

Urbanization of Suburban Areas in Tirana city

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ABSTRACT

Tirana is a city which keeps growing mostly in a natural way. The unexpected growing rhythm that followed the political changes of the early '90es has not yet produced enough administrative and planning awareness and capacity.

Planning in a large urban scale in order to predict a regular growth has already become a formality. On the other hand, legalization policies, have transformed informal building activity in a very common mean of negotiation between private actors and public administration.

In a way or another, Tirana is a self-made city which has invented its own rules of growing and existing. Although planning is a very potential mean of urban development, the main way Tirana has experienced the recent growth is far from planned and too near to accidental.

Informality on one hand and legalization policies on the other have smoothened the border line between urban space and rural ones. The urban space within the city seems to grow as a result of a continuous process of "rural to urban" transformation.

KEYWORDS: self-made city, urbanization, rural, aggregation, road net, urban tissue, services, land use.

1 INTRODUCTION

This paper tends to describe some of the developmental characteristics of suburban areas alongside Tirana city borders. Mainly spontaneous and accidental, those characteristics affect the quality of nearby urban areas, and in a wider point of view that of the whole city.

On the other hand, a close observation of the way the suburb exists and grows may result a very educating process through which one has a lot to learn. Being spontaneous not always means being wrong.

The environmental and human factors that generate the procreation and further existence of developing suburban areas are described as **variables** in this paper.

The term **aggregation** will be used in this paper to describe the process of attachment of new living areas alongside the city border. The fact that these areas, in their initial form, show different characteristics from consolidated urban areas nearby, allows us to consider the urbanization process as a qualitative and transforming process more than a quantitative thus growing one.

The content and the variables will change during the **aggregation** process, and this is how the stages of **urbanization** will be described in the following paragraphs.

It is important to consider the issues in this paper as an invitation for an open discussion.

2 CONTENT

2.1 Background

Nearly 20 years ago the first signals of the coming urban growth consisted in two main directions:

1. Spontaneous suburb installations of individual houses, (Figure 1)
2. Intensification of the inner parts of the city, (Figure 2)

While in the first case the constructions are made without permission to build and often in an unclear status of land property, in the second case the permission to build is almost always consented and the land is of a reliable origin.



Figure 1

There was a concentration of legal construction activity in the inner parts of the city at this period.

The pre-existing infrastructure and the renewed market value of the land inside the city borders were very motivating from a financial point of view. That and other had as a consequence a continuous intensification of urban areas mostly near the centre of the city.

It is important to mention that the quality of pre-existing urban tissue, strongly determined the level of the intensification and the final results of the interventions.

The concentration of the legal construction activity in the inner parts of the city also led to a growing attention toward regulations on how to build inside the city.



Figure 2

Continuous changes and updates followed, regarding applications for permission to build and The Urban Regulations.

But none of them even tangentially dealt with the current urban extension. Operating in a consolidated urban contest never made present the need for models of urban expansion.

Even though lots of regulatory plans were proposed, most of them concerned the development of the central parts of the city.

Considered illegal, the suburb metamorphosis remained an “outdoor” phenomenon for a long period, long enough to allow its consolidation....

2.2 Stage 01

From a general point of view the urban expansion of Tirana city has as a main variable the **demographic growth** which on the other hand is based on lots of economic, social, political and psychological factors.

In a simple language, many families, family groups or social groups, decided to move away from their living areas, toward the capital of the country looking for a better life. Encouraged from unstable local policies, which change form and content from one legislation to another, this huge amount of human income and the energy it carries, couldn't but change in a definitive way the concept of the suburban life.

Yet, looking for a better life is a relative urge and as a consequence the relative expectation that it generates does not meet the best for an expanding capital city.

The urbanization (read population) of the suburbs and the continuous expansion of its boundaries because of the demographic growth experiences even today:

- Poor infrastructure
- Institutional insufficiency
- Poor aggregation with nearby urban areas (Figure 3)
- Etc

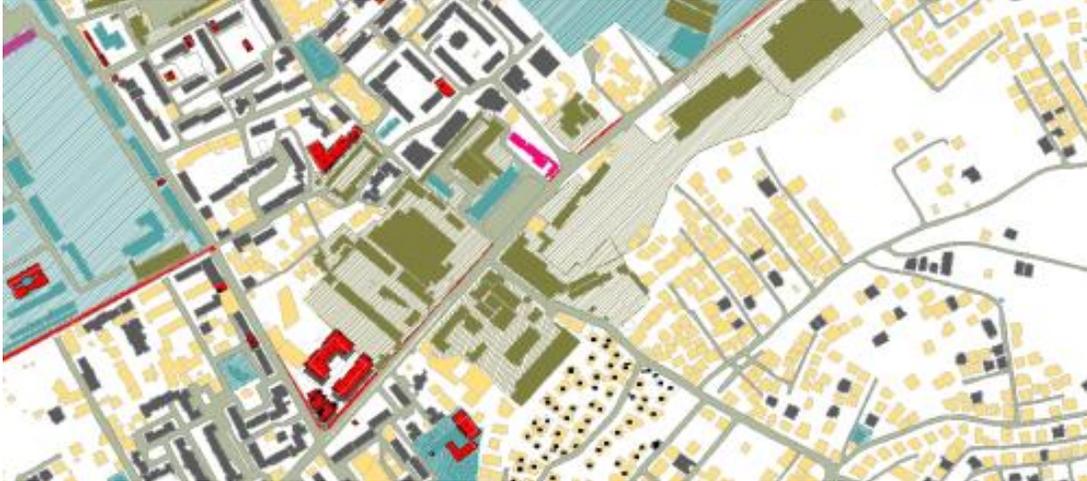


Figure 3

Migrating toward the city meant always leaving behind the rural environment but not the rural way of living. So a double approach is present in the way this spontaneous installations initiate their existence.

Some important **environmental variables** standing in the basis of suburb installations are:

- Vicinity to degraded or degradation industrial facilities (Figure 4)
- Agricultural land in an unclear status of property (Figure 5)
- Vicinity to main road axes
- Sufficient to minimal infrastructural net (electricity, potable water, sewage, etc)
- Etc



Figure 4

In order to understand the contribution of each variable in the process of aggregation (read urbanization), a detailed data elaboration is needed. But even in an early stage of observation it is obvious that the newly arrived inhabitants in the suburbs of Tirana city, in absence of any statistic data and relying only on sensorial perceptions, have generated an **agro urban life style** which deserves some considerations.



Figure 5

The expanded boundaries of Tirana city as we see them today are determined in a spontaneous way from a population which profits from urban facilities of nearby preexisting urban areas and at the same time conserves a very strong relationship with the land. This duality, apparently archaic, can be also considered a vital proposal toward a future green city.

2.3 Stage 02

The expansion process is followed by **gradual densification**.

The densification itself is followed by the process of aggregation which has happened and is still happening in different ways. In figure 6, it is easy to note the division line between preexisting and newly born urban areas.



Figure 6

The demographic growth or better the **demographic pressure** on one hand has forced the local governance to provide educational services like schools and kindergartens for lots of areas even though not yet institutionalized ones. It is not the same when it comes to health service because it is offered under administrative units and creating new ones is of high cost from an administrative point of view.

Electoral campaigns on the other hand have contributed on instant legalization practices. Lots of roads, energy appliances, pipelines and other infrastructure is provided in change of political support. In both cases speculations are performed during the implementation of improvised laws and recommendations in order to fulfill the emergent need for mediatic popularity.

But with no developmental strategy (still missing for unknown reasons) these interventions often result partial, insufficient and unreliable.

2.4 Stage 03

If by urban equipment (read urbanization) we simply mean instant legalization, services and infrastructure, than we can say that big part of the suburb is already urbanized in a moderate level. But, in a free market oriented society (which we pretend we are) this almost idyllic status cannot be but transitory.

What follows is high urbanization, which high apart, closely and carefully observed is also catastrophic.

The two stages of urbanization described above are based on spontaneous pragmatism.

The first stage is a **demographic one** and is encouraged from a weak to absent local governance. Speculative and unpredictable this stage somehow ends up at the edge of the city.

The second one starts at this very edge as an **infrastructural promise** (read electoral promise). Because of lack of vision and strategy, the infrastructural growth taking place in this stage, is insufficient and unreliable.

What follows can't but carry the above characteristics.

Just like 20 years ago when the growth started out as intensification of the inner parts of the city, consuming all preexisting infrastructural potentials, the actual urbanization of the suburbs is following the same steps. The repetitive lack of institutional responsibility once again determines the process of aggregation in this further stage.

It is necessary to point out a **critic difference** between these two moments. 20 years ago the intensification took place within a **consolidated urban implant**, which determined in different levels the type of intervention. Now days, the intensification is happening in a contest of **missing urban content, poor infrastructure and insufficient administrative cover.** (Figure 7)



Figure 7

Residential blocs contradicting any urban condition, insufficient roads, poor access and services, missing green area, etc. are what the modern suburbs of Tirana city offer today.

The institutional irresponsibility has encouraged professional irresponsibility among actors of the constructing sector. Often the final product this sector offers is built areas instead of qualitative living spaces.

3 CONCLUSION

The variables that contribute the growth and expansion of Tirana city are related to the recent demographic changes. These changes are strongly encouraged from environmental factors in one hand and local policies on the other one.

The repetitive institutional absence and lack of vision has contributed on installing a strong neglecting attitude among all interested actors. Citizens are often advised to build without permission and follow the practice of legalisation because that way they simply save time and money. Because of that planers and constructors are forced to work in a suspicious environment where legacy is almost utopia.

Planning in an urban scale meanwhile the informality is the first step toward instant legacy has already become a mere formality, a homage to the institutions and a faint recall of what it could have been.

Instead, strengthening the local administration in order to have a better territorial control, can be an option to consider. **Planning against legalization can reduce the incidence of urban distortion that is transforming the suburb into a giant ghetto.**

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