban planning and development decisions (Këshilli i Ministrave, 2019).

The government, compelled to revise its urban development strategies to tackle the earthquakes and later the epidemic, used "normative acts" as the main policy documents alongside executive orders. With the power set by the emergency of both legislative and executive, to design expedited laws and by-laws, the council of ministers approved a new set of norms and new plans for the post-disaster crisis. This new legal framework seeks to govern the operations of entities tasked with the rehabilitation and reconstruction of towns and regions impacted by natural or other disasters, in addition to the development of new territories (Këshilli i Ministrave, 2019).

The new policies, positioned as recovery instruments, necessary and obligated by the disasters in a few days, redesigned and replanned massive parts of the urban and rural territories. 43 post-earthquake rebuilding zones were approved by the normative act No. 9, dated 16.12.2019, new neighbourhoods that would host the affected families. In this setting, governance evolved into a top-down, emergency framework that facilitates the rapid advancement of urban innovation, thereby normalizing accelerated design methodologies and allowing the rebirth of the broad, atypical metropolitan territory (Këshilli i Ministrave, 2019).



Figure 3: The masterplan official document; Source AKPT [online upload](#)

A Disjunction Between Vision and Lived Experience

"Tirana Riverside overlooks a river park dedicated to the community and designed to preserve an ecosystem capable of increasing biodiversity in the urban environment, becoming a refuge and biological habitat for non-domestic species, and promoting the creation of microclimates useful for the surrounding civic well-being." (Architetti, 2020)

The Boeri masterplan, was designed to be implemented in an existing built neighbourhood at the north of Tirana. Positioned alongside the river Tirana, the district labelled as “5 Maji” was home to hundreds of families. Some architectural magazines published at the time several articles about the Tirana Riverside Project as a good example of how to reconstruct cities after disasters by integrating smart technologies, green infrastructure, and mixed-use design (Ravenscroft, 2020). But the individuals who live in the vicinity of these rebuilding zones witnessed that there is a wide difference between what the project says it would do and what people really see. The difference brings up crucial questions about who will create the future of cities and who will be left behind in the process. It also shows how planning is done poorly in transitional societies following a disaster.

This 29-hectare area, 35 years before, was predominantly a suburban region characterized by low-rise structures and some collective housing. It functioned primarily as an agricultural zone, frequently of a semi-rural nature. After the fall of the communist regime in 1990, the authorities lacked the capacity to cope with people migrating within the country, while hundreds of families moved from rural areas toward the outskirts of the capital. One of the area affected by the migration displacement was 5 Maji zone.



Figure 1: Tirana Riverside Master Plan 3D Image. Source: Stefano Boeri Architetti <https://www.stefanoboeriarchitetti.net/en/project/tirana-riverside/>

In the absence of week institutional presence, they built their own homes by themselves, without any pre-approved projects or permits. Some of them even occupied the land, while others bought it but didn't have clear legal papers. In 2005, these buildings attempted to navigate via the legalization process and were declared as being built informally. But, unlike the gradual and negotiated substitution processes observed in Kashar and Astir (Kacani, 2024), the transformation in the 5 Maji neighbourhood was imposed more abruptly through top-down decisions.

The objective of the Boeri masterplan to transform, with the principle of *tabula rasa*, the current neighbourhood into a smart city meant tearing down the homes of more than 300 families. People who lived in the area didn't accept the idea of tearing down their houses, as they didn't see why they should tear down what wasn't damaged by the earthquake. They said they weren't briefed about the project or allowed to be part of the design process, and no negotiations were made possible for them.

Most of them declared that they found out about it through the news.

At the time of the project's approval, some homeowners were still seeking to legalize their properties and secure full ownership rights, but the government proceeded with the project's implementation and, due to the lack of legal ownership of the site, exercised eminent domain only partially, interest thus expropriation was easier as the compensation was not obligatory. This logic mirrors broader patterns observed in Albania, where informal settlements are often overlooked as legitimate socio-urban formations, and their residents are treated as obstacles to development rather than holders of urban rights (Aliaj & Kacani, 2020).

The municipality claimed that would be in the "public interest," arguing that the new neighbourhood will also be home to those who lost their houses in the earthquake. Even though they were considered "illegal residents" and had no recognized rights to the land, the government promised to facilitate their return to the neighbourhood once the rebuilding was complete. Through a contract of understanding, those who would sign would be granted a rent bonus of 180 euros and, afterwards, an apartment. Data from a structured survey of residents from the former "5 Maji" neighbourhood demonstrates that none of the respondents reported being meaningfully consulted at any stage of the planning or implementation.

From Displacement to Precarity

The negotiation process between the residents and the government unfolded in a tense atmosphere, characterized by early morning police operations that forcibly displaced individuals and demolished some houses. The government referred to this initiative as "displace by force and demolish" (Figure 5; Figure 6). Citizens.al, an online media outlet, has provided a detailed account of the forced displacement of individuals and the demolition of structures in the "5 Maji" district of Tirana in early 2022. The empirical analysis incorporates these real-time articles from the operation.

Under police protection, the Territorial Protection Inspectorate (IMT) demolished twelve residences on February 22, 2022. The operation commenced prior to dawn, while residents resisted by nonviolent protests, forming human chains, and confronting police, who deployed tear gas and made arrests. The on-site journalist sources narrate the violent demolishment of the "5 Maji" district to make room for the Tirana Riverside Project from the perspective of eyewitnesses. The article, "Five Stories from 5 Maji," complements this legal and procedural analysis with the personal testimonies of the individuals impacted (Ndrevataj, 2022).

A young man handcuffed himself to the rooftop of his house as a sign of the last resistance while the police forcibly removed him; an elderly woman who had to leave her home of thirty years and an emigrant couple who lost their life savings invested in informal housing frame the operation's narrative by highlighting the human cost of development under duress, where affected citizens are treated not as stakeholders but as obstacles to be cleared. Through these accounts, the Tirana Riverside project emerges not only as an urban planning case but as a socially and ethically contested terrain.



Figure 5: The demolition operation of 5 Maji neighborhood. Source: Citizens.al, Facebook 09.02.2022



Figure 6: Police presence during demolition process. Source: Citizens.al, Facebook 09.02.2022

None of the individuals impacted had executed contracts for compensation. Their attorneys asserted that the proposed contracts were inequitable and that their notarization was unlawful. The ombudsperson criticized the absence of explicit documentation, the deficiency of legally mandated compensation, and the employment of emergency legal measures to circumvent public consultation.

We conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with displaced residents in April 2025 to investigate issues related to displacement, institutional transparency, and community involvement. We performed an examination of urban density measures, land-use change patterns, and transportation accessibility indices in the areas before

and after the project. We performed a comprehensive examination of pertinent urban design plans, legal documents, policy briefs, municipal resolutions, and planning records. Attention was directed towards the normative legislation employed during the period of emergency and the formal redevelopment framework. We employed the triangulation of data to enhance the validity and dependability of the results. This integrative methodology facilitated the juxtaposition of official narratives with the experiences of impacted communities, revealing deficiencies in participatory governance and spatial equity.

A majority of respondents still live in temporary, substandard, or overcrowded housing, while the promised “smart neighbourhood” remains either inaccessible or unaffordable. Only a handful had signed return contracts, and even fewer had been reinstated. Nearly 60% of participants rated their current quality of life as worse than before displacement. Interviews uncovered material hardships, such as insufficient rent bonuses and legal barriers to property registration, and emotional and psychological stress due to prolonged uncertainty, social fragmentation, and the loss of community networks.

From Plan to Practice: Evaluating Tirana Riverside through a Theoretical Lens

As part of Albania’s recovery plan after the earthquake, the Tirana Riverside masterplan, approved in 2020, promotes a smart and sustainable neighbourhood that can hold 12,000 people on 29 hectares. Stefano Boeri Architetti in charge of the masterplan, promoted smart housing, green transportation, biodiversity, and renewable energy systems, which all worked together and composed a resilient smart neighbourhood. On the surface, it fits with the rational planning model of Taylor, (1998), a target-oriented and data-driven, centralized, and efficiency-focused plan to deal with urban environments after crises. However, when viewed through the lens of Advocacy and Collaborative Planning, the project’s legitimacy appears diminished.

Applying Patsy Healey’s theory of Collaborative Planning (1997) to the Tirana Riverside Project is compelling, especially in light of Albania’s post-disaster environment, which is characterized by institutional fragility, political centralization, and profound social heterogeneity. The goals and meaning of urban transformation are jointly shaped by a variety of actors, including citizens, public institutions, technical experts, and civil society, in Healey’s lens, which views planning as a deliberative and inclusive process rather than a technocratic exercise. This approach stands in stark contrast to top-down, rationalist models, which place a higher value on efficiency, speed, and centralized control—frequently emphasized in post-crisis situations. The urgency of the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2019 earthquake in Albania resulted in a highly centralized planning response that left little room for local knowledge, dissent, or discussion.

Healey’s caution is especially pertinent in this case: planning techniques that avoid candid discussion and consensus-building run the risk of losing their social acceptance and usefulness in fractured societies. The Tirana Riverside project kept away impacted communities from meaningful engagement, rather than encouraging a participatory dialogue on reconstruction. According to Healey’s perspective, this case required not only physical reconstruction but also an institutional process based on equity, openness, and cooperative visioning—elements that were mostly lacking during the project’s execution.

Healey says that the complexity of cities shouldn’t be seen as a problem but as a chance to come up with new policies. Tirana Riverside shows how collaborative ideas at first glance can be questioned, changed, or used in a limited way.

Adding to this study, Susan Fainstein’s (2010) idea of The Just City, we can look at both the processes and results of Tirana’s rebuilding after a disaster. Collaborative planning puts a lot of weight on participation, discussion, and coming to an agreement through negotiation, while Fainstein argues that planning must also achieve substantive justice, especially in cities that are changing quickly and becoming more unequal while following neoliberal principles. Fainstein says that fairness, democracy, and variety should be the main ideas that guide decisions made in cities. The Tirana Riverside Project raises some important questions about these ideas. Has the improvement of the area made it easier for everyone to get to homes, public places, and services? Have people who used to live in the area gotten the right amount of money, been included, or been made full beneficiaries? How much does the project encourage people to interact with each other, and how much does it encourage people to stay away from others by making green spaces look nice?

While the Boeri smart project emphasizes eco-friendly mobility, rooftop gardens, and digital infrastructure, the social infrastructures necessary for just urbanism, such as housing rights, participatory accountability, and redistributive equity, remain critically underdeveloped. From a Fainstein (2010) perspective, the project fails to deliver on the core principles of the “just city,” namely, that urban development must be evaluated not only by its design but also by its equitable outcomes and ability to empower the most vulnerable. This contradiction is especially salient in the context of the post-disaster urban redevelopment process, as Vale & Campanella (2005) have argued; crises often serve as catalysts for pre-existing political agendas, enabling the fast-tracking of plans that may otherwise have met community resistance.

In the case of the Tirana Riverside project, there is strong evidence that the earthquake was used to accelerate elements of the previously approved 2017 Tirana 2030 Masterplan, bypassing deliberative norms and replacing informal communities with formal architectural visions not shaped by those who lived there (Bateman, 2021). Further, this process reflects what Swyngedouw (2005) and Gunder (2010) critique as “post-political” urbanism: the masking of contentious political decisions under the language of resilience, innovation, and sustainability. The danger, they warn, is that “smart” cities become new mechanisms of exclusion, where design excellence is decoupled from social justice. The Tirana Riverside project is a good example of what Swyngedouw (2005) calls “Janus-faced governance. This implies that even though public discourse promotes new technologies, sustainability, and inclusivity, the planning process itself is still quite bureaucratic and exclusive. Both city and government officials told to the public stories about the 5 Maji, citizens that were both bullying and exclusionary, often labeling them “usurpers,” “illegal,” or suggesting they cared more about the interests of the opposition political party than their own family, while Boeri’s project was shown as a solution to fix things after the earthquake and as a plan for a smart and powerful city. This behavior of both local and central authorities generated a “post-urban politics” where decisions were decided centrally and people became spectators of a growth tale that is shaped from top-down and imposed by force.

The government (both central and local) made decisions that were often communicated through general announcements in the media or on social media. These announcements didn’t give enough information or allow for personal interaction with local government and its constituents. The fact that there aren’t many ways for people to get involved is a major criticism of technocratic planning models by Healey (1997). She argues that these models always ignore the importance of local knowledge and different ways of thinking. People didn’t see co-creation or meaningful consultation; instead, they saw what Miraftab (2009) calls “invited spaces,” which are places with strict rules where community participation is predetermined, shallow, or non-existent (Miraftab, 2009).

Citizens.al (2021) investigative reports reveal that the transition from the “5 Maji” neighbourhood to the new smart and green city was characterized by a lack of transparency and the exclusion of residents. Important documents, such as the Compulsory Local Plan, were not made available to the public, and no public hearings or consultations were conducted. As a result, residents were unaware of decisions that would impact their homes and lives. Many residents were uncertain about whether they would need to relocate, receive compensation, or become part of the new community.

Many of the residents who were interviewed said that they were not allowed to legalize their homes before they were torn down, even though they were waiting for decades and even paid for the legalization procedure. This meant that they lost their property rights, and besides the fact that they lived there for more than 20 years, according to the civic code, they were eligible to be declared as owners. This goes against Davidoff’s belief that planning should clearly recognize and support the rights of people who are politically disenfranchised. These testimonies strongly support Vale and Campanella’s thesis on post-disaster urbanization, in which disasters are used to justify carrying out pre-existing development plans that often ignore justice, transparency, and citizen involvement.

Besides the right to the property and the right to an adequate house, the imposed plan, the violent arbitrary intervention, and forced redevelopment, according to Jane Jacobs’s lens, destroy the things that make cities lively, like community networks, informal businesses, and a mix of different types of people.

The case of 5 Maji shows that centralized smart-city plans took the place of a neighbourhood that was built by the community but didn't involve the community. Jacobs' criticism is in line with what people in this study said, which shows that functional homes are being torn down without following the rules in the name of urban progress.

This critical lens let us look behind the appealing language of "green" and "smart" planning and instead focus on how these words were used in larger political and economic goals. The Tirana Riverside Project was shown as a symbol of forward-thinking urbanism, but our research shows how planning processes may be made less political and less democratic. It wasn't just a question of infrastructure or new ideas, instead it was also a question of fairness, inclusion, and power. These ideas make us think more about how post-disaster urbanism works in shifting and post-disaster situations and how planning, as both a field of study and a way to run a city, has to deal with the conflict between ambition and recklessness.

Conclusions and some final thoughts

The Tirana Riverside Project is a good example of how to rethink the stories, tools, and effects of urbanism after a disaster, especially when governments are changing and institutions are weak. At initially, the project was sold as a smart and forward-thinking redevelopment zone that would show how cities might be more resilient, adapt to climate change, be more resilient to post-disaster, be adaptable for pandemic situations and come up with new innovative lifestyle. But doing it highlighted how hard it is to follow planning rules when they are enforced in a strict and top-down approach.

Our research shows that the project's official vocabulary, which included words like "smart," "green," and "resilient," was not backed up by processes that included everyone and focused on community involvement, spatial justice, or transparency. Instead, these ideas were used to justify actions that moved vulnerable people, ignored informal tenure, and went around deliberative governance. What was promised as change turned out to be a tightly controlled removal of informal urbanism, organized by business interests and hidden behind the language of innovation.

Masterplans and visualization techniques were useful technical tools, but they were also ideological tools that let people make cities without politics. This raises further concerns about how urban planning is being deployed in post-disaster contexts, not to protect or empower communities, but to control and reshape them. In moments of crisis, urgency is often manipulated to justify interventions that shut down negotiation and weaken democratic oversight. In the long run, planning shifts from being a tool for public good to a mechanism for state-led accumulation and investor confidence—frequently in conflict with the lived realities of those most affected by the disaster.

To truly understand post-disaster urbanism today, especially in transitional countries like Albania, we need to do more than just look at design frameworks. We need to ask important questions such as: Who decides what is an emergency? Who decides what to do? Who gains from the it, and who pays for it? These are not just questions about how things work or how to run things; they are questions about fairness. To rethink how cities work after a disaster, we need to face the hard truth that planning is often used as a way to keep people out of politics. It is important to stop the depoliticization of space and bring planning back to democracy, collective memory, and social repair.

Planning as a Field: Between Desire and Anger

The Tirana Riverside example illustrates a fundamental issue in the realm of urban planning: how to achieve an optimal equilibrium between the objectives of democracy and its function as an instrument of institutional aggression. Urban planning aspires to provide greener cities, equitable infrastructure, and adaptable lifestyles, on the other hand, it remains essential to the power structures that create the injustices it seeks to eliminate.

This contradiction increases in areas recently affected by a calamity, particularly in transitional democracies. When people experience a necessity for rapid action, planning frequently becomes expedited, more technical, and less sensitive to the social and physical contexts it influences. Projects are defined by polished presentations, global best practices, and indicators that are useful for investors. The complexity of local lives is either obscured or utilized as a mechanism.

Tirana Riverside not only demonstrated planning logic but also employed it: a progressive ideology that masked displacement, a narrative of inclusivity that concealed elite consolidation, and an aesthetic that rendered suffering invisible.

This indicates that the discipline is going through a more profound crisis. Planning is always subject to bias. It involves more than merely creating spaces or preventing rapid urban expansion. It constitutes a political act, a narrative concerning culture, and frequently serves as a means of exclusion. We must closely examine the frameworks employed to instruct, implement, and validate planning. What do our instruments represent? Whose voices are reflected in our plans? Whom are we assisting, and what is the expense involved?

To restore planning as a democratic and ethical endeavor, we must resist its allocation by market dynamics and governmental propaganda. It signifies acknowledging its role in exclusion while also advocating for its capacity to nurture, correct, and collaboratively create. A significant gap exists between aspiration and assertiveness that necessitates serious rethinking. In this context, planning is not imposed or removed, but conducted collaboratively with those who will be most impacted by its consequences.

In this domain, planning can initiate assistance not just for the city as an entity but also for the urban experience as a collective condition rooted in memory, conflict, belonging, and hope.

The TRP Dilemma and Post-Socialist Urbanism

The Tirana Riverside Project exemplifies post-disaster planning and the aftermath of socialism, all under the guise of authoritarian modernity. The initiative is formally designated as a "state-of-the-art urban regeneration project," although its execution illustrates how calamity can serve as a pretext for major changes in urban environments. The transition from ambitious masterplanning to social conflict indicates that knowledge of technology alone cannot substitute for ethical governance.

In the absence of explicit legislation and mechanisms for public engagement, regeneration is executed upon individuals rather than in collaboration with them. Our analysis indicates that the obligations related to inclusion and improvement were not fulfilled. New edifices and thoroughfares were constructed; yet, for several residents who previously inhabited the area, access to public services decreased. A significant number of individuals were compelled to relocate to the periphery or to temporary accommodations characterized by inadequate infrastructure and connectivity. The public transportation system is inadequate, and expenditures on walkability and social infrastructure have not increased correspondingly.

The majority of residents received inadequate compensation and poor alternatives. Standardized contracts, frequently signed under pressure, stripped individuals of their rights to negotiate, capitalize on increasing urban values, or maintain ties to their dwellings. A multitude of individuals possessed unsettled tenure claims, complicating their negotiation efforts. Engagement was superficial and hierarchical, with economic advantages going to private developers rather than the displaced populations.

Urban planning post-disaster must be equitable and inclusive of all stakeholders. This necessitates the implementation of planning strategies which are transparent, collaborative, and respect the rights and values of inhabitants. The increased density of residences and enterprises in Tirana Riverside Masterplan imposes greater pressure on the city's current infrastructure, particularly its roadways. Insufficient funding for public services may exacerbate traffic congestion and marginalize individuals from society.

The master plan orchestrated by Boeri promotes sustainable mobility, verdant thoroughfares, and cohesive transportation; yet, it lacks detailed information regarding the practical implementation of these systems. It displays roads, but not the traffic conditions. Public transit appears to prioritize managing the present rather than anticipating the future. It fails to consider the hundreds of thousands of square meters of dwellings that will shortly be occupied. The project may become an isolated enclave without multimodal, high-speed transit linking Tirana Riverside Masterplan to the northern periphery of Tirana.

The inconsistent utilization of public transit and infrastructure raises concerns around greenwashing and symbolic. It illustrates the compatibility of a progressive style with retrograde politics and underscores the paramount importance of critical, justice-oriented planning.

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