

Spatial and Morphological Potentials of Urban Informality: “Shallvaret” Block

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ABSTRACT

To understand urban developments in a city or region, the informality has been and is always an issue of outlining. Albania has more than two decades that is dealing with informality. It is now part of the city, and the citizens cannot escape from this reality. Different stakeholders like real estate developers, urban planners or residents are engaged in exploring the meaning of this informality for the city's future. In this context, by pointing in one of the buildings that are considered a landmark for years in the city, this research aims to study the informality of “Shallvaret Block” by analyzing spatial and morphological interventions in these apartment blocks. The informality impacts on the visual layout the existing housing blocks and consequently on the urban morphology. This paper examines the potential of informality by using the methods of “zoning” and “overlapping” comparing the existing situation with the originally designed building. The findings reveal that interventions in the façade are proportional, and the users are aware of the architectural qualities. Further, the program interventions are unidimensional, often focusing on physical improvements. While these leads to improved housing conditions on one side, it opens discussion on the informality's spatial potentials.

Keywords: Urban informality, intervention, spatial quality, Tirana

INTRODUCTION

The central and Eastern European cities that were under the socialist rule, due to the étatist policies and practices of space production had a deep impact on the cities. The transition from communism to democracy in some of them was lived normally, but in some others, it happened very drastically. Even though there are some differences in the transition period from country to country, what can be said is that the “post-socialist transition may have a significant number of unique characteristics” depending on the country and “undoubtedly no one can support the fact of being the only transition of the moment” [1] and the time being.

These tremendous, spectacular, and chaotic changes that the post-socialist transition period draw researchers' interest, especially on the spatial change and urban reconstruction.

A more detailed observation to the post-socialist cities, would provide a better understanding of the changes that took place in the transition period. For example, Ludek Syroka witnessed post-socialist Prague for the “re-emergence of some pre-socialist pattern, transformation in some areas from socialist times and creation of new post-socialist landscapes.” This city's characteristic post-socialist development is claimed to be “accelerated concentration of advanced functions through commercialization and densification of the city centre” [2]. A change in functions such as changing the residences' function to offices, developing multipurpose business centers, and facilities that serve to tourism like restaurants and hotels are subject characterizing the post-socialist cities. Residential spaces of post-socialist Sofia have been subject to some

consequences of the transition period, such as “the loss of compact urban form inherited from the socialism and the growth of a lower–density suburban periphery.” [3]. Sofia was experiencing the suburbanization process, which was a process that emerged in other countries too. Budapest, for example, experienced the same transformations as a consequence of commercialization [4]. The built environment of the newly formed capitalist cities (as in Sofia example) “organization of open spaces” is needed for the simple fact that the transformation period brought a “loss of public green spaces and their fragmentation into explicitly private enclosures” [3]. Tirana city is another example of this phenomenon. It is still suffering from the loss of public green areas. During the transition period, open spaces, boulevards, city parks, green spaces, and public plazas were occupied by kiosks of all sorts, losing their original character due to the lack of control and construction policy of the public sector [5].

For example, Aliaj, Lulo, and Myftiu [6] state generally the urban post-socialist Tirana transformations as follows:

What characterizes Tirana in the post-socialist time is an extreme degradation in the quality of urban environments and the occupation of lands by illegal developments, a process that is accompanied by serious harms to the environment.

Thus, this period is associated with the population’s indignation towards the public property and the “public” in general, manifested in various forms of occupation and intervention. This resulted in a conflict between the formal and informal.

This research focuses on the unexplored potentials of urban informality. It does not deal with the negative aspects that these huge interventions exhibit, but in a morphological and visual analysis between the originally designed housing block and informal interventions added in the post-socialist period.

By taking the case study of the “Shallvaret” block in Tirana, we aim to discuss the morphological changes and the informal additions' architectural potentials.

URBAN INFORMALITY

“Urban Informality” describes the intervention done to the existing buildings or erection of new objects in violation of urban government rules. It is mainly an action present in cases where the city cannot withstand the influx of people who chose to live in that city. The line between “formal” and “informal” is determined by the legislation of the country. It depends on the problems with which each country is faced. The United Nations has tried to set international standards, but their application in many cases has been ignored, making these standards not applicable in different contexts.

According to Dovey & King [7], these interventions are socially, spatially, and economically integrated with the urban context. Most developing cities are unsuitable without these informal interventions. In contrast, the general desire that exists in removing these interventions is related to the problems it causes in urban identity and image. Kucina [8] defines them as unpredicted changes of architectural and urban organisms. This situation makes the context spontaneous and continuously evolving, never being static and clearly defined. This always-evolving condition has a positive and negative aspect. The descriptions of informal urban interventions usually focus on the negative aspects because they change the urban relations unpredictably. On the other hand, it is important to study their spatial and morphological potentials to look for positive elements.

Huchzermeyer [9] insists that informal settlements should be studied in continuous practice since these structures are perpetually changing. Thus, understanding and learning from this process would give feedback on the need to understand urban informality.

According to Hakim [10], forms of urban informality appear and adapt to time through change-generating processes. These generative processes address the actions that need to be taken for changes depending on the needs rather than the results visualized in some drawings, detailed plans. Whereas for

Lapping [11], informal interventions can be considered "modern vernacular environments" as long as they are simultaneously spontaneous and continuously increasing.

Based on the context and needs, informal urban interventions are very flexible. The perplexing situation between formal and informal architecture forms in such city areas creates a sustainable interconnection process making the communities living in these buildings more sensitive to the problems they all have as a community.

FORMS OF INFORMALITY

Studied from morphological, spatial, and visual aspects, informality is categorized into different typologies.

Pojani [12] suggests several categories for informality based on a conceptual framework, including settlements, dwellings, inhabitants, and processes. Also, for each of the four primary categories, other specific divisions are proposed. Accordingly, settlements are split corresponding to location and size, distribution and density, land use, public spaces, image, and identity.

But dwellings are studied in relation to materials and technology, likewise, in relation to architecture and symbolism. The connection with architecture and symbolism is seen in these informal constructions' tendency to take traditional architecture or visible, influential buildings.

According to Dovey [7], there are three main processes of how these interventions take place:

The first is called "settling," construction in a not well-defined territory (unoccupied land). The other form is called "inserting," constructions in uninhabited or abandoned areas of the city. The third includes "attaching" informal constructions in the formal structures of the city.

In almost all countries, the forms of informality are similar. Though they are similar in categorizing interventions, they also show different characteristics from one country to another, making the issue more complex. Economy, social components, historical and legal conditions are among influential elements that affect the interventions.

INFORMALITY IN "SHALLVARET" BLOCK IN TIRANA

The division that UNECE [13] does upon the typologies of informality suits also for Albania. It differs from the socio-economic and historical context. In Albania, in addition to other specifics, based on the construction materials used, urban informality is better than in many countries on which the studies are based.

In the case of "Shallvaret," the interventions are introduced in the "attachments" (attaching and adherence) as informal interventions on an existing formal structure and where the existing structure serves as an armature for the overlapping informal construction. Elements of the "behind the scenes" also appear with most informal interventions taking place behind the "Shallvaret" block's formal structures.

Based on the division made by UNECE [13], informal interventions in the "Shallvaret" Block belong to the first category where residents have had permits on the original property and have made unauthorized changes to the same property. The changes are structural, which includes the lateral extension of apartments or the addition of floors. These changes directly affect the morphology and spatial configuration of the block.

Regarding the division made by Pojani, [12] who includes the connection of the architecture of these interventions with the symbolic one, the urban informality of the "Shallvaret" is seen as a tendency to respect some of the existing ratios of the formal building on the visible side of the facade from the street. The symbolism of the inside of the block reflects the whole architecture in our country during these years, creating a "model" in itself in which elements of the vernacular architecture of the country can be found.

Table 1: Types of Informal Settlements in the Western Balkans [13]

Legal title to land and property – unauthorized adaptations	<p>a) Minor adaptations to existing structures without building permission (e.g., closing balconies, the addition of one to two rooms in an existing attic). Turning existing premises into living areas (e.g., turning garages into living areas, turning basements into living areas); turning former common spaces (e.g., laundry rooms) into living areas, without a building permit.</p> <p>b) Structural changes to existing buildings, e.g., lateral extensions of apartments in multi-family buildings and floors on existing multi-family buildings.</p>
Legal title to land - unauthorized construction	<p>a) Construction on own land following the existing plans and regulations but without an actual permit (in cases where a detailed master plan exists).</p> <p>b) Construction without a permit on own land over existing plans.</p> <p>c) Construction with a permit on own land, but unauthorized changes to approved plans, building more than officially approved permit (e.g., building a multi-story building instead of the approved family home).</p>
Legal land title – unauthorized subdivisions and unauthorized construction.	<p>a) Legal title to land, but the illegal change of land use (e.g., agricultural land used for residential buildings) involving illegal subdivisions of land (and the selling thereof to a different owner). Housing was built without building permission.</p> <p>b) Public land or rural land subdivided and given (or sold at market price) by the local authority itself to im/migrants coming to the city, but without a change in the plans.</p> <p>c) Construction without a permit on land with unclear title to land (e.g., that resulted from an unclarified or unresolved process of land restitution).</p>
No legal title to land – unauthorized construction	<p>a) Illegal land occupation, housing without planning/building permission, not integrated into the broader urban system (relatively good living standards). b) Building in protected zones: national parks, natural reserves, coastal areas, protection areas (e.g., highways, industrial, flood barriers, etc.).</p>
No legal title to land – squatter settlements	<p>a) Unauthorized homes built by im/migrants settling in unserved areas.</p> <p>b) Unauthorized shacks made in un-served areas by the low- or no-income population (e.g., Roma population).</p>

SHALLVAREVE" BLOCK

The "Shallvaret" block is located near the city center at the intersection of "Ibrahim Rugova" street with "Gjergj Fishta" Boulevard (fig. 1). Built-in 1952, it is an example of apartment blocks built during the communist period. The regime itself put architecture and urban planning at the center of propaganda to restructure a socialist society.

Unlike other blocks identified by a rational architecture, in "Shallvaret," a neoclassical architecture was used in the facade's treatment. This was also influenced by the impact of bilateral relations with the Soviet Union. The block was designed with four floors, a constructive beam-column system, and constructive brick material. Further, it respects the urban network's outline defined by the existing roads (figure 1).

Through the morphological and spatial analysis of the building block in its initial designed condition with the changes that have taken place over the years, it can be better understood the occupants' needs and their input in the spatial organization of the dwellings. Through this temporal and layered arrangement, the spatial and morphological analysis of the block becomes valuable, making it possible to understand this urban informality's real potentials and the relations created with the existing formal building.



Figure 1. Location of the “Shallvaret” block [14]

Facade Analysis

Informality in the “Shllvaret” Block appears mainly as structure overlap over the existing building. It uses the latter as a base for developing the additions in the building (figure 4). To note the changes over the years and to find the quantity of these changes, we overlapped the current condition of the façade with the original, initial façade.

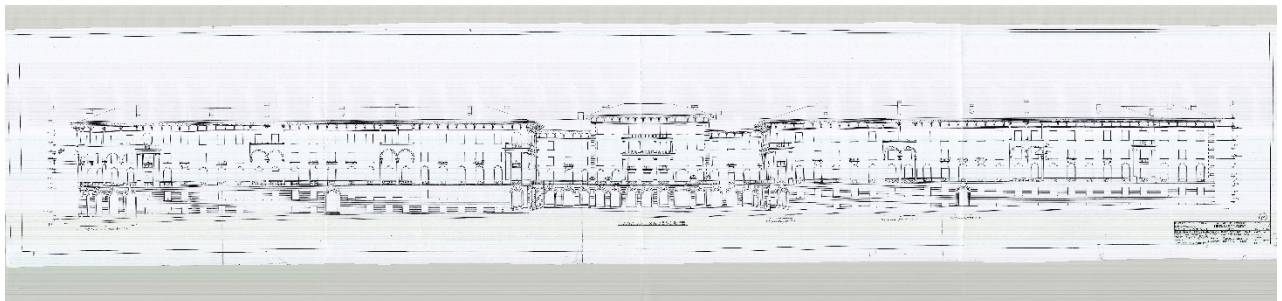


Figure 2. Main facade as designed initially [15]

Visually, the additions to the original building are in 1 to 3 ratios (Figure 3). Unlike similar interventions done in other countries, the informal portion has the general tendency to continue and preserve the openings and by treating so the façade compatible with the original design.



Figure 3. Interventions in the facade

Elements used in the original project disappeared with the years, but the materials are the same as initially constructed. By applying a simple solid-void analysis, it is possible to identify all the façade configurations. In the upper images, (Figure 3) the additions on the original building are marked with red color and voids (openings) with black.



Figure 4. The depiction of the façade elements drawn on the images retrieved from AQN (courtesy of the authors)

The uppermost floor has undergone a noticeable change, together with the roof. This floor does not respect the existing morphology of the building façade, but it does more obey the utility.



Figure 5. Ornamentation drawings, retrieved from AQN (courtesy of the authors)

The initial design was a 4-floor building with 3.3 m on each floor. Further, it also has one floor partially underground. The façade style is neo-classical with both Ionic and Corinthian elements. It also has a longitudinal ornamental badge that frames the cover (figure 4&5).

The roof of the building is made of a wooden structure. For the openings, a module with a width of 120 cm and a height of 170 cm was used. This module is repeated with a simple rhythm along the entire facade. The module of the openings changes only on the ground floor, where the height is 160 cm.

The entrance axis is central and at the same time serves as an axis of symmetry for the organization of the whole block. The entrance is evident as it is treated in the form of an arch. The central block, in contrast to the two side blocks, takes place on five floors.

The treatment of the façade on the ground floor also has a different composition. It is designed with successive arches that serve as passages to connect the blocks. The two floors in the façade are treated by rustication, provided by red brick usage [16].

The same cannot be said for the inner façade of the block. It is unrefined, and the decorating elements in the façade and the openings are missing. This kind of treatment of the façade only from the main streets is a typical approach of the communist regime to the residential architecture. The inner facade has remained the same in terms of refinement, even today (figure 6). However, it is the façade where the interventions

are more visible because they occur in the verticality and in the massive volumetric outputs that disrupt the facade's initial morphology.



Figure 6. Informal additions in the inner facade. (courtesy of the authors)

On the main façade, the informality is more controlled. The view from the two main roads tries to preserve the formal language which undergoes obvious changes only in verticality. While from the inside of the block, more significant interventions are out of context and do not respect the original design.



Figure 7. Program division and informal interventions. (courtesy of the authors)

Meanwhile, when we analyze the building's programmatic aspects, it is easily understood that the whole block is used for housing except the floors highlighted in blue that function as service areas. The service is concentrated on the lower floors. Still, the tendency is to continue to the other floors. There are already some interventions that the apartments have turned into businesses.

Figure 7 can be identified morphological changes and the ratio of intervention that is done through the years. The red color is the new addition, with the grey color missing from the initial design (the roof is missing now).

By fully defining the morphology of current informal interventions, it is possible to determine the tendency with which the shape of the block may change in the future. It helps to assist in a sustainable solution to similar problems.

Plan and Section Analysis

From the study of images obtained by the National Albanian archive, it is noticed that the plan of the block is organized according to a linear scheme, with a corridor in the center that serves to access the apartments on both sides. Thirteen sets of stairs access the block itself. A set of stairs serves four residential units. It moves from the quota - 1.65 to the quota ± 0.00 respectively with 11 step legs with dimensions 15x32 cm. In the main, centered object, the entrance is made through the existing colonnade.

The apartments are oriented only in one direction, depending on the block. They have a linear organization scheme with two rooms, one living room + kitchen, and one sanitary unit. The total area is 62 m². The section shows the height of the floors, which is 3.3m, and the staircase. There is evidence of the ratio of the informal-formal construction (Image 9).

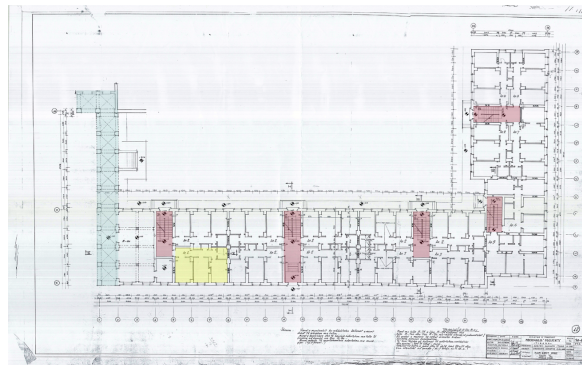


Figure 8. Plan from the Northern part, [15]

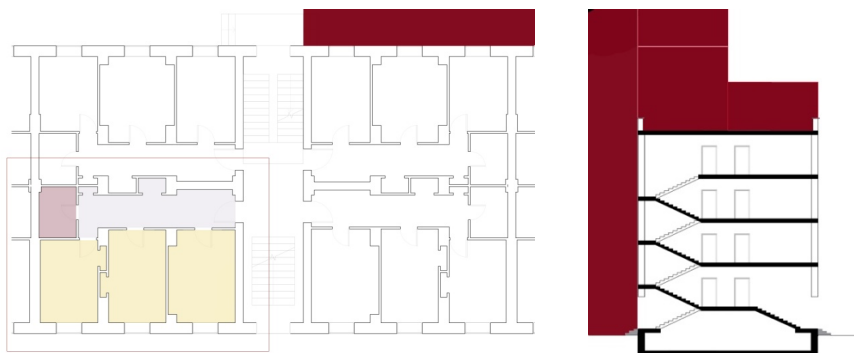


Figure 9. Plan of one apartment unit (on the left); Section (on the right). (Courtesy of the authors)

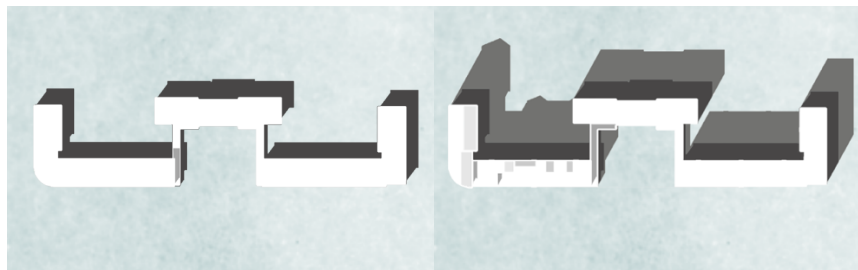


Figure 10. Shadow in the original block (on the left) and Shadow on the existing block (on the right)

Through the shade-shadow analysis made by the overlap of cast shadows, the impact has had additions concerning the existing building. The increase in the number of floors has also affected the urban scale's reconfiguration by changing the block's visual, morphological, and spatial perception—subsequent planning of the surrounding constructions (Image 10).

CONCLUSION

The study's purpose was to focus on the morphological and spatial analysis of urban informality in Albania and understand the characteristics of these interventions to be more predictable in future planning.

Compared with the other urban informalities, in the "Shallvaret" block, it is understood that urban informality appears in different forms and dimensions. Some informal processes and interventions shape not only the latest additions but also the initial design. The exiting line between formal and informal becomes more incomprehensible over time.

Further, through these spontaneous interventions, the whole block's spatial reconfiguration makes the urban situation never static, but always flexible and changing.

Informal interventions have caused a chain effect on the whole block because these informal additions have visually and spatially affected all the following constructions.

Based on the morphological and spatial analysis performed, it is identified that the interventions occur mostly from the inside of the block and show characteristics like the designed initially building.

Informal interventions that have taken place on the main façade, the one visible from the two main roads, are more reserved. The tendency is seen to preserve the existing form and spatial relations.

The changes that are part of the building's functional program are also reflected in the visual façade. This condition transforms the morphological ratios due to the need to adopt the spaces' new functions. In the future, the spaces' program may change again, so we advise that the façade configuration be done by thinking about the proportions and the other design elements of the existing building. Additionally, possible new interventions should be developed to collaborate with the dwellers to cope with such inclusive environments strategically. The "Shallvaret" example offers essential lessons about the capacity the buildings and the users have in terms of adaptability.

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