

TIRANA AS CONTEMPORARY LABORATORY: LIVING THE “GREEN BELT”

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ABSTRACT

The city of Tirana, its history, its planning and its recent transformations, highlight a multiplicity of issues that cross several disciplinary fields and contemporary problems.

Despite being the result of inconsistent transformations, today it is a very active laboratory in the research of the urban form, in the application of planning principles and in the experimentation of implementation mechanisms of the contemporary project.

The research that has been carried out in recent years at the School of Architecture in Bari on the form of Tirana and its sustainable development, has been compared dialectically with Boeri's Plan. It highlights many themes today at the center of the debate on the transformations of cities in the West as well in the East: the ecological dimension of the city, the contemporary urban form, the preservation of the traces of the historical city and architectural heritage, accessibility and sustainable mobility.

Therefore, together with the elaboration of the Boeri's Plan and then in the phase of its implementation, this problematic field has been explored, elaborating pilot projects that would face in an integrated way the themes mentioned, starting from the most problematic components: the peripheral fringes, dominated by the informal settlements, the disused industrial heritage, the peri-urban and rural space around the city.

The first Degree Workshop dealt with the theme of the “green belt” of Tirana, understood as an ecological evolution of the design device that crossed the history of the city and of twentieth-century urban planning, building a green infrastructure project that winds at different scales and designs new spatial arrangements capable of representing a renewed identity and new prospects for sustainable development for the city. Subsequently, a second Degree Workshop focused on the marginal area near the Kombinat, experimenting “new forms of living”, through a housing complex created from scratch and interventions for the redevelopment of the existing informal residential fabric, with the aim of verifying strategies and methods applicable in similar contexts.

KEYWORDS: Tirana, Contemporary urban planning, Green belt, New forms of living

INTRODUCTION

In the context of the studies on the Balkan area that have taken place in the Degree Course in Architecture in Bari for more than a decade, the case study of Tirana has been taken as a particularly significant example because it is a complex and problematic city that it has had the greatest growth in the modern era and is still subject to great building development. The Albanian capital, although the result of inconsistent, contradictory and conflicting transformations, is now a very active laboratory in the search for urban form, in the application of the principles of planning and in the experimentation of the mechanisms for implementing the contemporary project. Since the beginning of the 2000s, the Architecture Studio plan, the experiences of Studio Dogma and the Berlage Institute, the Grimshaw project, Boeri's recent plan, testify to the willingness of the Municipality of Tirana to make this urban reality fully participate in the international debate on the development of western cities.

The two master's degree Workshops "Tirana Greenbelt" and "Tirana: new forms of living" have integrated theoretical-methodological research with design experimentation, involving the disciplines of Architectural Design, Urban Planning, Types of Buildings, Urban Sociology, Archaeology and Cultural Heritage, Architecture Technology. They studied the forms of settlement and housing developed over time in Tirana, corresponding to different ideas of planned cities or spontaneous growths, which overlapped, grafted or flanked and which currently largely coexist disorderly in the central and peripheral districts: from Ottoman settlement, to the Italian city to the socialist one, to informal development. The homogeneous parts that characterize the contemporary were then identified, analysing the relationship between orography, urban morphology and building types, and making a sampling of the existing.

Finally, the Master Degree Workshops have faced disciplinary innovations in the field of environmental sustainability and the pressures on urban ecosystems in the contemporary era; themes that have been found and explored also in the most recent product planning tool for the city of Tirana, the Boeri plan of 2013.

TIRANA GREEN BELT

Green Belts, Ecological Networks and Green Infrastructures represent the cultural and methodological references in which the project for the Greenbelt of Tirana was developed, reinterpreting a

fundamental design figure in the history of urban planning - the green belt - in the light of the most recent innovations in the field of disciplines and policies for environmental sustainability. Tirana Greenbelt, in fact, represents both an instrument of environmental and ecological requalification of the vast metropolitan settlement and a project of landscape and urban requalification and definition of its form.

The field of application and experimentation is the area of "Durana", the large region that involves the municipalities of Tirana and Durazzo, the major national infrastructures, the natural coastal and internal systems and within which the Plan Tirana 2030 provides for the construction of the 'orbital forest' with almost 3 million trees, including protected parks and nature reserves aimed at preserving and nurturing the existing biodiversity, which will mark the border beyond which it can no longer be built (Boeri, 2017).

"Durana" today presents the characteristics and criticalities of large metropolitan areas that have grown with discontinuous planning and are affected by recent, sudden and informal development processes; it is therefore characterized by a high unplanned settlement area, which has strongly compromised the rural territory and the recognizability of an intentional relationship between urban spaces and the countryside.

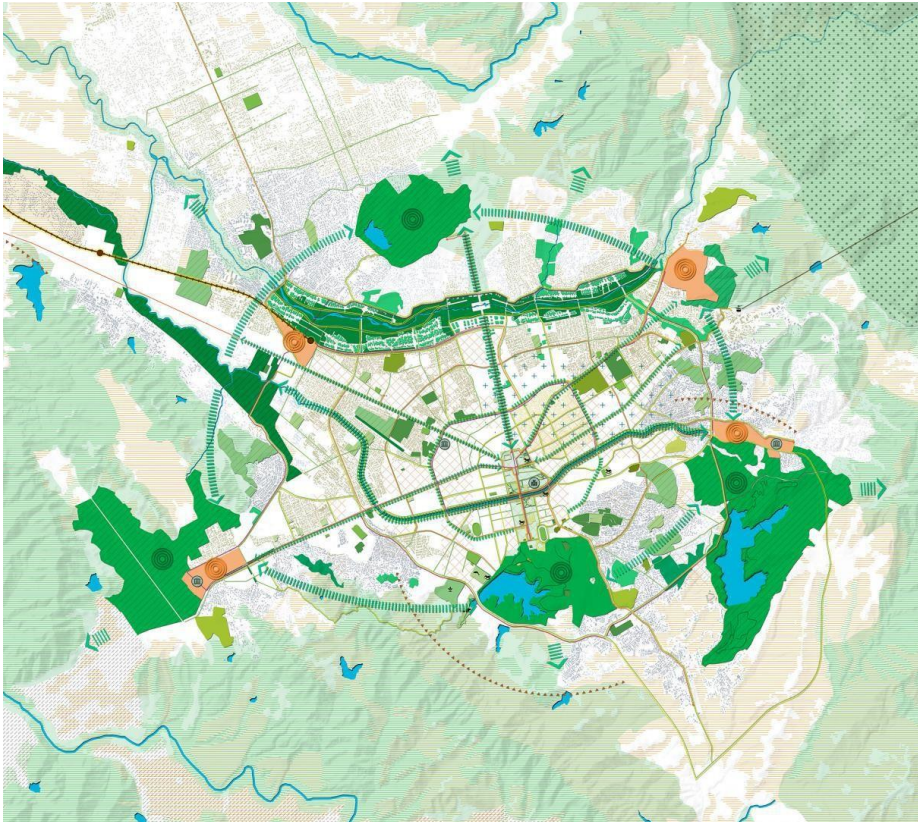
The area is now a laboratory of particular interest for the proposed experimentation as it is crossed by phenomena that, although present in European cities, here are traceable with a particular intensity: the process of industrialization and de-industrialization, which has taken place in just 30 years; the rapid spread of informal settlements, large functions and architectures, often completely decontextualized, in the open territory and along the lines of territorial connection; the impoverishment and degradation of the historical and cultural heritage; the abandonment of the practices of maintenance of the territory, which failed with the end of the regime, which has further compromised the delicate environmental balances. Not only: the recent administrative reform (2015) has led to the annexation to the municipality of Tirana of almost all neighboring municipalities, consisting of informal settlements that have developed since 1997, which now represent 2/3 of the population of Tirana. For this territory a way of sustainable development and identity must be thought of.

Greenbelt's project is characterised by being a systemic, integrated and multiscale project.

It is a systemic project because its peculiarity lies in tackling the problem of environmental requalification of a complex environment

through a coordinated set of different design devices, in the awareness that a real improvement in the environmental conditions of our cities can only be achieved by adopting an organic and articulated strategy according to the relevance of the problems, the available spaces and the possible policies.

It is an integrated project because, together with the creation of the greenbelt and green infrastructure, it deals with urban and architectural design issues more properly, with a unified and integrated approach. In this field, for example, there are projects that, together with the redevelopment of natural and rural environments, involve the creation of a system of thematic itineraries that cross the Greenbelt connecting its most significant places, or for the redevelopment of the settlement in both its ecological and morphological components and public spaces, and finally for the redesign of abandoned industrial areas in the spaces of connection between the city and the greenbelt.



It is a multiscale project as it is built on different levels:

- at the metropolitan level, it creates a strategic territorial masterplan based on the integrated design of three systems that make up the outer ring of the greenbelt: the metropolitan system of green areas and parks (which partly coincides with the orbital forest of the Boeri plan), the system of heritage and networks for use as an opportunity to enhance the historical, cultural and natural heritage of the area, which in most cases is in a state of neglect; the system of thematic areas: Rural life system, Petrela cultural system, Dajt natural system, Boville lake system, Kashar lake system, Historic sites system;

- at the urban level, it implements an urban strategic master plan, which consists of the inner ring of the green belt of Tirana, which is entrusted with the role of dialogue between the external naturalistic context and the urban fabric; the recovery, reorganization and enhancement of the city, in which the greenbelt penetrates and is articulated through the large natural corridors of rivers and urban parks; the system of peripheral polarities and devices for the environmental redevelopment of open spaces and urban fabrics; the system of connecting components and sustainable mobility.

- at the level of individual components, networks or parts of cities, and of specific nodal places of particular landscape and cultural value or particularly degraded, in which it builds pilot projects for new structures able to represent a renewed identity and new prospects for sustainable development. All the project interventions are accumulated by the objective of introducing elements of quality - environmental, landscape, settlement - in every element "touched" by the plot of the green; moreover, their value lies in being each part of the broader strategy already described.

Among the pilot projects, which are very diversified in scale and content, two in particular take on exemplary value for the major themes that cross the contemporary city.

The first is a project to reorganise the marginal area of the Kombinat district, to the south-west of the city (later further developed in the subsequent project "Tirana: new forms of living"), through the reuse of the large abandoned textile industry - strategically positioned as an interface between the city centre and the green belt and therefore interpreted as a "landscape node", as well as urban - and the project of

the nearby agricultural park, within a valley enclosed between two high hills, where the agricultural areas are marked by great signs represented by canals, with adjoining rows of trees, buffer strips and large green areas placed at the center of the agricultural matrix.

A second is an abacus of sustainable strategies for informal settlements, based on a participatory process of assisted self-construction. About one third of Tirana's inhabitants today live in informal settlements in poor housing conditions and without adequate access to primary infrastructure. Updating the informal city is therefore a good fit for goal 11 Making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, flexible and sustainable - Goal 11 of the UN Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development.

NEW FORMS OF HOUSING IN THE KOMBINAT DISTRICT

The Master Degree Workshop "Tirana: new forms of living" has verified the possibility of creating a new pole on the urban and territorial scale, focusing on a particularly significant area of contemporary Tirana: the peripheral west zone occupied by the large textile factory Kombinat, now abandoned, and the facing areas, characterized by the development of informal housing. This marginal area, with a productive and residential vocation, is in direct relationship with the rural landscape



and is located in a cove inside the track of the “metrobosco” provided by the Boeri’s Plan.

The area has a strong characterization, for the presence of the former factory and the workers’ quarter built to serve it, but also responds to typical conditions of the peripheral context of Tirana. The area is divided into two macro-zones by one of the arteries that branch off from Skanderbeg Square: the downstream part consisting of the factory and the informal urban fabric behind, arranged partially following the original agricultural subdivision, and the part lying on the slopes of the hill, occupied by another informal urban fabric arranged according to the orography.

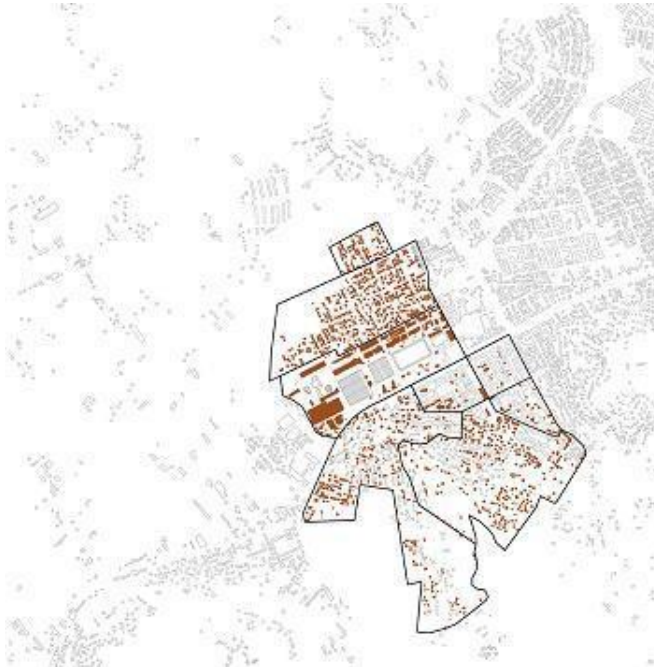
Maintaining, and indeed strengthening the different character of the two areas, the project has experimented with new forms of living and renewed interpretations for high- and low-density building, declining the different possibilities that offer the land use indexes established by the plan.

New types for contemporary ways of living have been studied, which reinterpret the local tradition of urban and architectural space, introducing new relationships between city and nature, open/closed, full/empty, public/private spaces. The project has chosen aggregative forms and building types that respond to the renewed ways of living (co-living for students and the elderly, co-working for companies and business groups, living working for freelance workers, artists, artisans).

Recognizing Tirana’s value as a “city by parts” determined by physical, historical, functional and social conditions, the project has identified the different urban environments and defined their margins, connecting them through interstitial spaces of nature. In these “urban islands”, formally and functionally identified, the city models that occurred in time have been reinterpreted. The Ottoman city has been evoked in the neighborhood in the upper part, the Modern city (from the compact Italian city made of “excavated” streets and squares to the Socialist one made up of large courtyards) in the intensive district behind the Kombinat, the Industrial city in the former textile factory. These “islands” are crossed by a green system that acts as a connection, articulating itself in a linear agricultural park with an equipped path, corresponding to the flat tongue of land that reaches up to Kashar, in the urban-forum park inside the Kombinat, in the terraced park on the slopes of the hill-promontory, up to the wood on the hill with the belvedere and the articulated path upstream that connects the different promontories up to the artificial lake located in the southern end of the monumental axis.

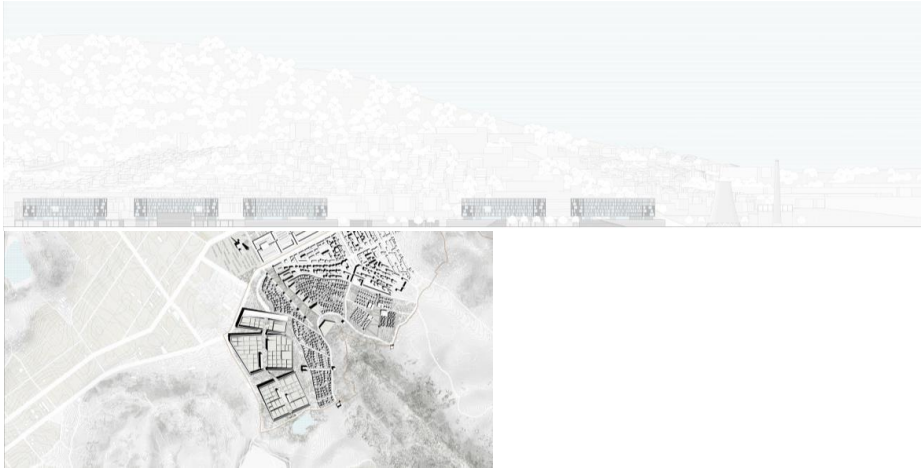
The thesis has experimented with various settlement models, which can be summarised as follows:

- dense city (urban fabric between density and discontinuity)
- building-city (the “great architecture” as a metaphor for the city)
- city-nature (open urban forms and natural voids).

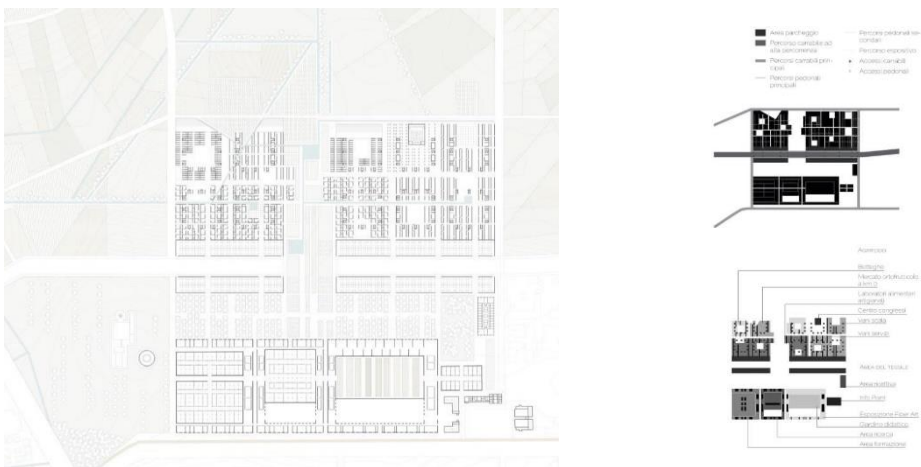


A. Den-City. The “island district” downstream

Behind the Kombinat was planned the demolition of the informal urban fabric and the creation of a new, less extensive and denser neighborhood. A basement organized as a compact urban fabric and open spaces, reminiscent of a bazaar, is related to the mesh of iterated spans of the Kombinat on the one hand, and with the layout of the agrarian fields and canals on the other hand. It contains shops (stores), a covered market and spaces for the agri-food sector, in continuity with the agri-food park behind it and the peri-urban agricultural landscape. On this “artificial ground”, regular courtyards overlap, generating a grid,



interpreting the socialist city consisting of large inhabited courtyards with services in the centre. The court first floor is a transparent and permeable space, containing the co-working spaces, mainly linked to the functions of agri-food and textiles. On the upper floors there are the residences, in order to create a neighborhood with integrated functions (housing, public spaces, work, production, commerce, culture, loisir), which can live at all hours of the day. This principle of settlement gives rise to a stratified city, with open and closed spaces which, from the public function in the basement conceived on a territorial scale, progressively pass to the urban scale defined by the semi-public spaces of work and collective residence, to the increasingly intimate and private places of individual living.



B. Building-City. The Kombinat complex

The former industrial complex is re-functionalized with uses related to textiles. It is planned to enhance Piazza Garibaldi, the only public space currently in the area, characterized by monumental access to the Kombinat, and the buildings of the furnace, located on the opposite side of the complex, which show the original identity of the factory. In the existing structures and in the perimeter enlargements, activities linked to production, use and recycling of textiles (laboratories, ateliers), training (school, conference centre), education (didactic garden), documentation and memory (Museum of Work and Textiles), exposition (Museum of Fiber Art), marketing (fair-market), research and innovation (experimental laboratories for the University) are foreseen.

The empty band behind, between the former factory and the new district, is characterized as a forum-park for recreational activities and spaces for events and shows. The bypass provided for by Boeri's Plan separates the Kombinat from the district, but a large central connection crosses the large road infrastructure that runs partly in the trench, regaining the unity of the parts.

C. City-Nature. The "village" on the hill

In the district on the slopes of the hill, consisting of a serial and discretized urban fabric that lies on the ground, adapting to the orography, the Master Degree Workshop interpreted the relationship between the morphology of the land and the form of settlement, taking as a reference the traditional Albanian villages placed in similar environmental conditions. In this context that currently lacks a defined form, hierarchies and public spaces, subgroups and centralities have been identified; connections with the existing city and with the natural context, internal gradations of the paths and spaces have been established. The neighbourhood and urban services, arranged at the base of settlement, at the edge of the workers' quarter, along the central terraced park and at the top, act as ordering systems and emerge from the basic building with forms derived from the modeling of the ground (podiums, bases, ramparts, belvedere terraces) or through recognizable architectural types (open or closed court buildings, towers, fences). In the existing urban fabric, the building action was developed in a punctiform way, through the operations of thinning, densifying, concentrating and replacing it. A model district divided into sections has also been studied, with the possibility of large investments and unitary interventions.

These strategies are considered replicable in similar contexts, with appropriate variations.

CONCLUSIONI

The research themes and design strategies defined in these experiences touch on the problems and explore the possible answers in a city that does not seem to escape the fate of the capitals of the



East, subject to profound and contradictory transformations. On the one hand, the continuation of the phenomenon of urbanization of the population from rural areas and therefore the growth of an extended informal city, on the other hand, the catalization of financial resources and therefore the implementation of huge real estate operations that transform entire parts of the city. Although there is a new instrument of territorial governance based on criteria of sustainability and polycentrism, in order to manage both phenomena, detailed planning is necessary to ensure spatial quality and environmental and social sustainability, which in current conditions can only be ensured by a

public action that knows how to direct all the transformations in this direction and how to obtain public benefits appropriate to the transformations allowed. In this large design space, the described design experiences are included, as examples and explorations of possible ways of implementing the strategies of the plan, interpreting and deepening them in specific contexts and for central themes. From this point of view, these projects could be a support for public decision-makers in order to weigh up their choices and to achieve what they want to obtain from the transformation processes. The project as a working method to interpret the plan and give shape to the city is a topic long debated in the research of design disciplines, and these works are intended to be illustrative of how in the contemporary condition this theme can be assumed. Therefore, these didactic experiences are not intended to provide absolute solutions, but rather to offer possible working hypotheses, considered valid above all from the methodological point of view. Moreover, they intend to verify, through spatial prefigurations, the results of choices to be made by the city's governing bodies (building indexes, guidelines...), and their effects on the urban form as a whole.

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