DYNAMIC OF CHANGES OF RESIDENTIAL SPACES DURING THE POST-COMMUNIST PERIOD IN ALBANIA

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ABSTRACT

During last 30 years the government system of Albania has changed from the Communism to Democracy. The change of the political paradigm, the different level of economy, change of the lifestyle of Albanians had affected also the housing system. The housing space standards, primarily being established by Communist state, were cancelled during the first transition years and recovered just after a decade of the change of political system. The state during the long period had lacked the control of the quality of construction and application of space standards. This situation was directly reflected in the housing design. The facts, that the overall area of apartment and areas and proportions of the habitable rooms were not defined, resulted to the existence of dwellings with inefficient and even inappropriate layout of apartments. The study aims to find the consequence between the political and economical situation and the size of the apartment ant its parts. Within the research 95 2+1 apartments from the last 35 years are taken as case studies. For each apartment its overall area, area, width and proportions of the habitable rooms and the coefficient of space use are analyzed. Comparison of these parameters allows to find the main tendencies in changes of the physical properties of the dwelling in Albania and to trace the influence of the major political and economical events onto it.

KEYWORDS: Housing in Albania, housing space standard, apartment layout, habitable room

INTRODUCTION

Within last 30 years housing system in Albania could be subdivided at the several specific periods. Each of them is characterized by the different paradigm of construction, different source of investment and form of ownership, which was also reflected into the average dwelling size, apartment composition and design and construction quality.

During the Communist time up to 1990 most of the dwellings in cities were owned by state and rented to the inhabitants. The apartments were small and typically included one or two small rooms, the bigger living and dining room and a kitchenette. In 1989 the space standard for apartment was increased by 20% (Bengt Turner, József Hegedüs, Iván Tosics, 1992). The apartments were built up to 6 stories without elevators and the demands of the specific groups of people, as the ones with limited abilities, were rarely taken in consideration (Aliaj, 2003). There was no individual design of any residential building; the dwellings were constructed using several typological prototypes. During the Communist period there was a constant growth of the housing construction with the majority of the state ownership – 95% in 1989 (Tsenkova, 2009).

The transition period to a market-based economy had started in 1991. The comparatively fast process of privatization of the state properties had started in 1993. The urban dwellings, which were owned by state, were sold to the inhabitants with a price, which was much less, then the market value (Thiesenhusen, 2000). Still up to 1994 the government had invested into 30% of the dwelling construction (Katsura, 1996). The construction activity and the real estate had significantly increased after 1990. During that period, it was difficult to estimate the real value of the real estate market in Albania due to the fact, that many deals were taken out of legal mechanisms. There was a discontinuity between the needs of dwelling seekers and the visions of developers. While the buyers had searched for the new types of urban residences, the constructors had thought, that the only need is the larger apartments with the bigger rooms. There was not any applied housing standard, which could control the residential comfort, apartment layout and space quality. The quality of design was fully depended on the professionalism of architect and the demands of developer to provide the maximum of built area. The land use policies, urban and buildings codes were not enforced, which resulted to the wide construction of unauthorized and self-built structures with the use of inappropriate construction materials and techniques (Margaret

Eveline Moores, Norman D. Flynn, 1997). The housing construction in the transition period was unstable and limited due to the uncertain situation with building permits, lack of sufficient urban plans, and lack of land in the most preferable sites (Elona Bollano, Gerond Ziu, 2009).

Similar situation had continued at early 2000s. There was no appropriate legal framework for the construction, lack of urban plans and strategies of development, lack of communication between the different parties as well as the political interference into the construction process (Nepravishta, 2004). The construction paradigm after 1997-2000 has changed from the low-raised towards high-raised massive blocks of apartments (Evangelia Balla, Maria Mantouvalou, Fereniki Vatavali, 2007). Nevertheless, up to 2007 the housing market has experienced a significant increase with a further slowdown of the growth due to the growth of level of uncertainty and low confidence (Rebi, 2014). Since 2004 the Albanian government had introduced the Social Housing program, which included the low-cost housing and social rented housing (Dauti, 2014). The program had required the establishment of the minimal housing space standards, but its realization had several difficulties due to the lack of finance. In the last edition of the dwelling standard the minimal size of the 2+1 apartment was 47 m^2, the living room – 13 m^2, master bedroom – 12 m^2, single bedroom – 8 m^2 and cooking zone of the living room – 2.5 m^2 (VKM, 2015). Still these requirements are not obliged both by public and private constructors.

The paper aims to study the development of the design properties of the typical apartments in Albania, which were constructed during the Communist period and in the Transition time. The changes of the dwelling size, the comparison between the areas, widths and proportions of the habitable rooms and the efficiency of use of the habitable area of apartment are going to be investigated in accordance with the political and economical situation. The evaluation of the apartments includes its comparison with the minimal housing space standard of Albania.

METHODOLOGY

Housing space standards may change with time, which may be explained by the different desire of the society towards the residential comfort, sanitary and health standards, economical and technological efficiency, increasing demands in sustainability. Rapoport stated, that in general on the level of the whole society the house form is not a result of an individual wish of a person, but it is a product of the common goals

and values (Rapoport, House Form and Culture, 1969). The dwelling process is very conservative, and basic physiological living needs are not changing, or changing very slowly. The dwelling can be defined as a specific system of setting, where the particular set of activities takes place (Rapoport, Using "Culture" in Housing Design, 1998). Dwelling space standards are expressed through the set of measurable parameters, such as area of a dwelling and a habitable room, room proportions and minimal width (Chowdhury, 1985). The minimal size of the room is defined by the dimensions of the specific furniture, which is suitable for the room function, and the following it circulation space (Pedro, 2010). Building regulations can be subdivided into several categories depending on the strictness of the prescriptions and the level of control (Sheridan, 2001). Housing standard in Albania had passed through several stages, starting from the prescriptive requirements with the set of ready typological solutions in Communism time towards the neglection of any standard in the first 15 years of transition period. Currently the housing space standard is issued, but its practical application in not controlled by the state.

The aim of the research is to find the consequences between the political and economical situation in Albania, the presence and application of national dwelling standard and the size of the typical apartment and its habitable rooms. Examples of 2+1 apartments from residential complexes built in Albania during last 35 years have been analyzed as case studies. After the research on the available information 95 apartments from 50 residential complexes located in Tirana were selected. The chosen typology of apartment is the one, which is mostly spread in the market. Each of the apartments includes the 3 main habitable spaces - living room (with built-in kitchen), single and double bedroom. The study is limited only by one-storey apartments in order to exclude the vertical circulation spaces from the overall area. The three habitable spaces of apartment are labeled as Room 1, Room 2 and Room 3 and organized depending on the area of the room from bigger to smaller one. The initial source of information is the plan of apartment. In some cases, some information on the sizes of rooms is provided by real estate agencies or developers. All necessary information is taken from the redrawn plan through the graphical analysis and measurements. The information is collected using the following guidelines: the overall area of the apartment is measured with exclusion of the area of the partition walls and outdoor spaces, such as balconies and loggias. The habitable area is a sum of the areas of each of the four habitable rooms. The area of each room is measured with

exclusion of the area of service spaces, such as storages, wardrobes, private bathroom attached directly to the room. The width of the room is the smallest clear distance between the walls, if the room has rectangular shape. The coefficient of use is calculated as the relation between the habitable area (the sum of all habitable rooms) and the whole area of the apartment.

ANALYSIS OF THE SPATIAL PROPERTIES OF APARTMENT AND ITS HABITABLE ROOMS

The evaluation of spatial structure of 2+1 apartment starts from the analysis of change of the overall area of the apartment and the coefficient of use within the relation to the time period. The work proceeds with the evaluation of dynamics of area, width and proportions of each habitable. The comparison of the diagrams of change for each parameter allows to find the common influence of the political and economical system to the dwelling space and organization.

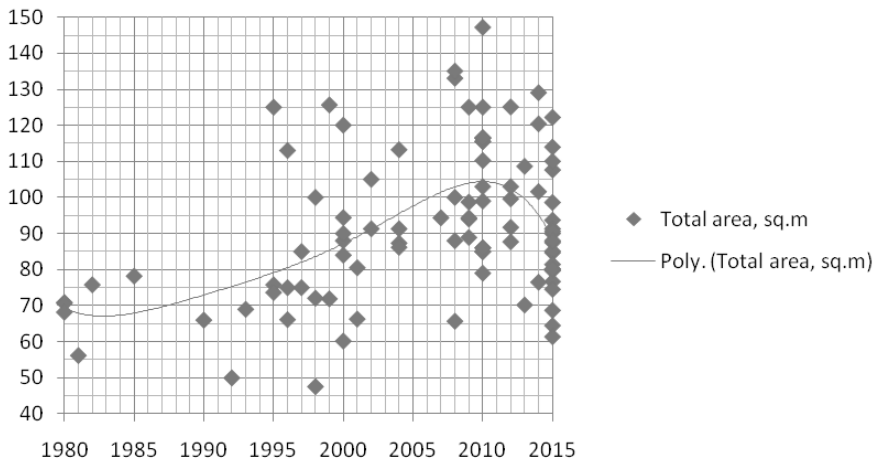### Total area of apartment

Figure 1: Total area of 2+1 apartment, m2

The distribution of the areas of the analyzed 2+1 apartments of selected cases during last 35 years is given in Figure 1. There is an evident difference in the distribution of parameters during the different

time periods. The apartments of Communist period (1980-1980) are relatively small and similar in area. Liberalization of the political system and transition period (1990-2010) are characterized by the growth of the dwelling total area. Still in this period there could be found as very small, as oversized apartments. The relative decrease of the apartment area after 2010 is connected with certain economical crisis of that period. The smaller apartments were sold easier, which resulted to the increase of their presence in the market.

All the apartments satisfy the minimal spatial requirement, which is established by Albanian housing space standard. The average apartment area is 91.7 m^2, which is almost doubling the minimal. This means, that the typical Albania 2+1 apartment is relatively big, but has the tendency to be reduced in future.

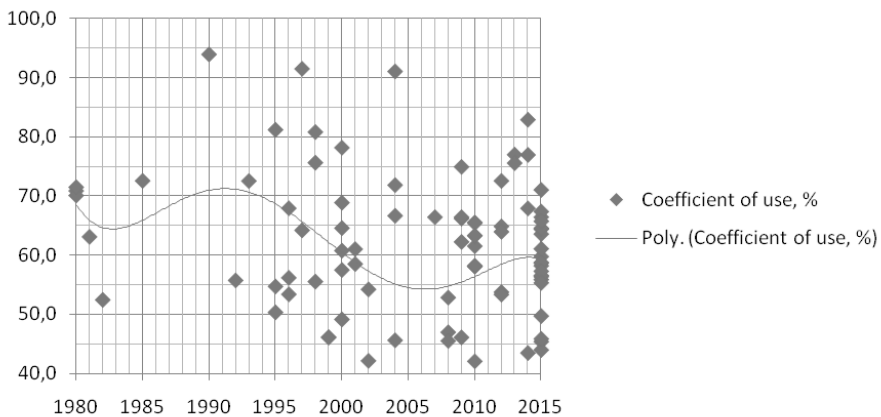## Coefficient of use of apartment

Figure 2: The coefficient of use of 2+1 apartment, %

The second step of analysis is the evaluation of the balance between the habitable and service spaces in the apartment. The coefficient of use is the relation between the sum of three habitable rooms and the total area of apartment. The dynamics of change of this parameter is given in Figure 2. For all Albanian apartments the coefficient of use is very low, which means the abundance of service spaces in the apartment and inefficiency of its spatial design.

Starting from the relatively high 70% value, the coefficient of use is decreasing during the whole transition period. The trend may be connected with the demand of developers to sell the apartments with

higher area but belonging technically to the same 2+1 typology. The situation started to change after 2010, but still is not reaching the parameters of Communist period. The average coefficient of use is 59.9%, which is rather small.

The area of habitable rooms

Figure 3: The area of habitable room, m2

The changes of size of the three habitable rooms with time are consequent, as it is seen at the Figure 3. The area of Room 1, or living room with built-in kitchen, is constantly increasing, meanwhile for the two bedrooms there are evident wavy oscillations. The bedroom area (both for Room 2 and 3) increases at 1993 and 2012 with the slight decrease at 2005.

For every apartment Room 1 is significantly bigger, then the other two, and only in 6% of cases it doesn't satisfy the minimal standard. 27% of the master bedrooms and 48% of the single bedrooms are below the standard, within them the majority had constructed during the transition period (1990-2010). There is an evident trend in reduction of area of all rooms in the recent 3 years. The average areas of the living room, master bedroom and single bedroom are consequently 25.5, 15.7 and 12.6 m^2, which is still bigger, then the minimal size.

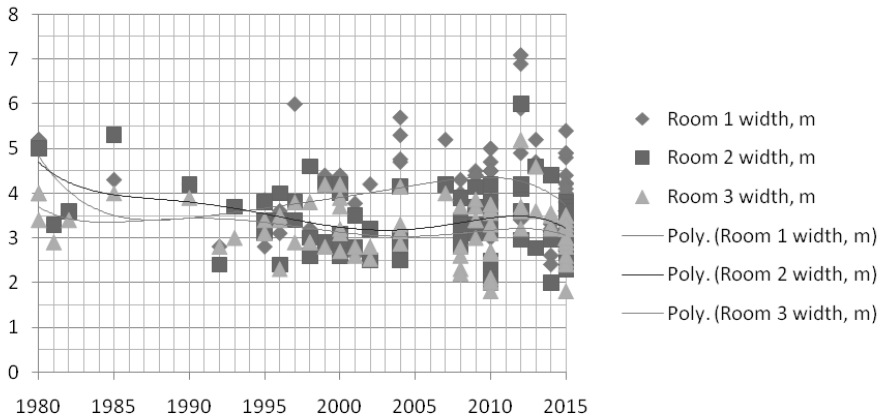## The width of habitable rooms

Figure 4: The width of habitable room, m

Minimal width of the room is the parameter, which characterizes the ability of the room to host a specific function. Minimal width depends of the dimensions of the furniture and the following it space for circulation. According to Figure 4, the width got the maximum in Communist period and then is slightly decreasing for all three rooms. Room 1 is almost in all cases wider, then Room 2 and 3, which are almost similar.

The average width of the living room is 4 m, the master bedroom – 3.4 m and the single bedroom – 3.2 m, which satisfies the housing space standard. In few cases for the Rooms 2 and 3 there are recorded very small values, which may lead to the inappropriate proportions of the room and difficulty of its furnishing and use. For all the rooms there is an evident tendency in decreasing of the width after 2013.

Proportions of the habitable rooms

Configuration of the perimeter of the room may affect the possible layout of furnishing. Rooms with the same area, but with different ratio between the width and length may host different set of living activities. It is recommended to design the rooms with sides related in proportion 1:1 – 2:1. Such type of space can be used more efficiently, than longer and narrow ones. Figure 5 shows the coefficient of relation between the length and width of the habitable room. In order to obtain the adequate room proportions, this parameter should stay between 1 to 2 (SNB,

2003). Greater value indicates the narrow and long space, which could have problems with furnishing and access of natural light.
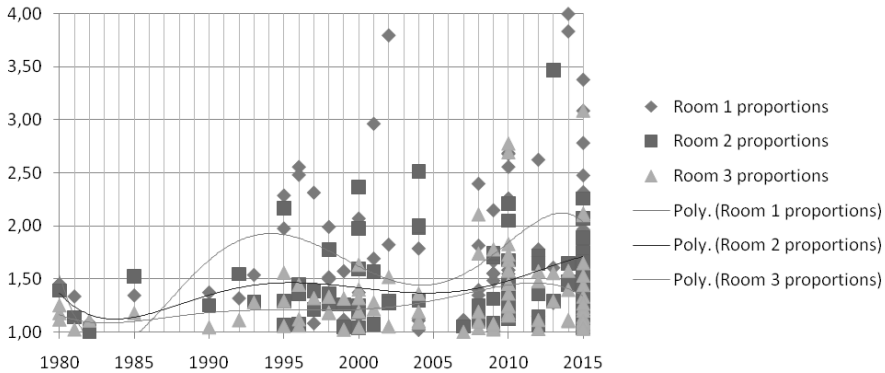

Figure 5: Proportions of habitable room

The majority of the studied spaces have the acceptable ratio between the width and length. Nevertheless, 26% of the living rooms, 11% of the master bedrooms and 6% of the single bedrooms have problems with proportions. The length of the room in some cases may reach up to 12 meters, while the width at the same time is 3-4m. The proportions of the Rooms 2 and 3 are usually better, then the Room 1. It can be noticed the tendency of degradation of the room spaces with time, especially for the living room. Still the average value for every room remains acceptable: 1.8 for the living room, 1.5 for the master bedroom and 1.3 for the single bedroom.

CONCLUSION

Spatial properties of the 2+1 apartment in Albania had been changed during last 30 years. Application (or neglection) of the housing space standards by state had influenced both to the size of the apartment and its room. The quality of the design and the efficiency of space use had been influenced as well. The Communist period (1980-1990) is characterized by the design of relatively small apartments. There was no evident difference between the three habitable rooms. The space was used relatively efficient – the coefficient of use at that period was higher. Rooms were designed with the application of side proportions, which range from 1:1 till 1:1.5, which demonstrates the higher level of universality of the room and residential comfort.

During the Transition period (1990-2010) there can be noticed the increase of the apartment area with the simultaneous degradation of the quality of design. The size of the area of the living room increases drastically. In some cases, it reaches about 40 m^2, which seems to be abundant for the 2+1 apartment, which is supposed to host the family of maximum 4 people. The bedrooms are also slightly oversized. The Transition period is characterized also by the low efficiency of space use. The developers prefer to construct the bigger apartments with the exaggerated service areas and habitable rooms in order to get more profit. The lack (or disregard) of dwelling standards results also to the construction of spaces, which are too small, or too narrow for comfortable fitting of the living activities.

The recent period of development (after 2010) is characterized by the gradual improvement of all parameters. The size of apartment and the areas of habitable rooms tend to become smaller, while the space is used in a more efficient way. This may be related from one side with the dissatisfaction of the design of apartments, which were constructed during the previous period, and from the other side with the economical crisis, which required to construct smaller apartments, which are more affordable to buy. The state had issued the housing space standard, but still the application of it was not controlled.

Adequate size of apartment and efficient use of its area are the key parameters of the affordable housings with the appropriate level of comfort. These two parameters may be controlled both by the market and state. Minimal size of the apartment and its rooms and minimal room width are controlled by the housing space standards. Maximum size of the apartment is not officially stated, and it depends usually on the wealth level of the state. Lack of the state control for construction leads to the unreasonable growth of the size of apartment, while its typology (2+1) still allows to host the same number of inhabitants. The irrational size of the habitable rooms and abundance of service spaces become the instrument, which may bring profit only for developers. At the same time the appropriate layout design may allow to add one or two habitable rooms to the same apartment, which may increase its value. The efficient design may result to increase of the amount of habitable space using the same time and material resources for its construction.

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