

Regeneration of Domestic Itinerary in Dialogue with Urban Tissue Analysis and Spatial Orientation Process Case Study: Historical Central Area of Tirana

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Abstract: *This project-oriented paper aims to identify the characteristics of the urban tissue, geometry, social behavior and moral, cultural heritage of the historical area of Tirana, based on a series of analysis and investigations in site. The main topic is the analysis of the revitalization strategies of the historical area, by intervening along an internal path, modifying properly a very special and delicate urban tissue and adopting the suitable housing typology. This tries to bring to life a methodological contribution to the maintenance and development of dynamisms of life in the old crusts of Tirana, becoming so, an unforgettable experience in both projecting and let it being projected. In accordance with the urban tissue and social behavior of the area, this work gives opportunity to new approaches to regeneration of public spaces in old cores of poor (most of the cases destructive) condition, for meeting the needs of people for happiness, relax and social interaction. The paper aims to represent the role of the housing discipline (density concept), and the street (mainly internal paths of the habitative blocks), in regenerating public spaces of a strong contextual form and history, as a celebration of the public social life.*

Keywords: Pattern, Urban Tissue, Spatial Orientation, Regeneration Approach, Densification, Public Space, Domestic Itinerary, Wayfinding

1. Introduction

This site of the central area which can be a possible case study, is positioned in the historical center of Tirana, at a distance of 935 m from the Scanderbeg Square. This site is urbanised and built up quite early with typical single family courtyard housing.

The area under study is mainly noticed for the culture and moral heritage other than old buildings. It's own urban structure creates unbelievable situations such as: the emotional endless dead- end alleys poured out by the main roads in a "stream"- like distribution, the existence and stratification of scattered semi-public areas spotting still the landscape, the crowns of the trees which are vulnerable prisoner of the lifestyle of the community itself, the non-physic green areas as they let flow the perceptions and urge senses, but do not let themselves be seen, apparition of verminous spaces living with the existing structure in a unilateral symbiosis, profiting from it, absorbing its energy etc. Jane Jacobs's ideology: "Think of a city and what comes to mind? Its streets" (Jacobs 1961, 29), affirms the acknowledged role of the streets in reflecting the image of the city.

"Imageability is that quality in a physical object which gives it a high probability of evoking a strong image in any given observer... It might also be called legibility, the ease with which parts can be recognised and can be organised into a coherent pattern". (Lynch, 1960)

Having carried on a detailed survey of the present situation (historical data collection and catalogation, urban structure dating, surveys made at site, which suppose to build up a scenario for a revitalization plan and of course better understanding of the morphological, historical, socio-political transmutations and the factors that shaped the territory this way), a full strategy is built for the whole block: 1-Regenerating it with a strong intervention along the internal path. (small scale intervenstions on housing and public areas inside it). 2-The appropriate modification of a very special and delicate urban tissue and the adoption of suitable housing types are the centre of my work. 3-The architectural definition that will be outlined in the end is the first step of a process that can only be concluded further, later on, taking advantage of existing structures and their potential to offer renewed pleasure in living.



Figure 1: Identification of the site serving as possible case study

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The regulatory plan of 2012 for Tirana foresees high buildings to be built in the area, to increase the density. This study shows that increase of the density can be achieved even if we do not build in high heights, by acting in different manners. The substitution of the degraded buildings by row houses (individual and intermediate typologies) is a way of intervention within the housing discipline, since house is still the raw material that constitutes the fabric of the city, physically and socially, along the internal path, and defines the public spaces and the relationship with the private and the existing urban fabric. Gehl highlights that *“life between buildings is a dimension of architecture that deserves more careful treatment. It is where social interaction and perception, urban recreation, and the sensory experience of city life take place.”* (Gehl 1987). The quality of the neighborhood is related to the quality of space between buildings, especially of public space, which is tended to be the center of attention of this work, by being aware of the role of the residents as participators in placemaking.

Strategy seeks to stimulate the people to go where people are.

2. Site Study and Analysis

Historical evolution and stratification of layers

In the historical development of the area is noticed the densification of the buildings in the period from 1921 to 1937. In the year 1921 the majority part of the road was with agricultural use, while in the year 1937 all the territory is fragmented with buildings. In the period from 1937 to 1953 there is not so much difference in the urban development of the area and the buildings being built. [Stat von plan Tirana (1917), Tirana survey (1921), Tirana survey (1937), Regulatory plan for Tirana (1940-43), Regulatory plan for Tirana (1953), Regulatory plan for Tirana (1980)]



Figure 2: Stratification of layers of the site, presented in the 1917, 1921, 1937, 1953, 1980 regulatory plans of Tirana

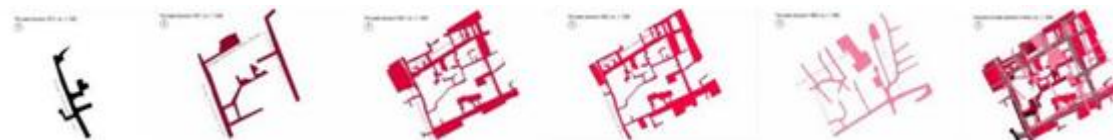


Figure 3: Primitive urban structure, and its growth. The overlapping of the road system developed in time

Tangible dimensions of the site understudy (Buildings height, roofing, construction, interventions, qualitative situation)

The area is dominated by low urban scale of the unfamiliar houses, generally 1-3 floors villas, located in the centre of the block. This uniform scale is rotten by brutal interventions with high buildings, 7-10 floors, at certain points of the site. Besides, there is also an inexistent scale that consists in additional functions for housing like cabins, house pets or different services. Communication with the surrounding area is interrupted in the western part of the site by the 5 floors communist's period building which forms an urban wall in its continuity.

The block is also dominated by the red historical roofs of the old houses, although now in a degraded condition and poor maintainance, which cover the old bearing walls constructions. This panoramic view of the block is discontinued with terrace covers of the multi familiar objects built in the recent years with reinforced concrete construction, or the combination of both, built after '90.

Functionally, the zoning of the area mainly includes unfamiliar and multifamiliar residential buildings, most of which degraded and abandoned. There are distinguished some reconstructed villas that are in good conditions.



Figure 4: Building heights, functional zoning and scale of housing intervention in the site

Intangible dimensions of the site understudy (urban tissue, urban grid, relation of built and unbuilt spaces)

The area is restricted in the perimeter by main roads, which remains disconnected with each other by secondary inner

roads. Some spaces are inaccessible and dead ends roads are characteristic.

The urban grid is represented by the built lines of the objects

that go parallel with the roads bordering the area in study and with the longitudinal shape of the parcels. With a direction from west to east, it is seen a densification of the urban grid which is translated in a disintegration of the urban morphology. The land use coefficient (0.37) and built

intensity (1.03) are low and the regulatory plan foresees the densification of this area by high buildings. (Regulatory plan for Tirana 2012)



Figure 5: Space characteristics, urban voids and urban grid of the site

We are dealing with a site that was urbanised and built up quite early with typical single family courtyard housing. The high walls that surround the yards and isolate them from the public, are traditional for the area since the Ottoman invasion when the house was developed inside the high surrounding walls of its private territory, being afraid to face the main road. The high walls prevent the main façade to be seen. The public spaces consist in roads and pavements located in the perimeter of the area in study. There are also undefined spaces; internal roads of the block sometimes expanding that are nonbuilt territory. It is distinguished an internal road which dates back to the early plans of the 1921. (Tirana survey 1921). These undefined spaces are seen as parasitic instead of generating recreation and activity.

Building Up a Scenario (Concept of the Intervention)

The block was already built up with considerable land coverage in 1937. (IGM map of 1937). In both maps (Stat von plan Tirana 1937, Regulatory plan for Tirana 1953) is shown a similar situation where there is evidence of the winding path that crosses the area in SW-NO direction and that is selected as a primary element of this program of revitalization. Later on, after 90's (IGM map of 2010) the block was partly traumatised by tall buildings whose typology and relation with the ground is totally incompatible with the context. The most evident, is the L shaped block of social housing built in the communist period that, on the other hand, is not too high (5 storeys) and at this point should be classified and treated according to different criteria (architectural value, state of maintenance, living quality of the apartments etc.) as it occurs to the whole socialist housing stock of Tirana.

If taking a journey along this marvellous path is possible, at every step taken into that space, the feeling of profane by the silence and solitude and sometimes verminous place is evident. Following the directed alley leads to a bigger aggregation space. Walking among the old houses makes the feel of belonging and at the same time of compassion for the state of degradation, augment. It cannot be clearly understood if there is quietness and comfort in the eyes of the inhabitants along the way, or silent desire for a

regeneration of old cellules. The feeling of surprise get intensified and the heart keeps beating faster, right after turning around the corner, without knowing what to expect.

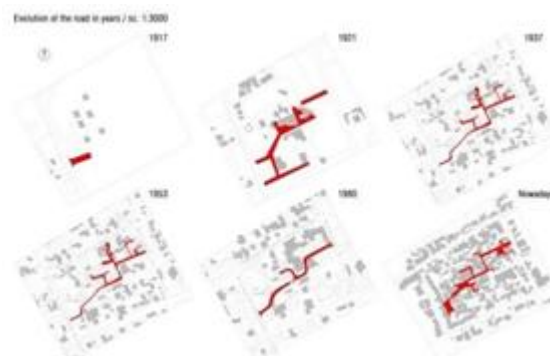


Figure 6: Evolution of the road in years



Figure 7: Urban journey along the internal path

What this program of revitalization needs to preserve in order to accomplish itself through the concept of placemaking, is what rested from this urban journey, that amazing feeling of hide and seek, the belonging... This work applies the idea of regenerating the block with a strong intervention along the internal path, being aware of the symbolism and the social connection that the housing represents and the heritage value of residential property, its architecture, its aesthetic, technical features.



Figure 13: Relation between public and private



Figure 14: Possible architectural solutions for the raw houses (typological promises)

The placement of considerable units side by side generates configurations of row houses (contemporary types, flexible to the changing situations of context). The flexibility in this scenario concludes the compositional pattern of the whole from the small-scale units, by physical regeneration according to the population needs. The large-scale scenarios include the interaction of some of this “wholes” spread in the urban fabric, in a complex way. These patterns are the structure and the inserted modules which appear and disappear over time in a puzzled system, are the flesh.

Merging and overlapping activities, layers, relationships incorporates a complex design strategy of mix used, in order to generate environments of high quality of use. The same principles encouraging the dense and vital city of Jacobs in her book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, remain valid nowadays, promoting density through diversity of built units, activities, functions, conglomerate units etc., creating a sensitive relationship with the existing urban and social character. (Jacobs 1961)



Figure 11: Intervention with raw houses to achieve a higher density



Figure 12: The landuse of the intervention area

Social cohesion through public spaces-place making as a development factor for the area

This is an intervention which opposes a strong sign in territory, realising a special unity, a whole which functions as one, which is bigger than the built space around, and which being penetrated by a carriageable road, is completely opened and accessible to the neighbourhood. It is a concept, an urban principle that forsee the transformation of streets into common gardens and the similar courts into urban plazas (squares, platforms). It is obvious the presence of the parasite spaces created in the encountering of the alleys. These spaces actually do not generate activity and they are silent and void. This might turn a new layout in the intervention phase of the project, which tries to aggravate the state of the transitory spaces, amplify the sensations of the alleys, gather the unsuspected frustrations of the directed paths into the heart of the block. The paths and the access to the entrance of the houses develop passing at their sides, establishing a gradation of transitional spaces, familiar and necessary for the habitants of the area.

The appropriate modification of a very special and delicate urban tissue and the adoption of suitable housing types are the centre of this work. Designed as a public area, the broad passage, is located between a game of green spaces in a symbiosis with public activities. To limit the temptation for residents to isolate themselves, the lot is sectioned in the middle by a square with play area and alleyway crossing through with a view of the new park. It is needed the involvement of local residents in the project design, making them participators in place making.

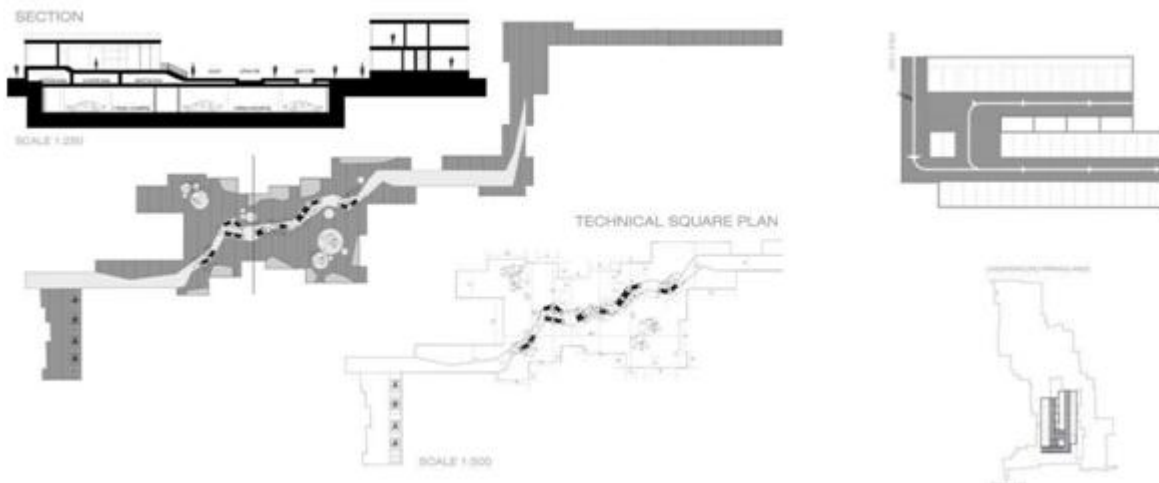


Figure 15: The development of public space and the underground parking

The existing structures are defined by hermetic boundaries. *“This hermetic boundary does not allow the private to create a relationship with the public. However, the boundary should be considered as a space of communication rather than a line of sharp division”* (Pollak 1999).

According to the system structure of the plots divisions, the habitations of the new scenario are characterized by a continuity of intern space throughout the exterior, due to the existence of the patios and the private gardens. The gardens are composed and articulated through a plot of bearing walls and plants that configurate the confines between the open spaces.

The cluster of houses around the “empty” space, has created a new continuous rectangular square, that controls the connections provided on the inner space and public area. The square gives also a good defense to the outside. In the inner block this has reduced to a minimum the surface of the fronts to protect. The roads and paths are the product of the expansion surface of a place when the central square becomes saturated by the houses that surround it. The importance of paths, which help the people to circulate, is evident by the existence of the square itself.

This is related to the concept of placemaking, which allows public spaces to be welcoming and pleasant for people. *“A place is part of space that is occupied by people that*

interact with the environment and is endowed with meaning, value and stability”. (Madanipour, 1996).

Mumford defined the city as *“a theater of social action to emphasize the importance of social activities that reflect the culture and communication between citizens”.* (Mumford 1937). As Altman and Werner point out, *“if people do not contact and interact with each other, the identity and sense of belonging will be weakened”.* (Altman and Werner 1985). Many contemporary theorists encourage the existence of open spaces in the city center such as Madanipour (1996) who indicates that public spaces express our public life and civic culture.

Architectural configuration affects the behavior of the residents and is expressed as a function of social and psychological dynamics. So the housing itself is an indirect influence to people, affecting the patterns of the social relations. The exchange with the environment is never ending and as Andrew

Baum and Stuart Valins affirm, *“our behavior can be conceptualized as a dynamic sequence of adjustments and readjustments to our physical and social environment”.* (Baum and Valins 1977). Density also determines the urban atmosphere which is dependent on the ethos of the public space. This is what makes people relate to a certain place.



Figure 16: Views of the public spaces (road and square) created by the bodies of the houses themselves

Water as a natural element for connectivity, introducing the concept of semi-public

The greening and other landscape patterns are the characteristic elements of the area. Since the eldest maps traces exist in the area in forms of irrigation canals, at that time Tirana was still an agrarian area. These water lines scampered through the streets, paths, on private properties or

through other squares. Irrigation canals, which existence is noticed since the origins of the area, pass along the roads, from the agrarian zones.

Water, as basic element has accompanied the inhabitants in years. The formal block is supplied on its left. As mentioned by Jacobs, *“At some point, topography and natural features*

such as rivers show in street patterns...The street and block patterns of early European hill cities reflect topography. Similarly the impact of rivers shows, not only as undulating linear bands of public space between areas of streets and development blocks, but as determinants of the development patterns themselves". (Jacobs 1993)

The outlook of public space implicates the private, the public and the semi-public all of them linked to territoriality and the social. The contemporary city burns the feeling of defending the territory, by adding ambiguity to space and bringing people more to collaboration with each other.

Anyway the needs of the community for preserving identity is evident, so the work tries to socialize them in the urban tissue of historical character, paying special attention to it. "For a well balanced urban space in relation to the needs of its inhabitants, spatial configuration and the contents of that space are important, and problems of spatial perception could be avoided by an attentive design" (Lawson 2010).



Figure 16: Irrigation canals in years



Figure 19: Site plan solution of the water canals and views from the main street and main plaza

These types of landscape patterns can be used even in other parts of the area, trying to unify the whole area landscape, which offers the opportunity because of the unused and verminous spaces. The usage of such elements is not only decorative but also affects the improvement of living process. They can also play the role of landmarks by trying to bring some traditional elements in a modern conception. By night, these elements can be enlightened and used as indicators for paths and the movement in the inner block.

"The elements of this language are entities called patterns. Each pattern describes a problem which occurs over and over again in our environment, and then describes the core of the solution to that problem, in such a way that you can use this solution a million times over, without ever doing the same thing twice." (Alexander 1977).

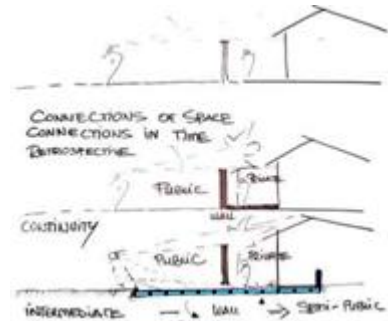


Figure 18: Creation of intermediate semi-public spaces.

Try to bring a part from the past into the present

The relation between public and private is a contributor to livability, making possible the connection between people, the way they talk to each other. This new public and meeting space, which for the moment is used for parking or simply is not used any more, hierarchically is not going to be the last of the list anymore. This work tries to introduce this concept in a new modern way, demanding connective spaces rather than separators, allowing the private and the public merging to a unique semi-public. By the new pedestrian path created, it is made possible the usage of these water lines in order to link public and private spaces, to penetrate from one part to another, to follow the main paths and to arrive in the entrances of the houses. Houses near to each other, linked with these water lines spaces, give a valuable place to socialise with the neighbours, whether chatting over the garden fence or meeting them. These new gardens with water lines can provide a good community focus and an opportunity for small, personal interactions and encourage cross-community or cross-cultural ties.

3. Conclusions

This study focuses on analyzing the role of the habitation's culture in the process of recovering the area and finding out the special contribute and the indications that come out from the housing discipline, in a detailed case study from the old center of Tirana, in order to somehow announce the availability of the interventions that this work deals.

So this project-oriented paper tries to give a valid demonstration that low rise high density housing, could be fruitfully used in some places, such as locations of historical area of Tirana, that it can be low-impact, site-sensible and at the same time solve difficult problems of accessibility and parking by overlapping garages and public spaces.

Reintroducing the road as an important element of the urban space and settlements and as a celebration of the public social life, can engender urban regeneration and probably

typological innovation.

What is really important along these kind of regeneration programs is to achieve the identification of the characteristics of urban tissue, geometries, moral and cultural heritage, symbols, stratification of “images” until the contemporary city of nowadays, in a proposed public space of a strong contextual form and history, in accordance with the urban tissue and social behavior of the historical area of Tirana.

This work gives opportunity to new approaches to regeneration of public spaces in old cores of poor conditions, for meeting the needs of people for happiness, beauty, relaxation, social interaction. Requalificating the area through the recreation of new centralities, or amplification of the weak existing one, that satisfy the residential function requires the participation of the residents in place- making.

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