

Bringing the city together / spatial interventions in Tirana residential areas

Introduction

The workshop '*Bringing the city together. Spatial interventions in Tirana residential areas*' was organized by a group of professors, lecturers and PhD students of the School of Architectural Engineering of the National Technical University of Athens (NTUA). It was hosted and supported by U-Polis/International School of Architecture and Urban Development Policies University. The workshop took place in Tirana from 5th to 10th October 2009.

Forty-three participants (thirty students of U-Polis and thirteen students of NTUA) worked on their projects in eight mixed groups. The groups were guided by and worked with seven tutors (Dr. Penny Koutrolikou, Dr. Thanos Pagonis, Petros Phokaides, Loukas Triantis and Fereniki Vatavali from NTUA, and Juljan Veleshnja and Diana Xhafa from U-Polis).

The workshop's program involved design studios, lectures, site visits and city tours, discussions and presentations.

Context

Over the last 20 years, Tirana, the capital city of Albania, has undergone dramatic transformations. The transition from socialism to capitalism, along with global trends in urban development, had a direct impact on the social, economic and spatial structures of the city. Tirana's urban space has transformed rapidly, towards two different directions. On one side lies the transformation of the city centre and the main road axes. New land uses such as commerce, offices and entertainment have been introduced, while new housing complexes have been constructed. Through interventions on the major public spaces and the upgrading of public infrastructure a new image and a new identity for the city centre was attempted to be constructed, aiming to regenerate the city and attract new activities and investments. On the other side, since the early 1990s, an extended periphery of informal small-scale housing was gradually developed - mainly by internal immigrants - without planning, social and technical infrastructure or provision for public spaces, leading to the creation of a poor urban environment. These informal residential areas, as most of Tirana's residential areas, are characterized by a relatively high quality of private space and neglected public space. At the same time, informal development processes have taken place within the existing urban fabric, occupying former public land and blocking passages by erecting small, medium or large-scale constructions. Furthermore, large-scale housing and commercial complexes implemented by the private sector, as well as large public projects, have appeared randomly in the close or distant periphery of the city, with no apparent intention to integrate with their urban surroundings. In this context of growing fragmentation of urban space and of intensified socio-spatial inequalities, new modes of urban interventions seem to be urgent.

Study area

The study area offered the opportunity to highlight the complexities and the particular features of the contemporary Albanian capital. The area is located in western Tirana and is, in fact, an in-between urban zone; a zone between the city center and the periphery, a zone between the socialist past and the post-socialist present, a zone between formal and informal urban development. Four major road axes surround the study area: the Durres Str, the Kavaja Str, the second and the third ring road. These axes, -in particular the Durres Str that also leads to the city's airport- attract new, mainly commercial land uses, while many high-rise buildings have been recently constructed. The interior of the area is mainly residential mixed with a variety of other uses. The often-chaotic combination of various scales and densities, designs and plans, consists of:

- the former state owned apartment buildings
- the post-socialist high-rise housing developments
- the low-rise informal houses
- vacant land
- shops and markets
- important public buildings such as the Technical University and the Partizani Stadium
- the city's old, inactive airport, and
- the unformed bank of Lana River

The social structure of the area is equally diverse, hosting groups of different origin, as well as of cultural, economic and social background.

The study area offered the chance to address such urgent urban issues as: the lack of social and technical infrastructures, the low quality and fragmentation of public space and green areas, the physical and symbolic divisions of space and the lack of centralities. It also offered us an opportunity to explore different meanings and understandings of public, common and private space that, in turn, shape the spatial realities of the area. At the same time the boundaries of the area (the Tirana-Durres axis, the Lana River and the two ring roads), as well as the new multi-functional developments promoted by public and/or private sector within or close to this area (for instance a new pedestrian boulevard along the landing zone of the old airport, a housing project between Lana River and the old airport, etc) presented a challenge in terms of understanding their social, economic and spatial dynamics and their impact on the neighborhood level and the local communities.

Theme

The workshop's intention was to focus on the spatial and social connections within this area and between this area and its surroundings, as well as on the links among the various social groups and spatial patterns. The goal was to investigate different typologies of urban tissue and production of urban space and to explore new modes of intervention. Planning, design and the strengthening of public and common spaces are crucial tools in order to deal with the fragmentation of the city. Our concern did not lie on the major public spaces of the city, but rather on the open, common-use, public or semi-public spaces within the urban fabric of the residential areas, the sometimes-leftover spaces, where the everyday activities take place, or the spaces in between the buildings and in their relation to the streets, the vacant land and the various urban programs. The workshop also drew particular attention to issues of social, spatial and

temporal boundaries and urban juxtapositions with a significant spatial impact, such as:

- Formal - Informal
- Public (space) - Private (space)
- Collective - individual
- Continuities - Discontinuities
- Past - Present - Future
- Center –Periphery
- Borders (internal and external)

Participants were encouraged to organize their work through one of the following points of view:

- **Nature and green spaces.** A variety of natural elements, namely the bank of Lana river, enclaves of trees, uncultivated agricultural land and pockets of greenery, constitute a key asset for the study area. What types of green spaces are there? What are their characteristics? How are they lived by local people? Are there any connections between them or with green spaces outside the study area? How could a system of interconnected green spaces at various scales contribute to overcome spatial and social fragmentation?
- **Centrality and articulation of scales.** What types of central functions are noted in the area, e.g. a big shopping center, a local commercial street, a small playground, a transport hub, etc? Under what processes have they been created and how do they fit into their surroundings? What is their meaning for different groups of people? Do these centralities link different fragments of urban space or not? If yes, how? How can we improve urban form and structure by articulating centralities through intervening in public spaces?
- **Local cultures and public space.** How do different social groups appropriate public, common and semi-public spaces? What forms of public life and cultures appear, e.g. exchange of home visits, religion festivals, evening walk along the main street, Sunday football game, outdoor cooking, etc? How do people live and intervene on public and common space? How do they conceive “public” and “common” space? How could it be possible to maintain cultural diversity and enhance social interaction among different groups?
- **Productive activities in the urban tissue.** Although the study area is mainly a residential area, several small and medium scale enterprises can be found scattered in and around it (e.g. car-services, workshops, small scale farming, wholesale activities, light industry, etc). How are these activities distributed in the urban tissue? How important are they for the socioeconomic structure of the area and how do they shape the character of public or common spaces? To what extent do they form part of wider productive networks linking the area with the rest of the city? Can we imagine any spatial intervention, particularly in open space, that would improve the integration of productive activities in the urban tissue without limiting their economic dynamism?
- **Forms of mobility.** The street network is characterized by discontinuities reflecting the conditions under which the urban fabric is being produced. How do

people move inside the area? How do they travel from / to the area? How do urban itineraries shape urban structure and land uses? How is public space affected by practices of mobility? Here we could reflect on the use of private cars, public transportation, cycling and walking, either separately or as a system as well as spatial interventions in order to improve the conditions of vehicular and pedestrian circulation. What forms of mobility could create new spatial connections inside urban fabric and how?

- **Social networks, livelihoods and everyday life.** Select one particular social group, e.g. children, women, older people, etc. How does this group live and experience public and common space? How are everyday practices and social networks inscribed in public and common space? What kind of interventions in open space could open new challenges to this group? What kind of public services and amenities could be introduced in order to support existing social networks?

Lectures

Apart from the academic literature that was provided to the participants, a series of lectures offered useful insights to relevant key issues and gave helpful input to participants for the elaboration of their project. Apart from the tutors' theoretical contributions, the workshop included the lectures of emeritus Prof. Dimitris Philippidis (NTUA) and the professors of U-Polis Besnik Aliaj, Sotir Dhamo, Dritan Shutina and Albana Tollkuci.

Besnik Aliaj's presentation on *'Informal processes, formalization and relation with urban design of public space'*, examined how planning can utilize the energy of the people in a context of an institutional vacuum. The speaker first presented the process of informal development in Albania and then focused on the participatory planning process undertaken by Co-Plan at the Tirana informal settlements, in the framework of the Urban Land Management Project. The case study drew attention to the management of informal development, and the supply of infrastructure and public services, as well as to the establishment of negotiation partnership models among the local community, the municipality and the central government.

Sotir Dhamo's lecture on the *'Theoretical issues of urban design in the perspective of Tirana'*, dealt with the transformation of urban space and image, during the socialist and the post-socialist era. The speaker was particularly interested on issues of urban morphology, presenting a close examination of Tirana's urban tissue typologies. In this context, he developed the concept of 'urbicide' as the damage to the city's fabric and argued that the challenge is to adopt a conscious understanding of the city. He commented on the profile of architects and architectural education in Albania; traced lack of inspiring visions and claimed that architects need to act as facilitators of innovative change and suggest new points of views for the society.

Penny Koutrolikou's lecture on the *'Social, symbolical and practical aspects of public, semi-public and private spaces'*, elaborated the notion of the public and the private and how these change across time and different societies and cultures. The speaker drew specific notion on the use of public space, as a terrain of social relations, interactions and political mobilization and emphasized on current threats against public space, such as exclusion, privatization, surveillance, commodification and

homogenization. She also commented on how the public and the private can be translated in space, in terms of design, diversity, legibility and adaptability.

Thanos Pagonis' lecture on the '*Challenges for contemporary urban planning, as a tool for socio-spatial integration*' offered an overview of the current mainstream agenda for planning that promotes urban competitiveness, sustainable development and territorial governance, often at the expense of social justice or environment protection. In order to examine how the dominant policy discourse is perceived and implemented in different local contexts, he brought up the case of Athens and the Mediterranean City Thesis. With a series of examples, the speaker discussed on issues of spatial competition, urban sprawl, strategic urban projects, formal and informal development, social polarization, as well as the relation between official planning and reality.

Dimitris Philippidis, workshop's guest lecturer, gave a public lecture titled '*Public Space Alive*'. In his lecture, the speaker presented his understanding of public space as a terrain of the urban lived experience. He highlighted the complexity of contemporary urban life and examined how people use public space in various urban contexts around the world, in relation to their cultural background, their customs, traditions and activities. He finally presented snapshots of everyday life in the city, acknowledging spatial qualities in what is often considered to be minor, insignificant, or banal, in order to show public spaces where people interact, relax, stroll around, discuss, play and in turn enjoy their lives.

Petros Phokaides and Loukas Triantis presented the topic '*Urban identities: modernism, memory, architecture*', drawing attention to local and global forces, migration and mobility, while focusing on the Balkan and post-socialist space. The speakers saw urban identity as a construction and presented how public or private space is used in order to produce meanings and promote certain interests. In the context of exploring the spatial politics of memory, they also examined modernism as a project of particular relevance today and presented examples of documentation and conservation of modern buildings/ ensembles, claiming that they currently present a challenge in terms of change.

Dritan Shutina's '*Planning under pressure. The case of Co-Plan in Tirana and Albania*' lecture -in the context of the public discussion series '*Tirana Dialogues*' that took place in the framework of the 4th Tirana International Contemporary Art Biannual: '*The symbolic efficiency of the frame*' - further elaborated on the work of Co-Plan at the informal settlements of Albania. The speaker presented case studies of upgrading the built environment through public space interventions and local community participation and highlighted the need for a holistic approach in urban planning, adjusted to the real needs and the existing potentials of the city.

Albana Tollkuci's presentation offered the initial helpful insights into the study area. The speaker went through the historical evolution of this particular part of the city, in relation to the urban development of Tirana throughout the 20th century. She also presented the regulatory framework for the area, according to Tirana's Regulatory Plan, as well as a series of ongoing studies promoted by the municipality in cooperation with international architectural firms.

Fereniki Vatavali explored issues of '*Housing production in Greece (and Albania)*', following a comparative analysis of Greek and Albanian cities and tracing down common experiences, but also differences in formal and informal modes of development. She focused on the land and construction system of the two countries after the 1990s, giving examples of public and private investments that transform the structure and the image of the city and open up opportunities for residential development.

Participants' Projects

The participants worked consistently and with enthusiasm in mixed groups throughout the week. The workshop was organized in two stages. During the first stage, participants examined how the complex urban environment functions and reproduces itself, by identifying the existing typologies of the urban tissue. They traced down everyday practices, collected urban experiences, analyzed housing typologies and typologies of public / common-use / private spaces, recorded land uses, population and building densities, public infrastructures, social networks, and thought over the processes and the dynamics of spatial development, as well as the intertwined relations of spaces, uses and meanings. At the end of the first stage, the participants presented their findings, sketches, photos, videos and maps, along with the first ideas of how to proceed to the next phase.

During the second stage the participants elaborated their concepts, strategies and scenarios aiming to improve the urban environment and the living standards of the inhabitants, at the neighbourhood level, or within a network of spaces. Most of the groups elaborated a master plan for the entire study area and subsequently worked on a mini masterplan for a specific neighbourhood, also proposing design solutions for public and semi-public spaces, within a neighbourhood or within a wider network (with facilities such as parks, playgrounds, sports & culture), or even focusing on various public infrastructure (programmatic, spatial and social).

A major concern for almost all the groups was the management of the extended open and green spaces, particularly the old airport, as well the elements of natural environment, most notably the Lana River. Most of the groups decided to preserve the largest part of these open spaces and turn them into areas of open-air recreation and leisure. In most cases, the groups tried to organize these spaces by creating green networks within the study area but also connecting them to other green areas of Tirana, while some groups addressed issues of sustainability, by preserving these large-scale open and green spaces for future needs. The groups also dealt with the bed of the Lana River that is currently heavily polluted and serves as a strong barrier for the residential areas around it, blocking possible accesses and connections. The groups presented a variety of ideas on how to better integrate the river into the urban fabric, by creating pedestrian and bicycle routes, bridges and other connections and by introducing new recreation and cultural facilities.

Accessibility and mobility were also major concerns for the participants' work. The groups examined the various internal and external boundaries, connections and disconnections. Some of the groups went on to a road categorization and circulation and proposed solutions for the road network either by rationalizing it (through the opening up of the dead ends at the informal quarters) or preserving it as a characteristic spatial feature that reflects a social process. Most of the groups

proposed the overcoming of spatial internal and external boundaries, by introducing connections over the river, for cars, pedestrians or bicycles, new roads, new public transport and improved accessibility modes within the area, but also improved connectivity to the city centre through public transport.

Issues of centrality and articulation of spaces also presented a challenge for many groups. Centrality was related according to the participants' approaches to diverse social activities, significant public buildings, open spaces, and natural entities. Some groups tried to connect small and medium scale centers, by creating local networks and interconnected systems. Other groups supported the creation of new centralities either of local or of inter-local significance, as generators of change and introduced new programs of education, culture, commerce (bazaars and markets), recreation and leisure. A third approach highlighted the importance of in-between spaces that would enhance centrality at the local level and create a sense of place.

Finally the groups dealt with a series of cultural issues. Taking into consideration that the majority of the informal houses have been built by internal immigrants from Albania's North, the groups faced the challenge to integrate these areas to the city, without overlooking the residents' needs, culture and traditions. The existing dead ends and the high fences within the informal zones gave way to a fruitful discussion as to whether these spatial characteristics should be preserved or modified and to what extent. Additionally, the fact that a variety of buildings from various time periods and styles is located in the study area, presented a challenge of dealing with the spatial aspects of memory, culture and identity. The groups proposed the maintenance and the reuse of some existing and derelict buildings of architectural and cultural value, the introduction of new landmarks or the promotion of existing ones and the introduction of new cultural facilities referring to the local level, as well as the city level.

The groups organized their planning and design proposals using sketches, collages, models, 2-D and 3-D drawings, and presented them in an open discussion that took place at U-Polis at the end of the workshop. The jury included apart from the tutors, emeritus Prof. Philippides from NTUA and professors Besnik Aliaj and Sotir Dharmo from U-Polis.

Conclusions

The workshop '*Bringing the city together. Spatial interventions in Tirana residential areas*' offered the opportunity to students from the U-Polis and NTUA to work together intensively for one week, to exchange experiences, methodologies and arguments, to compare educational backgrounds, to test their knowledge and their approaches and in turn to cooperate for a common project. But it also provided incentives for them to think on such crucial issues as urban development in the globalized world, formality and informality, migration, socio-spatial integration and the role of the architect-planner in such a dynamic urban context as the city of Tirana.

In November 2009, the experience of the workshop was transmitted to NTUA academic community, through a public presentation of the workshop's outcome from the NTUA students that participated in the workshop.

More information: <http://tiranaworkshop09.pbworks.com>