

Urban Preservation of Durres city, case study: “Liria” square

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ABSTRACT

Located in the central western part of Albania, Durres is one of the most important cities in country. The footprint of historical changes has given a sense of unicity and authenticity to this city, although facing some issues regarding identity. This study will be focused on one of the most interesting and representative elements of the city: the “Liria” central square, an urban space surrounded by administrative, religious, commercial and residential units. The last year’s regeneration of this square arose polemics and debate regarding local identity and urban preservation strategies.

This study aims to make a description of the surrounding historical buildings and their impact in urban scale of “Liria” square, by a diachronic analysis of changes through years. The first paragraphs name and illustrate urban plans of Durres city since the early 20th century to nowadays. Ongoing, a general picture of “Liria” square as the heart of the city is made by describing historical changes of the square itself until the revitalization plan of last year. This diachronic analysis is followed by a historical analysis of the surrounding buildings, interpreting their authentic values which, got together, epitomize the unicity of place. At the end, urban regeneration, preservation or conservation of city centers, are some of the terms we deal with to understand the most appropriate way to deal with such spaces. Many strategies should be taken into account so that the intervention process could not deteriorate the spirit of a place.

We found that some of these strategies were put to use in the revitalization of “Liria” square. However, this intervention was followed with debates caused by not preservation of some historical representative elements.

In conclusion, we outline the importance of preservation of archeological, architectural, social, historical and cultural values not only of “Liria” square, but of all historical and monumental buildings in Albania. This process should be done keeping in consideration varieties of object stratification and combine careful development strategies.

Keywords: *central square, place, space, urban regeneration, local identity.*

INTRODUCTION

Being the second important city of Albanian country, Durres have been in the center of attention from many authors and entities. His port is considered one of the oldest ports in Europe and a crucial point of entrance in Balkan Peninsula. Since the ancient times, Durres has been seen as an important door through which could be conducted economic collaborations. Several invasions through have left their footprint in urban structure of the city. What we inherit today is an irregular urban system, due to Durres position near the coastline.

“LIRIA” SQUARE – THE HEART OF THE CITY

One of the most representative urban element of Durres city is “Liria” central square. This study aims to make a brief description and analyses of space in terms of urban scale. As a result, can be drawn some conclusions and suggestions of urban conservation of important urban historical elements and how to combine contemporaneous development with protection in historical context.

As described by various authors [1], Durres city can be entered through two gates: Yali Gate (located in the southwest part near the byzantine walls and Commercial road and Customs) and Grande Gate (located in the north part, opened to outside bazaar).

The “Liria” square is located in the center of the city; it is the crossing point of three important roads Goga, Tabaku and Stalin, which connect with Porto Romano (in northwest), at north to outside bazaar, at north east to the hills of Arapaj (Egnatia road which connects Durres to Tirana by passing through the swampy area). Names of the three above mentioned roads were changed during Italian invasion. Plan of 1942, named them as B. Mussolini, Iacomoni and Emanuel Victor II (Egnatia road).

At the south part of the city was reconstructed the Port of Durres from Italians (1928-1934), which played an important role strengthening the city’s regional position. Through years, even during ottoman invasion, Port of Durres was not in good working conditions. The reconstruction solved a huge functional problem in terms of the city and country.

At 1940, most of byzantine walls were demolished, Grande gate was no longer existent. “Liria” square still was one of the most important area of city, representing its center. This is due not only to the crucifixion of the most important roads inside Durres city, representing the central urban node, but also because of the location of the most important contemporaneous, modern and historic buildings. The square is formed as the vast area created by the Mosque (built in 1931, reconstructed in 1993), the Municipality, Palace of Culture and Prefecture (built at the end of communist regime). The square further continues with the Amphitheatre which can be entered through south west past by wide stairs that go up towards the hill, The Clock Tower remains adjacent to the Municipality (built in 1929), Byzantine Forum (from VI century) behind Palace of Culture (built in 1963). At the other side of the square continues Commercial Street which ends with Old Hamam, Venetian Tower and old city walls. As we can see from the above description, “Liria” square has been the center of all this cultural heritage buildings of the ancient city and the crucifying of the most important roads. Therefore, it can be considered as “the heart” of Durres city, from which emerge its authentically character (Fig 1, 2).

The analysis of city center in urban context will be done using qualitative methods. Desk research will be focused on books, documents, scientific periodic, articles, magazines, online portals that have already analyzed Durres and its structure. Different projects done through years will help to create a full view of city center authenticity. “Liria” square, proposed as case study for this paper, is one of the most representative urban elements of city. It summarizes future and past developments and the stratification of historical changes through years. Through the analyzing of architectural and urban plans since Italian invasion until nowadays, can be identified strategies to protect historical context under contemporaneous changes.

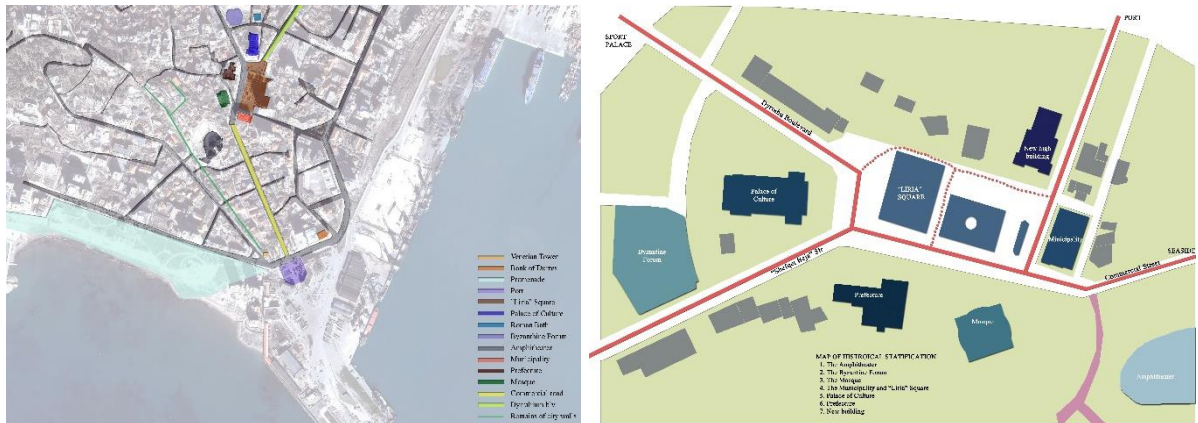


Fig 1: Location of all important formulate elements in the city of Durres.
 Fig 2: Map of Historical Stratification at “Liria” Square before revitalization (made by author).

DIACHRONIC ANALYSIS

There can be identified three important periods which have played a vital role for Durres city. The first is the Italian period (1939-1943), the second one is the communist regime (194-1990) and the third one it the post socialist area (from 1990 – nowadays) (Fig 3).

The regular shape and being the junction of three major roads gave “Liria” square an important role and it was usually the case with all medieval cities which were organized around the religious buildings [2].

The Regulatory Plan of Durres of 1942 tried to give the city some contemporaneous taste. Two important roads like cardo-decumano clipped at the city center which had a very regular shape [4]. City center is created by “Y” road axis according to Italian matrix (Fig 4-6). “Liria” square was conserved with its actual historical buildings but also proposed new buildings construction, which did actually change the harmony of the square.

After the 1926 earthquake there was a boom of new streets and buildings that changed the Ottoman structure according to the past urban rules and to a plan of streets forming urban blocks that ignore the previous geometries and town layout [12]. In the surrounding of the square, attentively analyzed by the town planning through some projects of open space setting and architectural definition of the main buildings such as the Mosque, an arcade around the Western side of the square, the post office, the seat of the Stock Exchange, never carried out, rise the first collective structures that will characterize the new square as a central place of the city [12].



Fig 3: Master Plan of Durres 1942, 1957, 1987, 2002, 2005.

It was suggested the construction of 2 new buildings – at Nord the Stock market building, at south the Party Federation. Along the other sides are proposed Postal Office building, a hotel, bank buildings, insurance building, office buildings, hanging gardens and site before Mosque. At the urban scale was suggested the elevation of Municipal building and use of porticos as linkage element. All these buildings should be distant enough so not to obstruct the view of entrance to the city by the sea, to leave enough space for greenery and to expose a regular image towards the sea [4]. At the center of Municipal Square was located Skanderbeg statue. Plan of 1942 marks the starting of modern era for Durres, making important steps regarding urban and

building requalification. The Architects did read the territory and proposed a new approach for historical preservation context.

The “Commercial Street” played an important role in city’s center. It was defined since 1928 and begun from “Liria” square to the south east part at the gate of the harbor. The facades of the buildings to the square reflect rationalist Italian style of the time. The religious building remains an urban focus even for the “Commercial Street” which, at the end of its perspective, used the Mosque as an architectonic sign: A baroque concept of an open city to be seen in Durres urban texture [2].

At this time, Italian architects took measures for the restoration of historic assets damaged by the earthquake of 1926. Part of this was the Municipality building, which was plastered and painted. All restoration work was done to conserve and point out authentic historic, architectonic and urban context.

The post socialist area (from 1990–nowadays) reflects a turbulent because of uncontrolled urban movement, democratic development, loss of public funds etc. This brought to deterioration of the most important historical structures. “Liria” square was victim of this new era changes. Unfortunately, it comes today with an incomplete view that does not correspond to present developments. Hence, many discussions have been emerged on how to retrieve historical, architectural and urban values from this very important site (Fig 7).

Many documents, plans and analysis have been done through years regarding Durres city and its center. We may take in consideration the Master Plan from DAU and Pescara University (1995), Master Plan for the Port of Durres (2000), Old Durres Town Master Plan (2007) prepared by Albanian – Italian cooperation, Strategic Project on western Waterfront; Strategic project on the south dock tourist port (yacht port); Strategic project on Byzantine walls and on King Zog Palace; Strategic project on Epidamos urban axis; Strategic project on the Railway Station; Urban Master Plan of Durres city (2010), Master Plan of “Liria” square (2008-2009) by Arch Michele Crò (Fig 8).

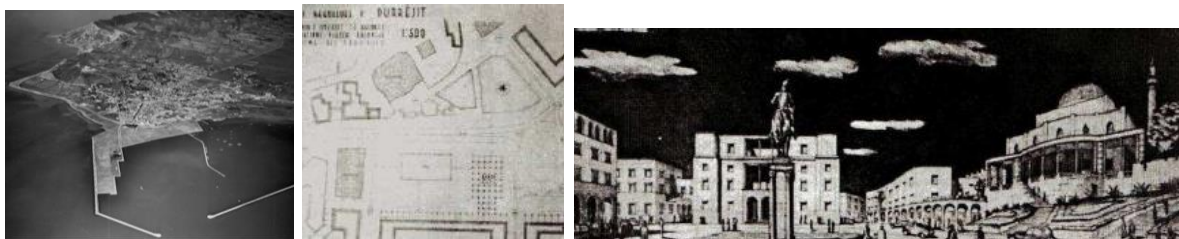


Fig 4: Old Durres city [12], p. 14.

Fig 5, 6: Regulatory city plan 1942, Municipal Square perspective [3], p. 76.



Fig 7: “Liria” Square Durres at communist period [34].

Fig 8: Project of revitalization of Liria Square Durres Master Plan 2015 [29].

The aim of the approved Master Plan of city center is to revitalize its urban structure. Through this plan, Durres manifests its vital spirit by highlighting the image of a city filled with historical values. It suggests a sustainable way to combine contemporaneous developments with

protection of historical context through redevelopment and recuperation of historical heritage. Nowadays the site has faced difficulties with traffic and transportation issues. Therefore, pedestrian paths have been crucified and interrupted by increased number of private transport use. Hence, this Master Plan proposes new pedestrian and bicycle pathways, more greenery and places to relax. From the urban view, the reconstruction of the site points out its importance as the heart of the city or an urban pole. Furthermore, are applied some of proposals from plan of 1942, as porticoes of the eastern side of the square, resetting of road system and the possibility of new tourist facilities (General Technical Illustrative Report, 2009). From the architectonic point of view, this project creates homogeneous character to the site and its central importance, by giving priority to pedestrians and creating ideal itinerary created through time collected from archaeological remains.

ANALYSIS OF THE ELEMENTS OF “LIRIA” SQUARE

The objects listed above carry out particular historical, architectural and social values. Through time they have coexisted at the same area, imposing their own identity as well as contributing to create “the spirit of the site”. Moreover, the square represents inevitably a space of functional and symbolic representation of a multicultural and multi-religious society in which there are traces of a rich and complex past and present that is an expression of a various and well-organized community both in life styles and in individual and collective behaviors [12]. Hence it seemed reasonable to make a brief analysis of their distinctive elements, so to create a general idea the importance of protection of these values.

The Amphitheater is located in the western part of Central Square, reachable through pedestrian stairs along the hill of Durres to ancient Walls. It is one of the larger and better preserved amphitheatres of the Roman world, as well as one of the eastern-most examples of the amphitheater form [20]. Nonetheless, it is not for its Roman architecture that the building is best known, but its later Christian decoration, specifically, a series of mosaics which adorn the walls of a small chapel inserted into the amphitheater’s Roman fabric [20].

The Byzantine Forum is located behind the Palace of Culture, created at V century, known through Durres citizens as Rotonda [21]. It is part of archeological site of Durres center.

The Mosque, was designed by the architect Valcov and sponsored by Ymer Lushakaj. Its construction began in 1931 and was inaugurated in 1938 [17]. During the communist period, in 1973, the Mosque was converted to monument of culture (Fig 9). In 1979, due to an earthquake, the Mosque was unfortunately destroyed. After the fall of communist regime, in 1993, it was reconstructed as a Mosque. From the architectural point of view, it has European style, differently from other Albanian mosques which have Turkish style [17]. This because the architect was influenced by the Italian style of the time. The main volume of the building stands for simplicity and the harmony of composition. The Mosque nowadays is covered by white marble and the prelude is formed by columns and pillars. In the urban scale, it dominates the upper part of the Central Square, being inclined to the original rectangular border of the square.

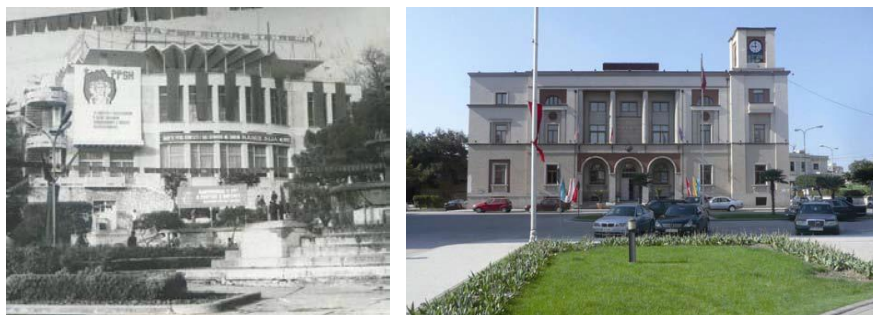


Fig 9: The Mosque converted in Cultural Center during communist period [12], p. 20.

Fig 10: The Municipality of Durres [12], p. 9.

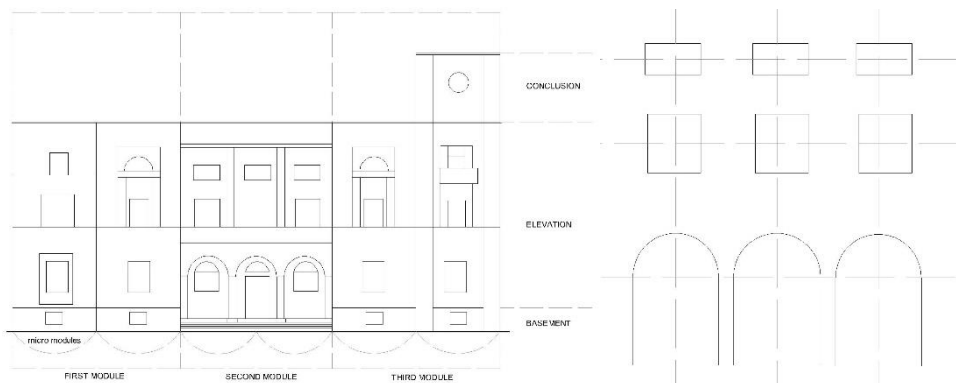


Fig 11: The Municipality of Durres façade and repetitive scheme (by the author).

The Municipality of Durres, located at the southern part of “Liria” square, was constructed in 1929 and reconstructed after the earthquake of 1926 [2]. It has three stores under ground and three stores over ground (Fig 10). The last reconstruction was done in 2005 to which was plastered the façade and keeping in mind its conservation. The architectural style which inspired the construction of buildings during 1930-1940 was affected by the rational Mediterranean style, the south Italian and Greek islands style and the Modern Italian style [4]. All these were brought together in one building, creating a uniform volume, tending to implement the fascist ideology to evaluate the language of the public space, the urban scene and architectural design [4].

The building is composed by a rectangular volume with three arches porch, a double height open arcade and a little clock tower on the angle iron towards “Commercial” street [12]. The façade is characterized by three vertical volumes where the first and the third are symmetrical to each other. These façade parts have simple volumes, rectangular windows, diminishing in progression from the first floor to the third. The only difference is the Clock Tower at the right part. The central volume has the monumental entrance with three arches at the first floor and another rectangular volume divided in three parts by Doric pilasters at the second floor (Fig 11). Repetitive arches and nude walls are characteristics of neoclassic Albanian architecture [4].

The Palace of Culture named “Aleksander Moisiu” after the great Durres actor. It is located in the northern part of the square and predicted since the plan of 1945 by Leone Carmignani [12]. The Palace of Culture was designed by Valentina Pistoli, Albanian architect from Korça, and built in 1963 during the communist period. Hence, it represents the rationalist spirit of the time, with proportionate volumes incorporated in a rectangular compact building with the element of windows and doors repetition (Fig 13). The façade presents a porch that starts from a monumental staircase and becomes a double-height open arcade with glass walls. It was reconstructed at the same time with the Municipality building, in 2005 (Fig 15).

The Prefecture a big edifice in a rationalist style that at the end of the eighties will replace the wide public garden which was in a position of slight slope between the Mosque and the area occupied in those years by the new Palace of Culture. It was built at the end of communist regime and restructured on 2005, pointing out the repetition of rectangular windows in all floors (rationalist architecture) and adding new elements like the brie-soleil (Fig 14, 16). These building interventions characterize the surrounding of the square through the location of big and functional containers commonly used and consistent with the function and the symbolic and representative meaning of the main public space of the town [12].

New modern building (Fig 12) was built during this decade at the south-east part of “Liria” Square, opposed to the Municipality. This tower of 12 floors, stands speculatively in this area, being not in harmony with other historical buildings. Its function is for residential and office services, offering totally different functions from the actual administrative, cultural and social

one at the square. It represents some contemporary architectural ideas, nevertheless it seems like an invader to this historical central city square.



Fig 12: New building tower near the municipality. Source: Google map.

Fig 13: Palace of Culture Durres [12], p. 28.

Fig 14: Prefecture of Durres after reconstruction [35].

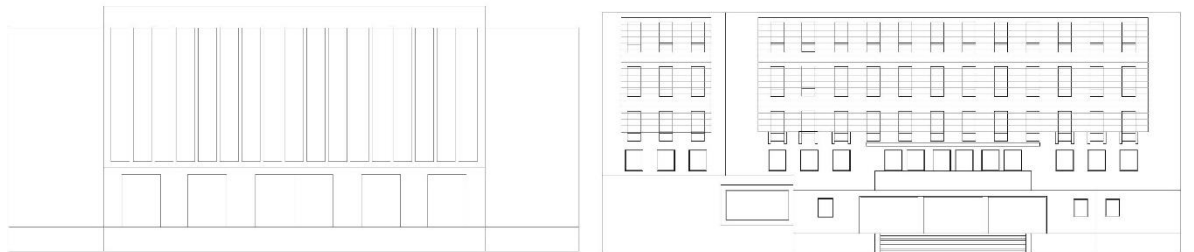


Fig 15: Palace of Culture Durres (by the author).

Fig 16: Prefecture of Durres (by the author).

PRESERVATION STRATEGIES

The stratification of historical, urban and archaeological assets in “Liria” square has brought nowadays a complex central area filled with memories. The more successful intervention should take in consideration preservation strategies based on national and international charters (as the charter of Athens - 1931, the Italian charter of Restoration - 1932, the Venice charter - 1964, the Restauration charter - 1972, Washington charter – 1987, the Valletta charter – 1992, European Urban Charter - 1992 and the Albanian charter of Restoration - 2007) and documents (recommendations on the Protection of Historical and Traditional Entities and their role in the modern life, the Resolution "Problems of protection and modern use of architectural monuments, and several UN conferences).

The protection of urban tissue of city square should take in consideration the following arguments: the way city works as physical and functional entities, our experience and perception for the city and how cities work as economic systems [15]. The square should provide contemporaneous facilities with unique elements and the design should evidence the distinctive shapers of the space (make the difference between the place and space). Instruments used in urban regeneration should include the analysis of history, architecture, archaeology, social, economic and environment changes of the site. Potentials and effects of interventions should respect the unique spirit of the place. “Liria” square as the most representative site of Durres contains authentic values of this city and its inhabitants. *“Spirit of place is created through history in a particular place of a town or city and requires an individual method of approach in conservation activities. So the spirit of place can be formed by relations of urban context, the historical developments through years and human experiences. Place is formed through time by its unique character and is the base of building and its users”* [9]. Hidden values can be brought to light by proper interpretation of social, cultural, physical, functional and spiritual characteristics of a site marked through years and will reflect their impact in the future. Genius Loci, the spirit of place, is represented in this case by place-making elements as

historical buildings constructed through time most of them from 1930 by the Italian architects, three important road axes which connected city center to different areas of the city, the proximity to seaside, the port and other archeological sites.

Urban archeology is another term that could be relevant in the case of “Liria” square. *“Urban archaeology is considered as an interdisciplinary field of study that evaluate the cultural stratification in cities and understand the historical background of urban life”* [10]. Contemporaneous developments could be combined with historical context by correlating urban conservation analysis with architectural and urban design and urban morphology analysis. Urban conservation methodology makes the identification and conservation of historic urban contexts. It includes documentation, analysis and evaluation of data related to socio-cultural, economic, administrative, historical and physical aspects of urban contexts and the making of correct decisions for their conservation [9].

Some of the above urban context strategies have already been taken in consideration by Master Plan of the city center. Revitalization of Public Square by creating more public spaces and green areas can help to read better urban structure and to reassess historical, cultural, archeological and environmental values. This means not only the restoration of the site but also the way it is connected with other important nodes like old walls, the port, the seaside, the commercial road, Zogu’s villa, the amphitheater, the archeological remains after the Palace of Culture and connection to new areas of city expansion. Furthermore, this plan has provided strategies in term of urban circulation like new pedestrian and bicycle paths, new roadways and the idea of a city center that could be more used by pedestrians than by motorized vehicles. At the end the plan provides suggestions for new commercial and touristic services.

Another important generative factor that cannot be left without mentioning is the interpretation and perception of Durres inhabitants for this area which have been part of their life for more than three generations. Conservative strategies could be used in case of significant heritage elements to keep alive the memory of the place. Related to the above discussion, during the restoration of the square was held a debate regarding the old fountain which was located in the city center. It has been part of this square for more than a half century and so on part of Durres inhabitant’s memory. The new Master Plan of “Liria” square proposed its removal and eventually was shifted near to the monument of Hafiz Ali Podgorica (which was the first Mayor of the Municipality of Durres), on the side of Municipality. This has led discussions through professionals and protests by local residents. This fountain together with the surrounding buildings manifest the spirit of “Liria” square. Hence, by moving this important element (even though it was not part of Cultural Monuments) the central square lost the identity raised in memory of Durres citizens for about 85 years. However, the new masterplan proposed a new fountain, with a modern view and it seems that was largely accepted by the inhabitants.

In general, the renovation of “Liria” square was a process of creating a distinct view of city’s center. The idea of a square at the same level of most important administrative buildings, has minimized the sense of superiority to which they were created and have generated integral paths through the site. Opened spaces are mostly organized in function of possible social and cultural organizations in the area, hence there is few greeneries mostly by high palms. Although it is the neuralgic point of archaeology, history, architecture and culture, the site has lost its identity and embraced a new one. It is up to time to see how this transformation would interfere on inhabitant’s perceptions in respect of authenticity and identity.

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