

**Urban Change and the production of space:  
The case of urban renewal in Tirana (2000-2008)**

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**1. Introduction**

In the context of an academic debate that examines the transformations, the continuities and the discontinuities in urban space, this paper draws our attention to the social meanings of change. The choice of the Tirana case is not accidental. Albanian cities, and Tirana *par excellence*, present a challenge in understanding contemporary urbanism and gaining useful insights into the post-socialist cities and the Balkans.

Bearing in mind the relative diffusion of political power in a capitalist context, and the multiplicity of the official and unofficial actors, groups, institutions and organisations in most of the contemporary cities, this text chooses to focus on the role of the Tirana Municipality. Throughout Central and Eastern Europe, the transition from the socialist to the capitalist world led –among others- to the decentralisation of political power and provided for increased responsibilities to the local level. In cases of charismatic mayors, the Municipalities emerged as salient instigators of change. In Tirana, the dynamic mayor Edi Rama, from 2000 till today has tried to introduce a new identity-image for the city and to promote a series of urban renewal projects.

This text starts by presenting some thoughts on the theory of change in the production of urban space, goes on with the case of Tirana and concludes by linking the theoretical framework with the case study. The analysis of urban renewal in Tirana will highlight how practices, policies and discourses are put forward by the Municipality and what their spatial impact is. It thus hopes to contribute to a deeper understanding of change in the production of contemporary urban space.

**2. Theories of change in the production of urban space**

Change in the production of urban space, as well as the production of urban space *per se*, are often attributed to the internal forces of capitalism, following Henri Lefebvre's (1991) seminal thesis, that (social) space is a (social) product. Lefebvre claimed that in capitalism, urban space is produced in such a way, as to facilitate and further enhance capitalism's workings, while the state secures this process (Orum & Chen, 2003). In line with this theorisation, David Harvey introduced a series of metaphors to interpret change. The notion of the *spatial fix* (Harvey, 1985a), for instance, is a metaphor that explains how capitalism -when in crisis- reorganises space in order to survive and reproduce itself. The notion of *time-space compression* is another metaphor that explains how capitalism exceeds spatial boundaries and rearticulates production and consumption on a global scale in order to accumulate capital (Smith, 2001).

Additional theoretical approaches, introduce the notions of globalisation and post-modernity to interpret urban change. The metaphors of the global city (Sassen, 1991) and the post-modern city (Jameson, 1984, Harvey, 1989) are narratives that understand the global as opposing to the local, the general against the particular, the local cultures against the global economic transformations (Smith, 2001). From this point of view, capitalism becomes the main regulator of the socio-spatial change. On the other hand the states' role is reduced to the point that they serve the capitalists' interests. For Harvey (1985b: 125) urban politics are not only compatible, but also necessary in the process of capital accumulation, while there exists no significant part of urban life lying outside the logic of capitalist reproduction (ibid. 156).

Nevertheless, the theories that see capital accumulation as the basic driving force of human existence, often limit our understanding of contemporary cities. This emphasis on the economic parameters of urban change, in the context of a global economy, reduces or/ and overlooks the multiplicity of actors, institutions, structures, networks, historical processes, cultures religions, races and the human being as a personality (Orum & Chen, 2003). Academic bibliography has often been critical of the theorists who claim that urban politics have no autonomy and only serve the goals of the capitalists (Pickvance, [1995]1998). It further identifies poor understanding in the analysis of balances among the state, the society and the market, as well as in estimating the ways the local and central state intervenes in global flows such as foreign investments, migration and culture. Thus, when it comes to local government, empirical studies focus not only in the municipalities' efforts to attract investments, but also on the personal aspirations, visions and interests of the mayors themselves, as there lies a multiplicity in motives, goals and practices (Stone, [1995] 1998: 112).

In an attempt to overcome the deterministic notion that it is the systemic features that produce space, this paper will investigate the theoretical approaches that focus on how change is constructed. In the context of a historical-institutional approach<sup>1</sup>, cities can be understood as places of *dense and varied institutional activity* (Amin & Thrift, 2002: 153), which develops officially and unofficially in laws, customs, codes and agreements among individuals, groups, political, economic, social, religious and cultural bodies and in general in any group of people bonded for a common goal (North, 1990: 5). As Amin & Thrift (2002: 153-4) note, in the context of urban democracy, to ignore the activity of those actors is to ignore the prime sites of social participation.

In turn, it is less useful to understand urban change as a product of predefined structures, and more useful as a process worked in practice, an open negotiation among different groups who act according to their beliefs, motives and interests (Orum & Chen, 2003: 54). We should thus draw our attention to the ways that actors and institutions emerge and their actions unfold through time and space, under specific conditions.

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1 I refer to the theoretical approaches of geographers such as Nigel Thrift and Ash Amin, political theorists as Ernesto Laclau, economists as Douglass North and pluralist political scientists.

### 3. The post-socialist urban restructuring

The paradigm of the post-socialist transition in Central and Eastern Europe best exemplifies the above statement. The salient feature of the transition from the centralised, state economy and the one-party political system, towards the free market economy and the 'democratic' civil society, was differentiation. Academic research (Hamilton et al., 2005) identifies not only differences in paces, but also differences in directions, namely towards different development models. Urban transformations were on the one hand path-dependent, as outcomes of specific historical and geographical factors, while on the other hand rested on the actions and choices of the central and local states, the local dynamics and the international organisations.

The Albanian cities, in particular, constitute a special sub-group within the post-socialist area, designated by the dramatic collapse of the political, social and economic structures in the early 1990s. Throughout the 1990s, the Albanian cities followed a rather unregulated model of development characterised by limited official capital investments, significant investments of local population in the informal economy, differentiated incomes, and weak public control over land, planning and the construction sector (Tosics, 2005).

In order to further understand the post-socialist restructuring, this paper draws our attention to the promoted decentralisation of political power (Hamilton et al., 2005). During Socialism, the local level politics were subject to central control and planning, through the Party's highly hierarchical structures. After 1990, though, the new legislation in all Central and Eastern Europe (in Albania in 1992) significantly strengthened the role of local administration. The fact that decision making, was partly transferred from the central to the local level (Tosics: 2005: 55), gave cities the opportunity to become much more independent on a political, administrative and economic level. Local governments could from then on have a direct impact on the cities' development.

### 4. Urban renewal in Tirana

In the context of this political decentralisation, we will examine the role of Tirana Municipality in the production of urban space, through the urban renewal projects, implemented from 2000 till today, under the Mayor Edi Rama. Following the chaotic early transitional period, which led to spatial anarchy in Tirana (Aliaj et al, 2003) and was accompanied by the most rapid population increase in all Central and Eastern Europe (Tosics, 2005: 68), the Municipality's discourse expressed the need to reclaim the city's public space and to restore the city's lost identity.

Urban renewal involved, among others (**Image1**):

- The preservation of the historic centre, and the rehabilitation of public buildings of the interwar period and the main boulevard (**Image 2**)
- The demolition of the illegal kiosks –mainly of commercial use- along Lana river and major open spaces of the centre, the 'cleaning and greening' of these sites (**Image 3**)

- The facade refurbishment of some socialist housing and their painting in extreme colours and patterns (**Image 4**)
- A series of international architectural and urban design competitions, most important of which the competition for the centre's master plan (also known as the 'French Plan') (**Image 5**) and the competition for Scanderbeg Square (**Image 6**).

The Municipality's role in programming and implementing urban renewal in Tirana was crucial. The analysis of certain **tools** used by the Municipality, in terms of discourses, policies and practices will allow for useful theorisations:

**Identity.** The three first stages of urban renewal were promoted under the name 'Return to Identity'. The ideological base of the project was not particularly clear. It was rather a motto that referred at the same time to the past, the present and the future. It simultaneously meant the refurbishment of the interwar buildings, the colouring of some socialist housing and the restitution of open green spaces. By claiming that the identity of Tirana was lost during the chaotic transitional period, urban renewal was in fact referring to the past and some sort of collective memory, as well as to the future and the city's orientation. The Mayor recalled the interwar period and the Italian architecture with enthusiasm and nostalgia for giving a European legacy to the city, whereas he spoke with repulsion about the negative impacts of the socialist and early post-socialist governments. The emphasis on the preservation of the buildings-monuments of the interwar period, designed and built by the Italian experts of that time, and in fact rather irrelevant to the city's urban tradition, reveals the irony of idealising a somewhat repressive past, a feature often met in post-colonial cities (Jones & Bromley, 1996, Huyssen, 2003). At the same time the Municipality promoted urban renewal as a tool of convergence with the ideals of the 'European city'. From this perspective the 'Return to Identity' was a return to the future, to the extent that it was trying to establish some links with the city's European integration.

As can be noted, issues of identity have become urgent in the post-socialist context and have often provoked ambiguities and tensions. Throughout Central and Eastern Europe, one can trace today efforts by the governments or other groups to revisit history and quite often to reject the socialist era and search for the pre-socialist historical and cultural links. This attempt has a direct impact on space, through urban revitalisations, demolitions and reconstructions, and above all new constructions of a highly symbolic character, such as museums or religious buildings. The fact that the project 'Return to Identity' was widely accepted by the local people and the profound positive impact it had on the built environment, leave little room for objections. Nevertheless, this paper points at the need for a critical understanding of the city's past, and a balanced confronting with the city's identity. Tirana –as every contemporary city- is unique in its urban evolution and it is more meaningful to emphasise its historical and spatial specificities, rather than rejecting them, or trying to adjust to external standards. In turn, the spatial politics of identity may become highly contested when identity is used in order to legalise or reject political choices.

**Image.** The painter-Mayor used the city metaphorically and physically as a canvas. This can be mainly understood in the project of the facade colouring, which was promoted not as an aesthetic intervention, but rather as a tool of social change, that would enhance urban patriotism and would mobilise people's hopes for the future. In the context of urban renewal, the Municipality produced a series of exploitable images, either as well set urban sceneries, or as photographs, videos and advertisements. Through these images, urban renewal was presented to have a pedagogical character that could change the everyday life and the behaviour of the urban dwellers. It is evident that such images may have a very positive impact on daily life, the psychology and the mood of the people. Given the widely accepted significance of the symbolic level of politics for contemporary urban governance (Borja & Castells, 1997), it is not the intention of this paper to undermine the role of creative thinking, and the use of symbols, metaphors, humour, or even shock in strengthening moral and cultural values.

However this emphasis on urban beautification projects often implies the aestheticisation of the city and the neutralisation of spatial politics (Deutsche, 1996), to the extent that the city is perceived as an abstract image rather than as a complex socio-spatial phenomenon. Such an approach may undermine the uneven urban development and the existing urban problems. In Tirana, as elsewhere around the world most mayors often promote certain beautification projects in the centre of the cities, and subsequently receive criticism for paying too much attention on constructing a beautiful centre, rather than on investing in infrastructures and long-term planning. For a city in transition, such as Tirana, the priorities of the Municipality may have more severe political and social implications. In other words, the construction of beautiful images in the centre is positive and legitimate –as long as the centre remains a place where all residents can use and refer to- to the extent that it works within an equally legitimate priority plan.

**Architecture.** It is evident that monumental architecture –among others- has historically become the necessary tool in expressing political power in space. This is the case not only in authoritarian regimes –from Napoleon to Stalin and Hoxha- but also in contemporary democratic regimes, where local or central governments symbolically invest in architecture. In the Tirana case, the Mayor persisted on the fundamental role that architecture could have not simply for the city, but rather for the “democracy, the culture and the future of Albania” (Rama, 2004: 15). By the initiative of the Municipality, architects around the world were invited to experiment in Tirana, through a series of architectural competitions (among them the architectural competition for the masterplan of the centre, the competition for Scanderbeg Square) and workshops (such as the one of Berlage Institute). These projects were either utopian visions, or realistic pragmatic propositions, while some of them became official binding documents. The architectural competitions were a particularly fertile process, as they mobilised local dynamics, imported innovation from abroad, presented imaginative urban visions and set the basis for a dialogue on the city's future. Yet how will this productive thinking and this positive experience benefit the city and improve the quality of the citizens' lives?

For the moment there seems to be a divergence between the urban reality as perceived by the residents and the visitors on the one hand and the 3D illustrations of the city, as presented in most of the proposed projects on the other. Furthermore, it seems that although the 'Return to Identity' aimed to preserve the public spaces of the centre, a great deal of these spaces was included in the built up spaces of the master plan. In other words, in the name of impressive architecture some of the centre's open public spaces will be sacrificed. As can be noted, it is often more useful for a city to have less architecture in order for some open spaces in the centre to be preserved as such for the contemporary and future residents. Finally, the outcomes of the architectural competitions, even the so-called French Plan do have a very strong communication advantage, though they are not sufficient tools to control urban growth, to prioritise goals and provide directions, in other words to promote a systematic and organised spatial policy. This can be achieved only through a Regulatory Urban Plan. The challenge is whether this Plan, which is currently under preparation, will meet the needs of the city and its present and future citizens. As a result, good architecture does not necessarily produce a better city; much less a better society. It can do so, when accompanied by certain social and political factors and in the context of an overall urban vision.

## **5. The accumulation of economic and political capital**

In the context of city marketing and urban entrepreneurialism, urban renewal in Tirana was an attempt to introduce the city into a global politico-economic network, through attracting foreign investments. Thus it was necessary for the foreign investors to perceive the city as secure and appropriate for their investments. Urban renewal was instrumental for the city's promotion. Sluis and Wassenberg (2003: 19) spoke with enthusiasm of a "*genuine metamorphosis*" that succeeded urban renewal, whereas in 2006 the Unit for Economic Development of Tirana was presenting the city as "*ideal for investors who wanted to relocate their businesses, due to remarkable structural changes*" (Mici, 2006: 83). Crucially, the French Plan served as a key tool for the city's marketing, for providing extended space in the centre for new offices, commercial uses and other facilities (ibid.84). To what extent was this goal achieved?

Official data (INSTAT) show that Albania had a relatively stable economic development since 2000. Nevertheless, it is evident that the increase in FDI was the outcome of the privatisation of telecommunication and mining industry (Boezelman, 2006) and did not have a particularly profound impact on Tirana and the city's development. Until recently foreign investors have proved reluctant in investing in Tirana. Data analysis and fieldwork research showed that the rapid urban transformations in Tirana since the late 1990s are not the outcome of FDI, but rather of local dynamics. The construction sector boom (Marle, 2006) was based to a large extent on local companies and capital both from the formal and the informal economy. The urban renewal encouraged the private investments and facilitated the construction boom and the commercialisation of the centre, as well as its vertical expansion, as it gave the opportunity to

local companies to build, sometimes in public land. Both bibliography and interviews suggest the existence of strong links between the construction sector and political authorities (Winner, 2006).

Even though the Municipality's effort to attract foreign investors have not yet been accomplished –at least not to the desired degree- urban renewal certainly had a positive impact for the Municipality itself. Change in the built environment translated to political capital for the Municipality and the Mayor himself and contributed to their remarkable acclaim in local and international media. Furthermore, it contributed to the Mayor's growing popularity, his celebratory re-elections in 2003 and 2007, and to the receiving of prestigious awards such as the UN Poverty Eradication Award and the World Mayor Award in 2004. From this perspective, the political symbolism was constantly present in the Municipality's strategy. According to Mayor Rama himself, one basic motivation behind urban renewal was personal: *"...for me Tirana is a mirror, an affirmation, a confirmation of my vision, or call it my will, or my person. This is something that comes far away, like destiny..."* (Kramer, 2005: 10-11). Such a discourse on the city implies the direct connection between power, political symbolism and urban space.

## **6. Conclusions**

An overall evaluation of urban renewal in Tirana is a tough task, as this is still a process in progress. As has been established, urban renewal in Tirana was an initiative of the Municipality and the Mayor Edi Rama and it involved a number of projects, such as the restoration of the historic centre, the cleaning and greening of public spaces, the facade-colouring of socialist blocks and a series of architecture competitions. The fact that urban renewal was bounded to the Mayor's controversial personality raises questions in regards to its meaning and continuity in the post-Rama era. Going one step beyond the profound positive effects that these projects had for the city, this paper claims that nowadays emerges a need to protect the city's public spaces and guard their public nature. Furthermore, the local and central government need to focus on the establishment of sustainable mechanisms and institutions, capable of controlling the urban development and contributing to the overall improvement of the city. From this perspective, this text wants to highlight the significance of civic participation in the process of urban transformation, for instance by introducing motives to mobilise a broader improvement of the urban environment.

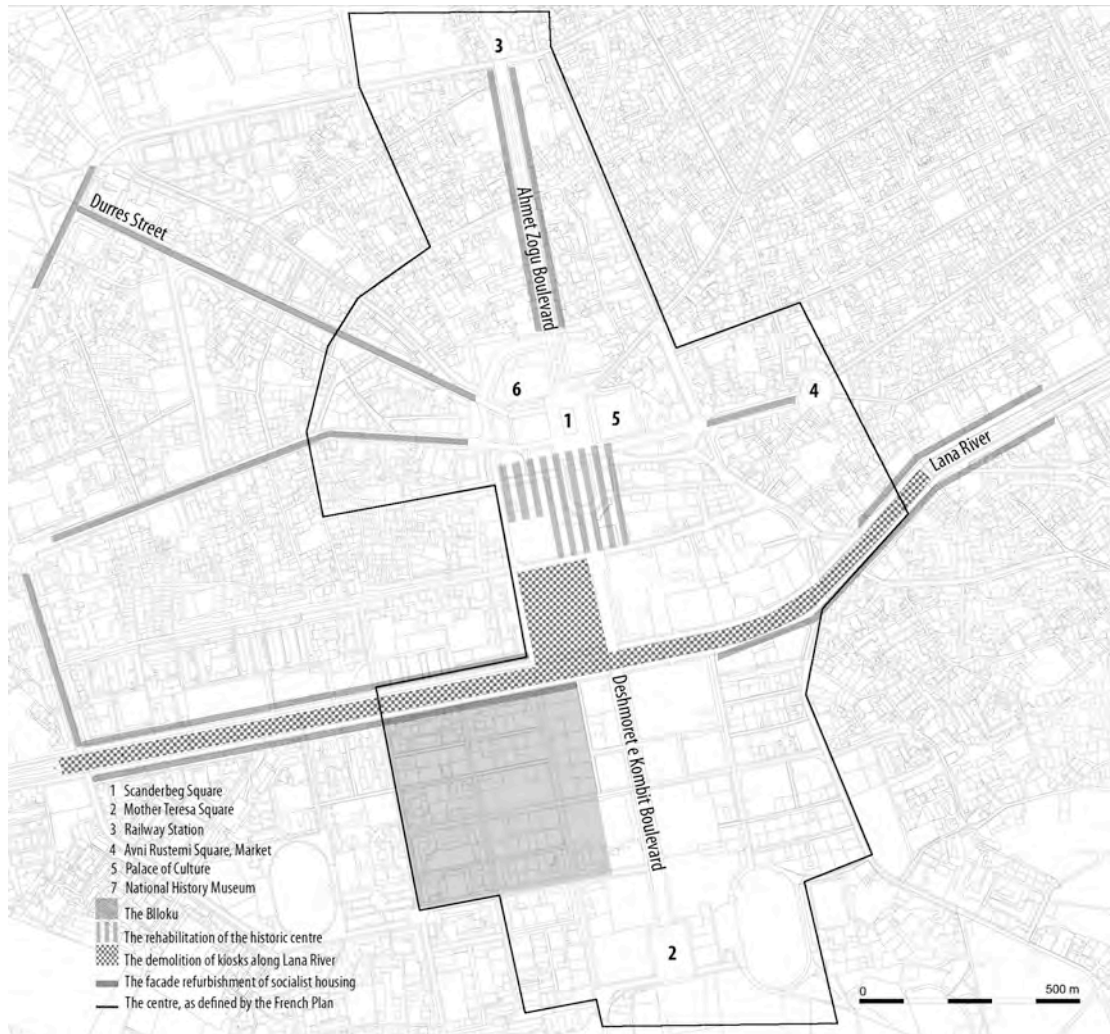
Going back to the analysis of change in the production of urban space, the case of Tirana exemplifies the strengthened role of local level politics in contemporary Albania, in the context of the new capitalist system and political decentralisation, promoted throughout Central and Eastern Europe in the post-socialist era. This paper did not trace any structural determinants that drive change towards a specific direction. It rather highlighted –within still somewhat unstable democratic context- diverse tendencies, dynamics, interests, historical and spatial specificities and individual mediation. In turn, there is no evidence in the process of urban change to exclude the multiple possibilities that can lead to innovative paths of social change and spatial transformations.

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## Images



**Image 1: Urban Renewal in Tirana**



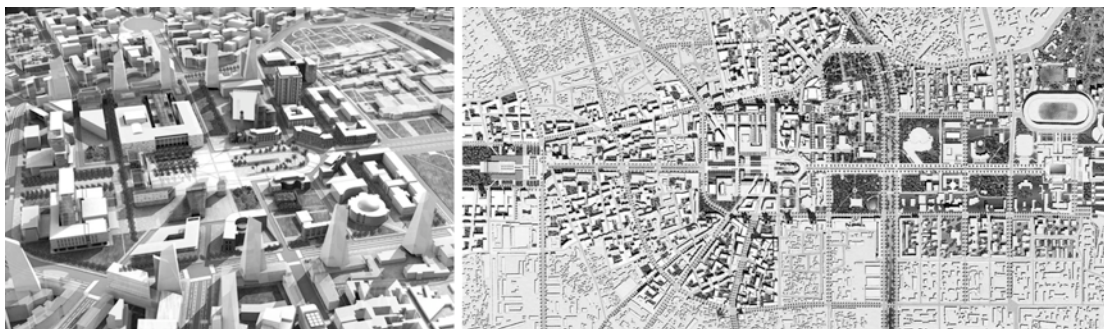
**Image 2: The rehabilitation of the historic centre.** Source (right): Post card from Tirana



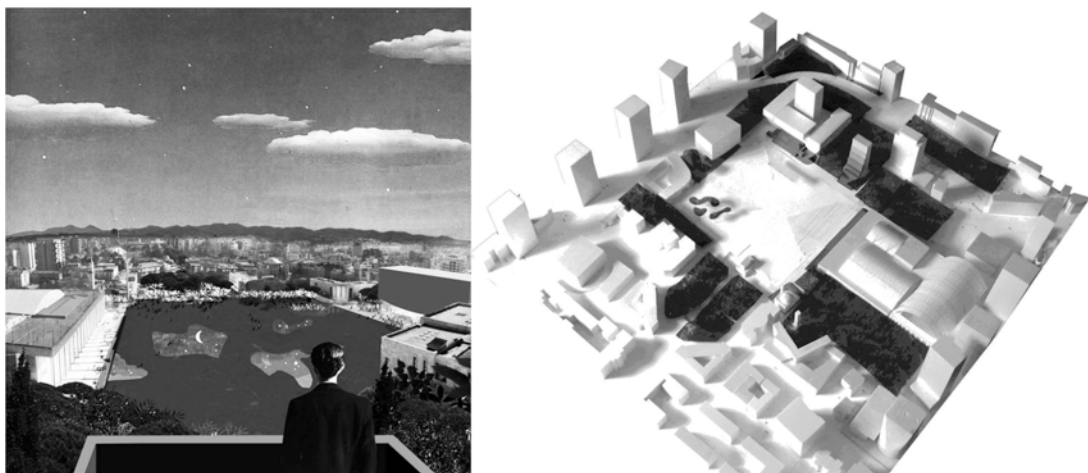
**Image 3:** The demolition of kiosks along Lana River. Source: Tirana Municipality



**Image 4:** The facade refurbishment of socialist housing. Source: Tirana Municipality



**Image 5:** The 'French Plan', First Prize from the Competition for Tirana Master Plan, by the French office *Architecture Studio*. Source: Tirana Municipality



**Image 6:** The First Prize from the Competition for Scanderbeg Square, by the Belgian office *51N4E*. Source: Tirana Municipality