

Twin Towers Destroying Tirana`s Identity?

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses and critically analyzes the issue of building skyscrapers in the Main Boulevard of the capital of Albania Tirana, an urban historical zone which is defined as “City Spine” and which constitutes a very important part of architectural identity of the city. In order to give an idea about the identity of the city brief information about the architectural products of the establishing periods of Tirana is given. After that the study is focused on the skyscraper of Twin Towers (Kullat Binjake in Albanian) which are constructed in an ex park area, just in front of the Prime Ministry building of Republic of Albania challenging all other buildings which has the similar height varying from three to four floors. The evaluation whether Twin Towers destroy or not architectural identity of Tirana is made through analyzing the Main Boulevard and the skyscraper within it, under the concepts of “Place-Identity” and “Genius Loci” The aim of this study is to expose the negative effects of this building in terms of city’s architectural identity and place. In conclusion what do the users of the city loose and what does the city itself loose from the Main Boulevard with Skyscraper and what are its effects are revealed.

KEYWORDS: City Spine, Identity, Place, Genius Loci, Skyscraper

1 INTRODUCTION

Cities in the world possess urban elements that constitute the identity of whole city or special parts of it. The architectural and urban values of this specific part are extremely important for its identity. The Forums, Coliseum and Capitoline Hill for Rome, Acropolis and Parthenon for Athens, Saint Sophia and Suleymaniye for Istanbul, Eiffel Tower and Avenue of Champs-Élysées for Paris are so much identified to each other that they cannot be thought apart. Partly demolitions or transformation of this places, without taking in consideration its architectural and urban values, may result in an unrecovered damage made to the place and consequently to the identity of the city. In this respect the capital city of Albania Tirana is a special case to be studied.

Tirana contains architectural products of three different periods that constitute its architectural identity: i. The Mosque of Ethem Beg with the Clock Tower represents the Ottoman period starting from the establishment of the city in 1614 to 1912; ii. The Main Boulevard or City Spine with the ensemble of governmental buildings, represents the establishment of Albanian State during the Zog & Italian invasion. Designed by Italian architects Brasini and implemented from Florestano Di Fausto and Gherardo Bosio, it includes the period from 1925 to 1942; iii. National Historical Museum, Hotel Tirana and Palace of Culture represent the architectural identity of Socialist period and the buildings were designed by Albanian architects with the support of Russian specialists from 1945-1980. The Main Boulevard an architectural product of the second period is of such an importance for Tirana that the city cannot be thought a part of it. The violation of the Main Boulevard of Tirana, which is a substantial part of city’s architectural identity, through construction of a skyscraper (17 floors) in between governmental buildings

of the same height (quasi 4 floors), is the main issue of this paper. This issue is going to be studied under place and identity built environment theory. In order to understand city and urban identity, it is a need to deal with concepts of place and identity. Their relationship and the meaning of these concepts are going to be explained.

Place identity is also defined as a set of cognitions about physical settings. The concept of place identity supports the collective sense of urban identification with a particular building or urban zone and its architectural features. Genius loci which is the spirit of place is another important concept that is explained within this paper. The above mentioned concepts are very important, in analyzing the decisions about constructions which are going to be made within an urban zone having a certain character and which is the most substantial, taking in consideration the architectural elements used in the existing buildings for the new buildings.

Within the above mentioned theoretical frame the meaning of the “Main Boulevard” of Tirana for the city and the inhabitants will be discussed. The construction of skyscraper, which is alien in terms of volumetric harmony existing between governmental buildings in terms of place and identity, will be discussed. Who is the loser? Who is the user? These questions will seek answer in the last part of the paper.

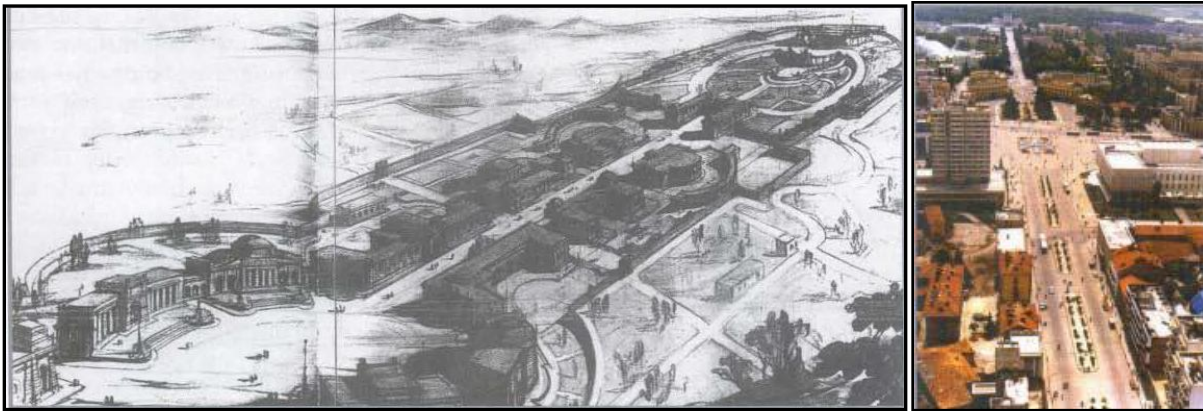


Figure 1: Left; The Main Boulevard developed from Italian architect Brasini and Right; The present situation of the axis. (From Aliaj, Lulo and Myftiu)

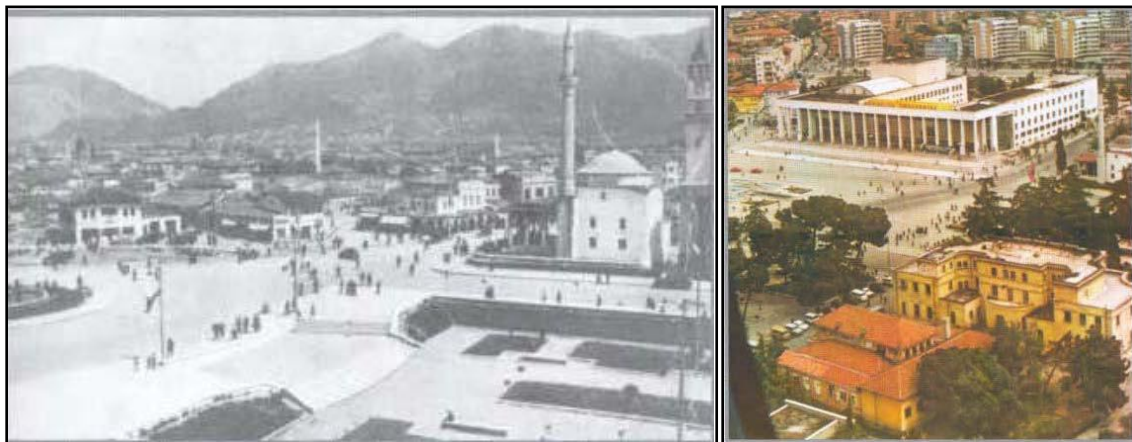


Figure 2: Left the Mosque of Ethem Beg representing the Ottoman Identity and Right the Palace of Culture built during the Communist Regime representing the proper period.

2 UNDERSTANDING PLACE AND IDENTITY

To grasp the identity of the city understanding and interpreting "place identity" is very essential. There are a number of scholars (Heidegger, Norberg-Schulz, Deaux, Lalli, Proshansky, Relph, Altman, Rapoport) who has studied and give a profound exploration of the concept & issues related to it.

Heidegger depicted "To dwell" as a process of making a place a home (1962, p.65) "Place" gained importance in architecture by Norberg-Schulz's work on the existence of a "genius loci" (1980, p.65), meaning the spirit of a place. Relph worked on the "sense of place", "placelessness" and used the terms "insiderness" and "outsiderness" to describe people's feelings of being part of a place (1976).

According to Deaux "identity" can be depicted as the distinguishing character or personality of an individual. "Self" is a concept often used in a more abstract and global context, whereas "identity" is linked to specific aspects of self-definition. While Lalli mentions that identification is a process and identity is a condition (Hauge, 2007).

2.1 Place Identity

Harold Proshansky (1983, p. 59) described place-identity as a "potpourri of memories, conceptions, interpretations, ideas and related feelings about specific physical settings as well as types of settings". So Proshansky defines the binom between space and identity in emotional, physical and behavioral strata.

While Edward Relph's definition is given like that: "Identity of place is as much a function of intersubjective intentions and experiences as the appearance of buildings and scenery, and it refers not only to the distinctiveness of individual places but also to the sameness between different places"(Seamon et al.1976, p. 44). Hence, place can be described in terms of many multidimensional physical and psychological environmental attributes.

Altman et al. mentions that the phrase "place identity" conveys many different dimensions such as physical size, tangible versus symbolic, and known and experienced versus unknown or not experienced. Place also includes that which influences the meaning occupants give to it through personal, social, and cultural processes (1992, p.343).

Seen from the city aspect, place-identity leads to 'urban identity'. Urban identity is closely related with the quality of urban life in cities, which embraces environmental, economic and social aspects. Hence the concept of place is very fundamental not only for the identity of city in the morphological sense but also is important for the urban identity in the sense of community.

Hence, in order to understand identity it is essential to discuss in terms such as "place" and "genius loci".

2.2 "Genius Loci" or The Spirit of Place

One important characteristic of place is "genius loci". The authenticity, the divisive nature of the city can be described through this term which is important in giving the identity to the place.

It is firstly defined by Christopher Norberg-Schulz. Worth mentioning here the everywhere quotation where Schulz defines place as a, "space with a distinct character" and goes further explaining "the spirit of place". This spirit gives life to people and places, accompanies them from birth to death, and determines their character and essence (1980, p. 17).

This 'character' of the site, in the city, besides being geographical is also historical and social.

Norberg- Schulz in his place definition mentions geographical influence on it: "Place is evidently an integral part of existence! What, then, do we mean with the word "place"? Obviously we mean something more than abstract location. We mean a totality made up of concrete things having material substance, shape, texture and color. Together these things determine an "environmental character" (1980, p. 6).

He further continues on environmental character of place stating the natural elements as the primary components of the given and they define place in geographical terms, repeating that it means something more than location. A place character is experienced through its buildings and network of

spaces, Landmarks are elements that with their experience makes possible the place character (Lynch, 1960).

Ian Thomson defines it as:

“Genius loci is an ancient and persistent idea. The Romans believed that places, like people, had inner spirits that determined their essences. Just as they thought it was possible to read a person's character or spirit from observing the particularities of his or her face, so the genius of a place could be divined by paying attention to its individual features” (2003, p.67).

Norberg Schulz considers that understanding the genius loci can be achieved by introducing the concept of “meaning and structure”. According to him the meaning of any object consist in the relationship with other objects gathers. So the keyword for an object to have meaning is gathering. While the second element which is structure underline the formal properties of a system of relationships. Thus structure and meaning are aspects of the same totality (Norberg-Schulz, p.18)

To interpret place identity as distinctiveness of place or identification, the conditions under which identity of place develop should be taken in consideration. This development may be designed or spontaneous. Among the spontaneous factors the economic force shapes the built environment. While the free will for selection of the inhabitants which is crucial in giving shape to the genius loci extensively free, the Urban Redevelopment Authority Office which plan, control and direct the changes in the built environment in order to protect the identity of the place or the genius loci of the space.

3 TIRANA MAIN BOULEVARD PLACE IDENTITY, ITS GENIUS LOCI AND SKYSCRAPER

In this context according to one of the biggest newspaper of Albania “Koha Jone” Albania`s National Council of Regulation of Territory, which is the top institution that gives the building permissions in case that total construction area is over 5000 m², has given permission for the object called Twin Towers in 1996 (Rama, 2001). The plot site is positioned just in front of Prime Ministry Building whose boss of the period was Alexander Meksi. It is very contradictory because being an ex academician in the field of history of architecture, he should have been the one to know best the architectural value of the main boulevard and its buildings. It was already mentioned in the introduction section about Tirana`s architectural identity, which consisted of design languages representing three historical periods: i. The Ottoman period, ii. King Zog period, iii. The Communist period. The Main Boulevard of Tirana which is our discussion is an architectural product of the King Zog period. It is that in this period Tirana has been selected as the capital of Albania and very important governmental buildings designed at first by Brasini and later Bosio constitute the “City Spine”. The conceptualization of the Main Boulevard from Brasini and later Bosio had in focus the “House of Fascio Building” which today is known as “Tirana Polytechnic University Main Building”. The perspective having in center this building is enforced with governmental buildings and big pine trees.



Figure 3: The main boulevard of Tirana, Prime Ministry in the right, the Assembly (Kuvendi) and Twin Towers in the left side, (www.panoramio.com, accessed in 20/04/2012)



Figure 4: The Aerial View of Main Boulevard of Tirana, the Buildings with the proper storey height and the position of Twin Towers within it [Courtesy: Edmond Manahasa]



Figure 5: A view of Boulevard “Deshmoret e Kombit” where the Tirana Polytechnic University Main Building (Ex House of Fascio) is focused in the perspective taken in 1988, (www.argophilia.com, accessed in 20/04/2012)



Figure 6: The same view taken after the building of Twin Towers 2005, showing the visual effect it makes to the boulevard, (<http://www.flickr.com>, accessed in 20/04/2012)

Referred to what Proshansky mentioned about place identity it can be reduced as a potpourri of perceptions related to feelings about a physical setting. So the Main Boulevard of Tirana can be analyzed with these three main keywords: cognition, feelings and physical setting. From the perception point of view the boulevard is unique in terms of dimensions and it is the widest street in Albania. Approximately its width is 30 m and all the buildings has 3-4 story, except the Tirana Polytechnic University which is positioned at the end of the boulevard, having all the perspective focused on it. In this respect from the cognition point of view the Twin Towers Building (Kullat Binjake in Albanian) with its height of 17 floors violate the perspective and an immediate perception is received that it is alien to that harmonious ensemble of governmental buildings (figure 3 and figure 4). From the feelings point of view in the plot site of the Twin Towers before its construction was found a trio of busts of Albanian patriots very important representative of Albanian Reawakening, a very critical illuminative period in the establishment of the state of Albania. Nowadays these bust are removed and it make people feel very upset for the removal of commemorative monuments which are very important for the national memory. Baykan Gunay a Professor of Architecture at METU, during a lecture on Tirana city mentioned: “At the first moment I saw the boulevard, if I could have a photoshop in real life, would erase the towers” (Gunay, 2009). From physical setting point of view it is important to mention that all the governmental buildings have almost the same volumetry. The governmental buildings preserve a horizontal character, each at the same distance from the street. Furthermore they have robust attitude and the monumental facades, which are plastered or marble cladded. The Twin Tower skyscraper is a vertical building. It has curtain wall glass facade and from the other aspect it doesn't respect the same distance from the street (figure 6). So from the physical settings aspect it is quite different to the other buildings.

The vision about place identity of Relph beyond what Proshansky mentioned consists in referring not only to the distinctiveness of individual places but also to the sameness between different places. The urban character of Tirana is composed of radial streets and one main bigger one which elongates in the North-South direction, which is the “City Spine” or Main Boulevard. Referring to Relph it possesses a distinctive character from the other streets, due to its axial morphology. If one analyzes the governmental buildings within the Main Boulevard they are similar to each other from architectural features point of view. The Twin Towers Skyscraper is totally different from the other governmental building. Basically the difference starts from the function of the Skyscraper which mainly is used for offices and for residence, while the rest of the buildings have official functions.

Altman et al. differently from the other scholars, considers influences of personal, social, and cultural processes that people give to the place identity. Related to the topic of this paper the influences on place identity, referring to Altman it can be said that he pushes the concept to the limits of the objectivity, because everyone may perceive a place in the way he/she would like. There could be people that would find the position in the Main Boulevard Twin Towers Skyscraper positive, due to the cafeterias that it possesses, but these necessarily does make it positive.

Referring to Schulz's Genius Loci or Spirit of Place Tirana's Main Boulevard can be analyzed on its distinctiveness and the totality of space identity that consists of meaning and structure. The distinctiveness can be seen in two aspects:

- i. In horizontal dimension represented by street,
- ii. In vertical dimension represented by buildings

The street map of Tirana consists of radial roads turning around the center. This radial network is predominated by a North-South Axis which is the Main Boulevard of Tirana. The aim of the boulevard was to organize parades, in other words it was designed for pedestrians. Someone that visit Tirana for the first time understand the difference of the Main Boulevard to the other streets of the city. The immediate impact made from the enormous width of the street and the robust governmental buildings, which give a suppressing feeling, as the architects themselves has shown effort to monumentalize the idea of strong and non destroyable state. This is the distinctiveness that Schulz defines in Genius Loci, that makes the Main Boulevard totally different from the remaining part of the city. The building which belong to the vertical dimension of Genius Loci, are considered in two groups. The first one is positioned at the beginning of the Main Boulevard, while the second one is placed at the concluding part of the boulevard,

focusing Tirana Polytechnic Main Building. Buildings organized in groups can be denoted as “meaning” of Genius Loci, which is explained with the key word gathering. The same language used in the design of the governmental buildings is like an invisible relationship between them. This is the relationship that is defined as the “structure” of Genius Loci. All of the elements defined above as elements of Genius Loci are part of a Totality. Within this ensemble of governmental buildings the Twin Tower does not have the same design language and is not positioned within a group of the other buildings, so it doesn’t contain features of the same Genius Loci.



Figure 7: The Twin Towers and The Assembly Building on its left, (<http://abcnews.al>) , accessed in 20/04/2012)



Figure 8: A Perspective from the winning project for the Master Plan of Tirana, where the high rise towers engulf the historical city center (From Tirana Municipality Digital Archive)

4 CONCLUSION ON THE USERS AND THE LOSERS OF THE MAIN BOULEVARD WITH TWIN TOWERS

The users of the boulevard are the inhabitants of Tirana, who do use the boulevard for promenade as a part of their city culture.

There is a big loser in the context which is the city itself. The city loses an important quality of its architectural identity. According to the “Place-Identity” definition, from the cognition point of view Twin Towers Skyscraper violates the monumental perspective that conceptualized from architect Brasini and Bosio. From feelings point of view the destruction of 3 commemorative bust, which belonged to high figures of Albania and the citizens of Tirana loses very important monument of the collective memory. And from physical settings point of view the volumetric point of view, this Twin Towers building threads and breaks the scale and order of this urban ensemble. All of the buildings that are found in the boulevard are 3-4 storeys high; while the Twin Towers as also is 17 floors high. Its negative effect on the visual quality of the boulevard can be perceived in the comparison between figure 8 and 9. From physical setting point of view Twin Tower’s thread was not a static one but its effect was very dynamic as more high rise buildings has been built along the boulevard although not in the first line. Later there are built buildings like “Skytower” or “ETC” at a distance almost 100 m away to the boulevard (figure 7).

The Main Boulevard is distinct compared to the other streets, due to its axial morphology, and this give a strong identity. The governmental buildings within the Main Boulevard share similarity from the architectural point of view between them. From the other side they are very different compared to remaining buildings of the city especially regarding the architectural quality. Twin Towers do not share any sameness or closeness referring to architectural elements, with the other governmental buildings. In this context the city still loses from its urban and architectural identity (Compare figure 5 and figure 6).

In addition to the distinctiveness that was treated in the upper paragraph, a very important aspect of Genius Loci all the governmental buildings has the same language of design representing the invisible relationship between them. Twin Towers do not have the same language of design with the other

buildings. While the governmental buildings has been “gathered” into groups as an element of Genius Loci that is structure. In this context Twin Towers are not positioned also within any group of buildings.

Beyond theoretical approaches, it is strange to see how the result of the international competition of Tirana Master Plan, which was organized in 2003. The winning project was the one of Architecture Studio, followed by Bolles & Wilson and Mecanoo Architecture (Tirana Municipality, 2003). Among the others they proposed along the two sides of the main boulevard, high rise buildings (Figure 8). According to Tisnado, who was the representative of Architecture Studio, they were necessary to enrich their main idea of creating a city garden, because they create a frame to the designed area from all sides of it (Durmishi, 2008). One view is that the Master Plan was requested with Towers, as we know that the city center is very expensive in terms of real estate property. As the Twin Towers were the first ones and they were built just in front of Prime Ministry Building. So based on this idea, if you build in front of the highest executive governmental building, logically it must be much more easy to built somewhere that is away from it, even it might be the city center, which also ironically is the “O” point of the city and its architectural identity.

At last Twin Towers evaluated from “Place Identity” and “Genius Loci” concept violate the identity of the Main Boulevard of Tirana not only by breaking visual, emotional and also physical setting, but also by threading the distinctiveness, sameness and the relationship between the consisting elements of this urban and architectural ensemble.

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