

# Autocratic planning systems challenged by unregulated urbanisation: Urban transformation in post-socialist Tirana, Albania.

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Blerita Dino, blerta.dino.14@ucl.ac.uk

Sam Griffiths, sam.griffiths@ucl.ac.uk

Kayvan Karimi, k.karimi@ucl.ac.uk

The Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London,  
132-140 Hampstead Road, NW1 2BX, London, UK

## Abstract

This paper explores Tirana's growth as a process of urban block formation across two starkly differentiated ideological periods: the socialist (1945-1991) and the post-socialist (1992-present). It examines the effects of this ideological shift on Tirana's urban development presented as an informal morphogenetic process of block deconstruction; a process with major implications for pedestrian and vehicular circulation, building accessibility, land use, land parcelling and building form. The evolution of Tirana's block layout is explored through three neighbourhood case studies comprising blocks arranged according to Soviet planning models. These were originally formed as semi-perimeter or free standing residential blocks with large public open spaces enclosed within or around the block.

Tirana's growth has been dramatically shaped by the sudden shift in the ruling ideology and capacity of planning authorities, leading to almost a tripling of the capital's population in less than a decade, through the systematic appropriation of open space by newcomers in need of somewhere to live, local opportunists and speculative developers. The paper uses the capital city as a case study to comment on the morphological dimension of social change in post-socialist Albania and the way in which 'planned' and 'unplanned' urban environments have contributed to the emergence of distinctive modes of urban life.

**Keywords:** Tirana, Post-Socialist, Morphogenetics, Informal Development

## **Introduction**

This study focuses on the post-socialist urban growth of Tirana, which comprises the area within the administrative boundary that locally is called the 'yellow line'. Through three case study areas, lying in various locations within the city, we aim to systematically study these transformations at the ground floor level. For all the case studies, comparative analyses are drawn between two periods: a) socialist developments of Tirana during 1945 to 1991 and, b) Tirana's built form from 1992 to 2015. This research gives an in depth description of Tirana's morphological evolution pre- and post the totalitarian regime, in order to identify how post-1991 urban development has affected: pedestrian and vehicular circulation, building accessibility, land use, and building form; on previously existing neighbourhoods of the city. Albeit Tirana is a new capital, throughout its history as a city, it has gone through radical changes in brief periods of time. These changes have always been initiated by the prevalent ideology of the respective periods. In the contemporary city, elements from different regimes are still pretty much identifiable in its residential areas, public spaces and public institutions<sup>1</sup>.

## **The evolution of Tirana**

Tirana is the capital and at the same time, the largest city in Albania. The origin of the city dates back to antiquity, but as a town Tirana was only known for the first time during the Ottoman rule around the 17th century. Until it became the capital of Albania - in 1920 – Tirana's population only counted for 17,000 inhabitants (Kera, 2004) whereas its area was 3 km<sup>2</sup>. In 1926, Albania turned into a monarchy under the rule of King Zog. During those years - for the first time in an Albanian city - real concern and interest were shown both about architectural and urban planning issues. Italian and Austrian architects were contracted by King Zog to engage in what would later be a first-ever plan for the new capital. The objective was clear and it was closely linked to the attempts to "westernize" Albanian society and Albanian architecture. The architectural style was predominantly inspired by the Italian Renaissance. Three Masterplans were produced (called Regulatory Plans) for the city of Tirana from mid-1920s until 1940s. (Aliaj, 2003).

After World War II, in 1945, the Albanian communist party (PPSH- Labour Party of Albania) took over ruling the country for almost five decades. In terms of the built environment, the communist government exerted a highly centralized control making sure that everything was

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<sup>1</sup> The main Ideological and architectural periodization of Tirana's development are summarized in 'Informality of sprawl? Morphogenetic evolution in post-socialist Tirana' (Dino et al., 2015:645).

planned in detail in order to fit the party's ideology and reflect its propaganda expressed through the style of Social Realism. Besides rigorously dictating the architectural style, the city's population composition was strictly planned and free internal migration was banned. Planning and restrictions were not only exerted in the realm of the built environment but with respect to basic human needs as well: such as food consumption, mobility, religion, and freedom of thought. By the end of 1960', religion was entirely banned to the point where Albania was officially declared to be the world's first atheist country. As a result many religious buildings were either demolished or converted into warehouses, gymnasiums, or workshops. The country grew increasingly isolated from the rest of the world and after the late 1960s, Albania suffered from unstable diplomatic relations even with the 'sister' countries -Soviet Union and People's Republic of China.

Through building up the country, the communist party led by Enver Hoxha, intended to discard the past and make believe that the creation of Tirana corresponded to the communist government taking the lead. This aspiration was emulated also in the fact that in 1957 the regulatory plan of Tirana was redrawn whereas all previous plans were dismissed (Aliaj, 2003). Prevailing city planning models included: abolishment of private ownership at all levels, introduction of zoning as concept, provision of social housing and a mono-centric city model (Aliaj, 2003). The centre was the most important area of the city; a monumental space to host all the communist parades and manifestations. This was reflected in the new masterplan released in 1976 where emphasis was made on the centre zone. Vast open spaces were scattered all around the city, in a time when motorization in the country was a luxury only to a cluster of privileged people.

As the main issue of Albania's urbanisation was the provision of housing, large housing units were built where the majority of the apartments had almost the same layout and amenities. The model used has been described as the 'original Stalinist model extended with harsh controls over mobility' (Tosics et al, 2002). The amount of space, the units of basic public services each family unit had access to, was meant to be equal and the population of the new housing complexes was socially mixed. The layout of the new housing estates mainly consisted of semi perimeter or free standing prefabricated blocks with access points from the inside of the block rather than from the outside which corresponded to access from the less integrated, quieter streets. A matured evidence of the heavy zoning concept was envisaged in the final masterplan drawn in 1985, which was ratified in 1989.

It could be said that Tirana was planned as a self-reliant city and it was the pride of Albania during the totalitarian regime. Some of its spatial features were expressed through strong axial streets, residential areas developed in prefabricated blocks or collective housing built

through volunteering work. The centre possessed the most distinctive characteristics and it was the focus of all political, administrative, educational, and recreational activities of the whole city, whereas the urban edges consisted of agricultural lands and industrial sites.

By the end of the 1980s, Tirana's urbanized area covered 12 km<sup>2</sup> and its population was about 250,000 inhabitants. Regardless of the significant increasing in population living in urban areas, three fourths of the Albanian population still lived in rural areas.

### **Post-socialist transformations in South East Europe**

The communist regimes collapsed in a domino-wave fashion across Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and South East Europe (SEE) countries between 1989 and 1992. The immediate effect was a major political and economic crisis and in some countries: bloody ethnic wars and national breakdown (Hirt, 2015). The paths of city development and change between those in CEE and SEE appear to be diverging significantly (Hamilton et al., 2015). Hamilton et al (2015) widely discuss in their book 'Transformation of Cities in Central and Eastern Europe' that post-socialist urban development has been influenced by strong external and internal forces. In this work, emphasis will be given to the internal forces that have shaped post-socialist development and reflect on their contribution to the current social and urban life of Tirana. By internal forces we mean factors of change, such as the elimination of the state control over the land and housing sector, privatization and restitution and decentralization of decision making from the central towards the municipal level (Ibid, 2015: 44). Shift in regimes instigated the emergence of new actors, such as the market oriented private developers and private banks. Throughout the 1990s, 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: 68). After the cessation of administrative restrictions in early 1991, the so longed for city-oriented movement could finally take place -the dramatic increase in movements towards the capital has resulted in the creation of informally constructed settlements within and around Tirana (Felstehausen, 1999; Tosics et al., 2002; Tsenkova, 2010). The 2001 PHC showed that 65% of the total migrants shifted towards the capital from all around the country (INSTAT, 2001) and as a consequence Tirana's metropolitan area almost tripled its population from 225,000 to 600,000 inhabitants (Felstehausen, 1999: 3). Vullnetari (2014) identifies six main factors responsible for the vast demographic changes in post-socialist Albania:

- I. the abysmal state of living conditions in villages by the end of the 1980s was a sure push factor for people to flee from the villages and look for better life opportunities elsewhere, whether internally or abroad.
- II. urban life has been traditionally considered in Albania as superior to that in the villages not only because of its better socio-economic opportunities, but also because of its urban lifestyle offering more time and opportunity for leisure and pleasure, and less conservatism and gendered oppression,
- III. after four decades of controlled mobility, Albanians were finally free to move and decide for themselves where to work and make a living,
- IV. once it was clear that the regime was on the brink of collapse, a widespread disregard for law and order ensued, as the pent-up frustration at decades of close surveillance and for many – oppression – exploded on a massive scale,
- V. it soon became obvious that the state's ability to enforce the law and restore order was also rapidly dissolving,
- VI. the privatisation in 1992 of what had been until then public property was the final nail in the coffin of socialism signalling the turning point of large-scale moves. (Vullnetari, 2014: 4)

These conditions have informed the decision that most of the internal migration fluxes were directed towards the capital; where under this demographic cannonade Albania became an 'extreme' example of post-socialist housing development (Hamilton et al. 2005; Tosics, 2005; Tosics & Hegedüs, 2003). During the first decade of this migrating wave an estimated 8,000 to 9,000 new households moved each year from different parts of the country to Tirana where about 70% of the housing supply was provided by the informal sector (Tosics, 2005). Under these conditions, the already existing neighbourhoods of the city witnessed significant densification whilst its boundaries were pushed outward by triplicating the area of Tirana. Even basic planning functions were clouded by ambiguity; it was unclear what regulatory plan to follow or who issues planning permissions (Aliaj; Hirt & Stanilov, 2009). Lack of expertise in economic analyses, lack of infrastructure standards, significant problems with the legal status of the urban land somehow contributed to the inability of the authorities to develop any masterplan (Hirt & Stanilov, 2009). Unfortunately, this was perfectly synchronic with a scarcity of professionals and deficient amount of funds. However, it is important to point out that a peculiar characteristic of post-socialist housing trend has not been necessarily driven by low income households; this is contrary to informal development in Global South countries. In this part of the world, entire middle class neighbourhoods - which have not been legally approved- have established themselves randomly across cities (Slaev & Hirt, 2016).

## **Methodological Approach**

Through the evidence presented in this study, we seek to elucidate on the morphological evolution of the post-socialist urban forms and social change in Tirana. In this context, by raising the question of differences in development patterns between the socialist and post socialist periods: in terms of ideology, architectural language, and also how these weakly regulated interventions have shaped up public life in the capital.

In order to attain an answer to what we seek, the most recent aerial map of Tirana was put in GIS platform superimposed with the geo-referenced built form and road network. The 'cartographic redrawing' GIS based modelling methodology pioneered by Pinho and Oliveria (Pinho & Oliveira, 2009a, 2009b) has been adopted to systematically study Tirana's morphogenesis, by working backwards to remove non-existent elements and readjusting the urban fabric where needed. The 'rough' data for the contemporary period (2007) was acquired from the institutions that produced these data officially as three separate layers – which have been amended where needed after a fieldwork (2016). Once the basic dataset was created, all the collected qualitative information was entered on the same platform. The collected information layers include: land use at the ground floor level, access points to buildings, and building period.

Batty et al (2004) argue one of the major limitations of urban analyses has been the failure to embrace the third dimension (Batty et al., 2004: 325). The restriction to two dimensions hugely simplifies the complexity of information about cities; and this research too does limit its outputs to the analysing of form and function of the ground floor.

It is important to emphasise that Tirana is not approached from a single perspective; that of morphological transformations but at the same time by providing historical information on this regard. The latter, is not simply a 'background' but it is used to illustrate 'syntactic growth processes' as well; this by enfolding settlement growth or the architectural typologies (Griffiths, 2012). Another aspect in which history is considered in this work, is described by Baker (Baker, 2003) as 'spatial histories' that has been contextualised by Griffiths (2012) as 'concerned with the way in which social phenomena organize and become organized in time-space, that goes beyond morphology itself to explain particular socio-economic or cultural aspects of an urban culture' (Griffiths, 2012:4).

## The metamorphosis of Tirana

Official records for the population of Tirana suggest that there has been a population increase from 368,000 in 1989 to 520,000 in 2001 (INSTAT, 2001). Unofficial sources estimated that the district had a population of 800,000 people by 2002 already (de Soto, 2002), and had approached the 1 million mark by 2005 (Lulo, 2005). At the moment, Tirana has an estimated population density of nearly 11,000 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup> (Vullnetari, 2014). This demographic expansion has not been accompanied, by any policy action nor strategic urban development plans. Most policy documents produced at the national or local level often look like quick reports of very general information, rather than evidence based, forward thinking masterplans in the way they are done in theory and followed by practice in many other parts of the world.



**Figure 1.1** Axial map of Tirana, showing the city's expansion from 1921-2015, Dino, B., (2016)

The semi spontaneous development that has occurred in Tirana, has been the case throughout the Balkan region –however at a considerably lower ratio. Mostly during the transition period (first ten to fifteen years of post the regime change) there was a persistent institutional absence and no official plan to follow, which contributed in creating a robust neglecting perspective among all the stakeholders. Repeatedly, this led to building without permission not only sporadically but by individual initiative. It was commonly suggested as

'best practice' if you wanted to have your dwelling/object to be built quickly and save all the hassle, as legalization would follow once the dwelling was built. Because of this scheme, professionals of the built environment were obliged to work under a corrupt-environment where there was neither a picture of the future nor its legacy. This phenomenon has been explored by Tsenkova et al (2009) in their report for the UNECE called 'Self-made cities' (Tsenkova et al., 2009). The term 'self-made' does not only apply to the buildings of the residential neighbourhoods in the urban periphery, but also refers to the ways in which locals have been able to intuitively regenerate social and economic life in their cities; it refers to the spatial transformation cities have faced. Stanilov (2007) suggests that the built environment of a city is much more enduring than its social structures (Stanilov, 2007:4). When considering post-socialist transformations, Sýkora argues that, "[t]he political change took only a few weeks and the core institutional transformations of economic system were accomplished within a few years, however, the change of settlement structures will take many years or decades" (Sýkora, 1999). From Tirana's perspective, it could be argued that the settlement structure did change at a faster pace than in other SEE and CEE countries. The structure has not only expanded towards urban edges, but also it has experienced considerable densification and infill in already existing inner city housing blocks. Alexander's concepts discussed in 'A city is not a tree' will be argued in Tirana's context by comparing urban structures and organizational models both, during socialism and post-socialism (Alexander, 1967).

More evidence will be provided through the case studies presented in the following paragraph where particular (post-socialist) transformations are explored in detail.

### **Case Study 1**

Most of the housing units are a legacy from the past regime. However, as Figure 2.1 shows these housing units have been altered by extending these buildings with new parts, by filling in the *gaps* where there was a discontinuity along the perimeter or by building up what previously was open public space. Figures show that in 'Case Study 1' 40.3% of the building units have been built during post socialism, 37.1% of the units are extensions (see Dino et al, 2014 for definition of extensions) and only 22.6% of the units were part of the urban fabric before 1991. Post-socialist urban transformations have contributed to the change of the urban landscape hugely, as all previous buildings had a maximum of 6 floors (as at the time there were no lifts so the highest a building considered functionally suitable without a lift was 6 floors), whereas the new apartment blocks are all >6 floors. Another notable difference between the two periods is land use change, predominantly on the ground floor. Before, more than 90% of the ground floor was exclusively used for domestic purposes. However,



since the regime change the ground floor is the most sought after property to be converted into private activities (retail and services). The analyses show that in 'Case Study 1' 35.1% of the non-domestic ground floor land use consists of retail, 23.8% is occupied by the service sector and 19.2% by third spaces <sup>2</sup>.

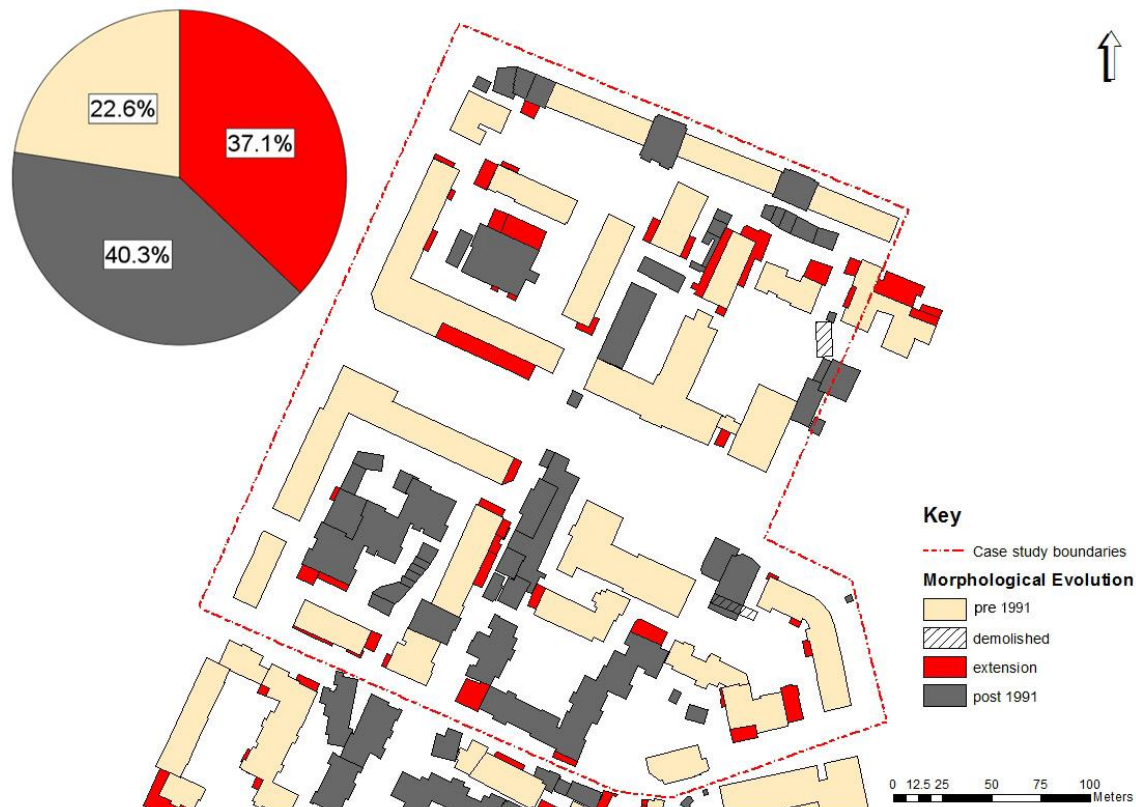


Figure 2.1 Morphological evolution in Case study 1. Pie chart showing ratio of units not floor areas. Dino, B. (2016).

In 'Case Study 1' the dominant non domestic activity is made up of retail and services. It is noteworthy also the percentage that third spaces constitute. Third spaces consist of bars, cafes, restaurants, patisseries and betting bars which throughout the day are constantly busy regardless of the period of the month or the time of the day. These places have taken up the role that once public spaces used to fulfil, that of social encounter and gathering. The addition of new buildings, extensions to existing buildings, land use change on the ground floor, increase of façade activity, and motorization has dramatically changed the block composition since the bottom up development started in Tirana. Structurally, the block has been fragmented multiple times, because of the new buildings and the new openings (entrances) along the already existing facades. There are paths that have been closed because of the new buildings and there are new paths that have arisen as a result of the new developments. Whilst during the socialist years there were only a handful of commercial activities in these blocks, the latest survey (2016) reveals that the land use composition on

<sup>2</sup> See Vaughan et al. 2013 for the composition of the land use categories.

the ground floor across the blocks has been flipped from mainly domestic to non-domestic activity. The contrast between the increase in facade activity as a result of land use change and new buildings arising can be clearly seen in Figure 2.3 and Figure 2.4.

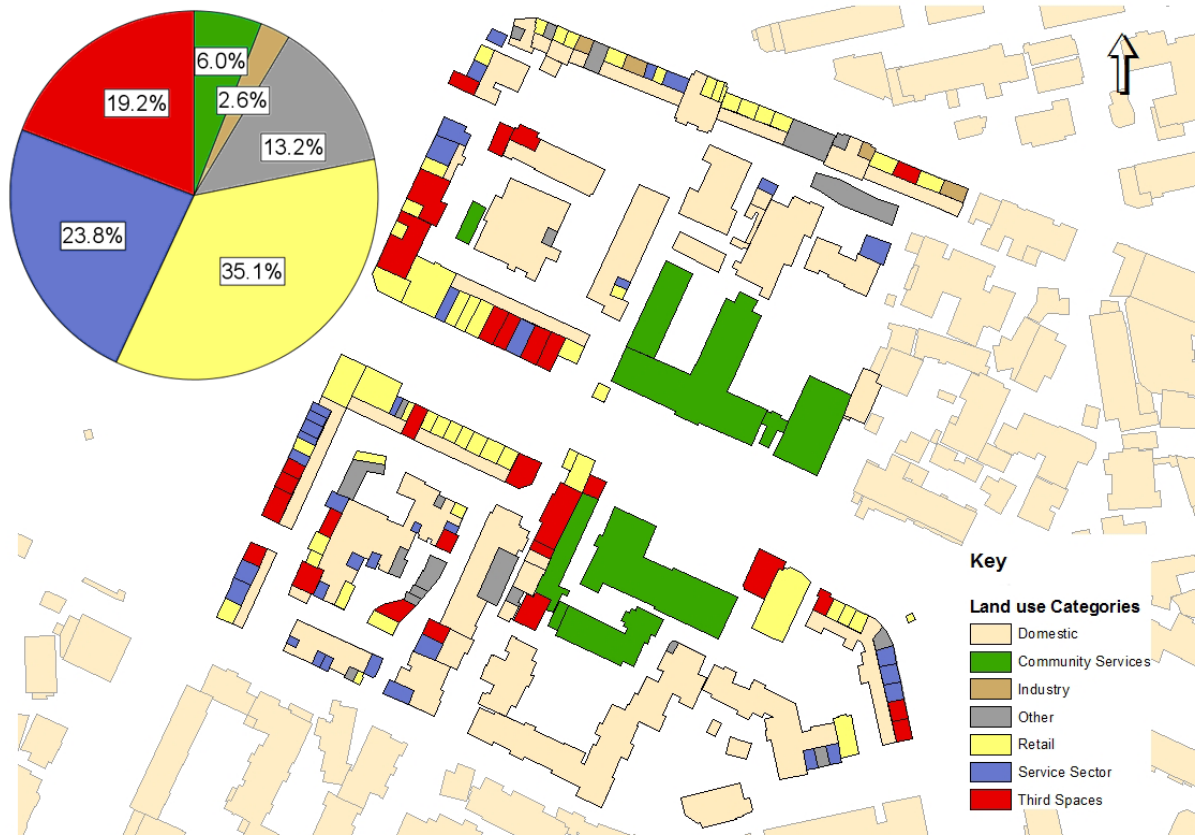


Figure 2.2 Land use composition of Case Study 1, 2016. Pie chart showing the composition of non domestic land use only. Dino, B. (2016)

The difference between the periods compared however, does not only comprise an increase of non-domestic land use on the ground floor level. There has been a trend to reverse façade activity, from higher activity on the inside of the block to significantly higher activity on the outside of the block.



Figure 2.3 Built form + Acces points to buildings- 1989. Dino, B. (2016) Figure 2.4 Built form + Acces points to buildings- 2015. Dino, B. (2016)

## Case Study 2

“Shallvaret” area is situated centrally and is one of the most expensive parts of the city to buy or rent properties. Nearly 30% of the units have been built before 1991, of which only one building had commercial activity at that time. About the same amount of units have been added to the built environment in the area since 1991. However, if we consider the amount of extensions that have been added to the units, there is a substantial increase of built fabric which in total adds up to about 70% of total units in this area. Also noteworthy is the increase in facade activity, which is mainly due to the great amount of services, retail and third spaces.



Figure 3.1 Morphological evolution in Case study 2. Pie chart showing ratio of units not floor areas. Dino, B. (2016)

Land use analyses show that retail has the highest distribution among non-domestic activities with 45.3% of the units, followed by services 22% and third spaces 20.8%. What is noticeable is that retail activity is mainly located along the busiest streets, those that are along higher integrated segments within the network system. Whereas third spaces which are made up of restaurants, cafés, bars, betting bars and patisseries are located mainly just off from the high street; this is different to the other two case study areas where third spaces are

mainly on the high street with bigger exposure and visibility. 'Other' land use refers to vacant, under construction or garage spaces. Mostly, these spaces are along inner neighbourhood routes, which possibly influences their status of not being able to operate as businesses when vacant or no necessity to be along main routes when designated for garages.





### Case Study 3

Before the regime change “*Kombinati*” area, was an industrial ‘satellite’ town of Tirana. All the residential units were built for the workers of the biggest textile industry of the country. The buildings of the former textile industry are still part of the urban landscape; however, now they are serving mainly as industrial warehouses.

Our case study is situated along the eastern edge of pre 1991 “*Kombinati*” industrial town. Yet, since the regime change, “*Kombinati*” is part of the city of Tirana with a significant addition of residential units. Referring to our case study area, 70% of the units have been constructed after 1991 from which 58.3% are extensions to buildings (mainly on socialist era units) and only 14.6% are completely new buildings. In ‘*Case Study 3*’ only 27.2% of the units are parts of pre 1991 Tirana. The majority of the buildings are between 2 to 3 floors, whereas the tallest buildings are 5 storeys high and are mainly located along the central and eastern parts of the case study.

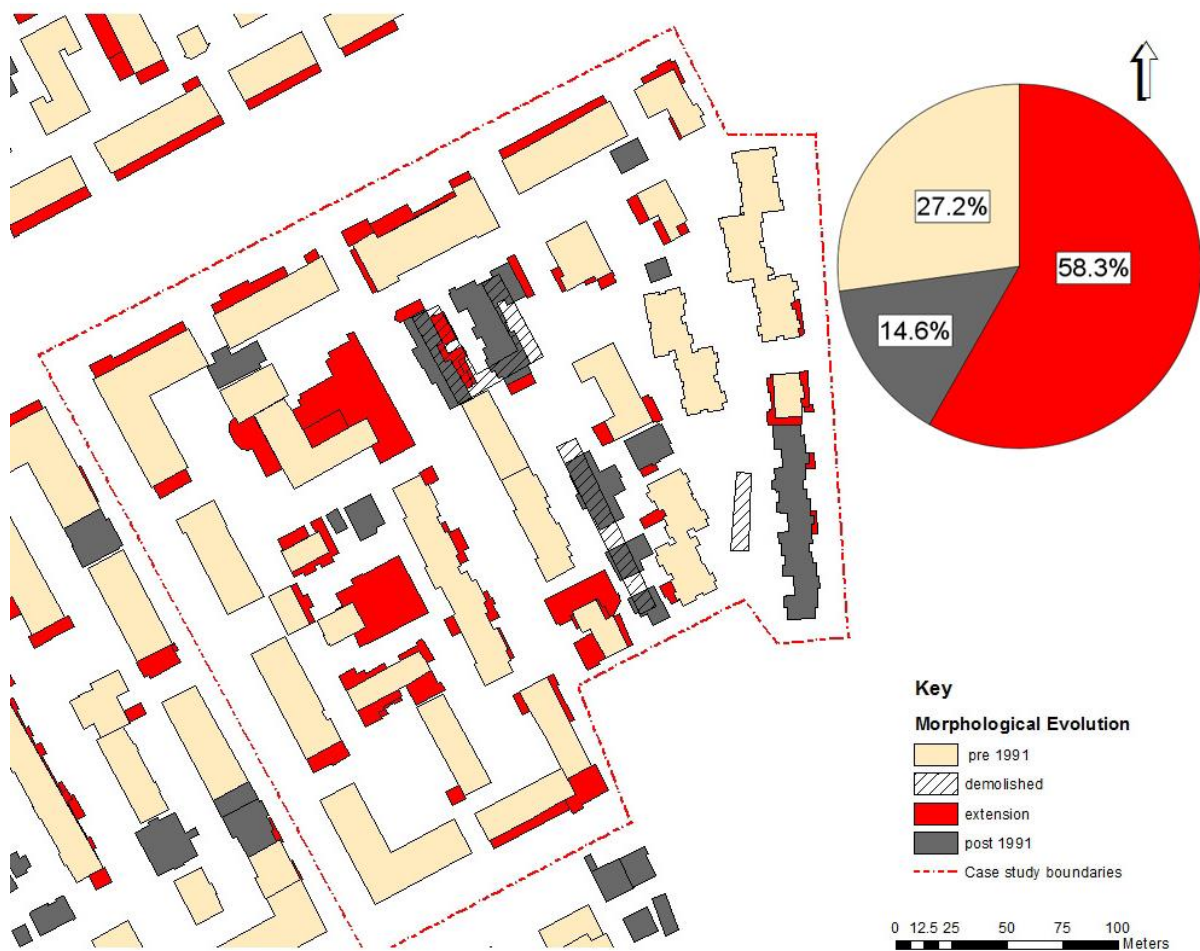


Figure 4.1 Morphological evolution in Case study 3. Pie chart showing ratio of units not floor areas. Dino, B. (2016)

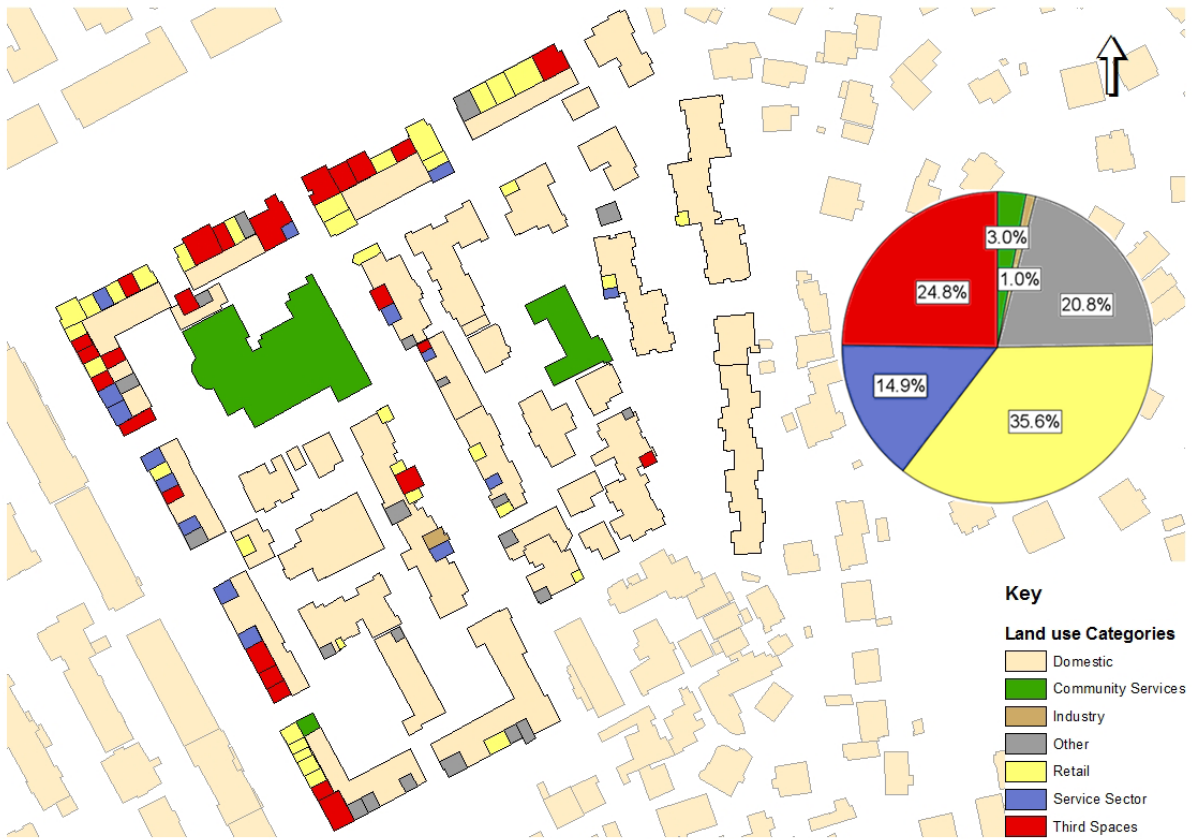


Figure 4.2 Land use composition of Case Study 3. Pie chart showing the composition of non domestic land use only. Dino, B. (2016)

The main non-domestic land use consists of retail 35.6%, mainly located along the busiest streets, followed by third spaces 24.8%, which mainly consists of bars and betting amenities that are frequented mostly by male customers –which is not usual in the context of Tirana’s public life. Striking is the amount of vacant units that in this case study, makes up the third most popular non-domestic land use category. 20.8% of the non-domestic units in this area are waiting to be rented. It seems that units that are not located along main road but rather in the inner streets are struggling to accommodate any kind of non-domestic activity. From all the case study areas, this study area has the highest amount of vacant commercial space.



Figure 4.3 Built form + Access points to buildings- 1989. Dino, B. (2016)



Figure 4.4 Built form + Access points to buildings- 2016. Dino, B. (2016)

## Concluding Remarks

During post socialism cities are transforming into multi-nodal metropolitan areas reaching extreme levels of privatization of housing, services, public spaces, and transportation just like cities in Western Europe (Stanilov, 2007). However, what significantly differs among the urban patterns is the rapidity of the transformation period; in Western Europe these changes have been taking place gradually for about half a century whereas in Eastern Europe the changes have happened within a sudden span of a decade (Ibid, 2007). It has been argued that both the sequencing of urbanization and suburbanization phases strikingly differ among East and West Europe (Szelenyi, 1996).



Picture 1.1 Tirana, 1980' (Source: Pinterest)



Picture 1.2 Tirana, 2016 (Dino, B. 2016)

Noticeably, even within the post-socialist context some trends are somehow going differently among countries –in our case Tirana has manifested different post-socialist trends compared to other former socialist bloc countries. For instance, Hirt (2013) argues that one of the key spatial contrasts between the socialist and the post-socialist city is the fact that the former was denser and more compact (Hirt, 2013: 20). However, as evidence in this research points out, contemporary Tirana is far denser than the pre 1991 city, which *per se* is significant in testifying to a different post-socialist urbanisation trend when compared to the other post-socialist countries. Additionally, in this case of a post-socialist legacy, like industrial sites (when within the yellow line), (mostly) are reinserted as active parts of the city's life and economy by adapting them to the latest market needs<sup>3</sup> –this again in contrast to many industrial sites in previous SEE and CEE countries (Hirt, 2013; Stanilov, 2007). The socialist housing estates also continue thriving in the socio-economic life of the capital, by not only expanding their footprints but also by adding richness and a diversity of activity to the daily life of Tirana's citizens. As has been argued, these changes and transformations have not

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<sup>3</sup> Industrial sites have been mostly part of bottom up adaptation rather than part of any top down regeneration plan.

been made through formal ways. Sztompka (1991) then Hirt and Stanilov (2009) theorize that the economic crisis of late socialism and early post socialism have led to the growth of the informal sector as a “coping strategy”. It has been argued, that potentially after being abused by authoritarian governments for decades, “people no longer perceive[d] it as morally wrong to exploit any system (communist, capitalist or 'transitional'”) (Hirt & Stanilov, 2009:57). In this case, building in public space was not perceived as something inappropriate to do; this can be observed through the vast amount of public realm appropriation. Nonetheless, the socialist and the post-socialist patterns coexist as layers of new development that are superimposed over the old urban fabric where space and society have changed concurrently (Hillier & Netto, 2002; Stanilov, 2007).

After almost five decades of top down planning and development, Tirana’s inhabitants reversed these trends to bottom up development. These individual developments have contributed to the formation of the ‘whole’, as Alexander (1987: 11) discussed is something that is hard to grasp by a single entity or period of time (Alexander, 1987). ‘Wholeness’ is something that exists in all growing organisms, ‘whose internal laws, and whose emergence, govern its continuation, govern what emerges next’(Alexander, 1987: 10). It has been pointed out in the beginning of this paper, that Tirana has been designed under rigid planning concepts supported by political views of the time. Interestingly, it seems that in the contemporary city people are ‘undoing’ the tree like structure and intuitively they are adopting a mixed use orientated development close to what Alexander (1967: 48) calls the *semi-lattice* (Alexander, 1967). There are no more sharp separations between activities or land uses. It seems that organically there is something imbedded in the unconscious; which enables understanding over what works best and how complexity can be better unfolded by simple intuition and led by the necessity of accommodating needs. Empirical evidence proves that in our case study areas there has been a 167.5% increase in domestic activity along building facades and 248% increase of non-domestic activity (measured by number of access points). If we break it down in numbers, before the regime change there were 160 domestic access points to buildings (88.4 % of total active facades in 1989) and 21 non domestic access points (11.6% of total active facades in 1989).Whereas in 2016, the numbers have risen to 268 domestic access points to buildings (34% of total active facades) and 521 non domestic access points to building (66% of total active facades) across the three case studies. The rise of new urban patterns has had major implications for pedestrian and vehicular circulation. Significant increase of building density and mixed use composition of urban blocks has contributed to the emergence of a new identity of contemporary Tirana. It seems that current development trends are in line with Jane Jacobs (1961) argument that cities should be once again higher density, with mostly mixed rather than segregated uses



(Jacobs, 1961). A significant difference between, pre and post 1991 is the increase of façade activity along the higher integrated street segments. Analyses reveal that during socialism, the entrances to buildings were placed on the least accessible street, on the street that had less foot fall. However, what can be observed is that these patterns have been converted to the opposite: activity has been pushed onto the busiest streets, where the likelihood of footfall is significantly higher. Despite the richness guided by spontaneity, no new public squares or plazas have been created under the same. We suggest that there has been a substitution for the function of the square or the plaza by the cafe's (third spaces). The culture of the café is the new centre of social encounter and gathering that regardless of one's financial income is unquestionably *main stream*. By this, we are not suggesting that the squares or plazas are not in use anymore but, their baseline role has been interchanged by the café culture.

In the last twenty five years of pluralism, there have been several rehabilitations of squares but new ones have been established neither in socialist developments nor in contemporary parts of the city. Top down planning, since the shift in regimes has failed several times; it has not yet become part of the development culture. This happened not necessarily because of poor quality plans that could not be implemented (actually they were never given a chance) but mainly due to political reasons. Consistently, every time the government has been changed, a new masterplan has been designed (from international practices such as: Architecture Studio: France, Grimshaw Architects: United Kingdom, 51N4E Architects: Belgium), therefore, making obsolete any previous project. In some way, contemporary Tirana is organically evolved – more led by intuition than by policies or development strategies – a kind of post-socialist development. A 'self-made'(Tsenkova et al., 2009) city, which has written its own rules of growing and reinventing itself.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Attending the PUARL 2016 Conference organized in San Francisco was made possible by The Bartlett Student Conference Fund.

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