

HIGH-RISE RESIDENTIAL BUILDINGS PERCEIVED QUALITY ASSESSMENT IN EX-POLITBURO NEIGHBOURHOOD “BLLOK” IN POST-SOCIALIST TIRANA

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ABSTRACT

This research focuses on the high-rise residential buildings, which emerged during the post-socialist period in an ex-socialist elite neighbourhood of Tirana called Bllok. This neighbourhood that was dwelled exclusively by the communist party leading members and their families, in the post-socialist period has become a major entertainment zone. The aim of this study is to measure the quality of these high-rise apartment blocks based on the perception of their inhabitants. The quality assessment of the dwellings is conducted by analyzing their indoor and outdoor spaces, in both physical and social features.

The methodology used in the research includes archival research to obtain the historical drawings, a survey to measure the quality assessment of housing and data processing to interpret the results of the questionnaire.

The results of this study show that although the high-rise dwelling general conditions are reported as satisfactory, the outdoor spaces` quality is mostly considered poor in the physical infrastructure and social aspects. The indoor spaces` quality offers a better satisfaction level in physical aspects, but lower social features.

KEYWORDS: High-Rise Residential Buildings, Quality Assessment, Bllok Neighbourhood, Post-Socialist Tirana

INTRODUCTION

During the socialist period, Bllok was a "forbidden district" where normal citizens could not enter, and only senior communist figures (members of the Polit bureau) used to live (Bushati, 2015). It was strictly controlled, and the houses of the most important figure were connected with secret tunnels (Fevziu, 2016). In the post-socialist period, it became identified as the major entertainment zone, with luxury bars and restaurants and the main centre of nightlife in Tirana. Lately, it started to be the seat of business centres and banks headquarters. Such functions transformed it into a dynamic district both during the day and night. A major reason for this development was related to the good infrastructure that this neighbourhood inherited from the socialist period, making it very attractive for the developers.

Because of this reason and the commoditization of land values, there was continuous pressure to build in the district. Such development targeted its public spaces, which were largely reduced and were filled with high-rise buildings. Their function in the majority was housing. According to Aliaj (2003), the growing demand for land in the central area of Tirana, caused a rise in the number of floors of buildings increasing from 5 floors to 15 floors in 10 years. These new high-rise buildings produced a cacophonous built environment, which was featured by pro-socialist period houses, socialist period low-rise apartment blocks and post-socialist period high-rise apartment blocks.

This research aims to evaluate the perception of outdoor and indoor quality of high-rise residential buildings that were built during the post-Socialist period in the Bllok neighbourhood. To achieve such a goal the study uses a survey, interviewing dwellers of selected buildings in the neighbourhood. For a better understanding of the context, in the below sections there are explained post-socialist housing in Tirana and housing forms in the Bllok neighbourhood. Also, since housing quality has a direct impact on the quality of life, the study provides certain theoretical definitions of the concepts of dwelling quality assessment. The last part is provided empirical results of what dwellers perceive in their high-rise dwellings.

Post-socialist housing in Tirana

The fall of the socialist regime had a deep impact on housing development in Albania. Especially the new socio-economic-political factors were featured by the cutbacks in state enterprises, loss of jobs and consequently in-migration from eastern Albania to the western part and mainly in Tirana. These factors combined with a lack of planning capacities at both central and local levels produced an uncontrollable informal urban development, whose function was predominantly housing (Aliaj et al, 2003; Manahasa and Manahasa, 2020; Misja and Misja, 2004).

This urban context produced different housing forms in the city centre and urban peripheries. In the city centre, formal housing evolved at the expense of public green spaces in the form of high-rise apartments (Buka & Pojani, 2012; Manahasa & Kazazi, 2021). In the central zones of Tirana, evolved informal additions that many people did to expand their dwelling spaces, considering the growing number of families with fewer members (Aliaj et al, 2003). In the periphery the majority of housing evolved illegally, considering that they were built on state-owned land, which was in a process of privatization (Nase and Ocakci, 2010).

After the years 2000, there were serious institutional efforts to legalize informal housing by establishing a state agency for legalization (ALUIZNI). In addition, continuous upgrading processes are implemented to provide the needed infrastructure, especially in the peripheral zones (Pojani, 2013; Manahasa & Rasha, 2021). By the year 2010, the first gated communities started to emerge in the southern hills of the city due to the request for higher dwelling levels, pushing for prosperity oriented segregated housing development (Tafa & Manahasa, 2021).

Although it has passed three decades since the fall of the socialist regime, certain central zones of the city are still being densely filled with newer high-rise apartment blocks, due to the commoditization value of the zone and the high profit of the investment in a short time (Dhamo, 2021). While in many cases they are built-in public green spaces of socialist mid-rise neighbourhoods, in other cases are built on private sites by annihilating traditional housing patterns (Manahasa et al, 2021). This housing development context brings into discussion the issue of dwelling quality and comfort in these neighbourhoods, especially in the dwellers of the high-rise apartment blocks, which this research is the subject. Since this study, focuses on the high-rise dwelling's comfort and quality of Bllok, the next section is explained the housing development in this neighbourhood.

Housing Development in Bllok Neighbourhood During Different Periods

In fact, Bllok was planned by the Austrian urban planner Hans Köhler in 1929 within the proposed "Tirana e Re" zone based on the concept of a garden city with housing on both sides of the boulevard in a grid urban structure. Between 1929-1942 there were built villas in the "Tirana e Re" for the upper class of the society including wealthy merchants and King Zog administration officials (Manahasa, 2017). This housing form was planned in a grid urban pattern and possessed a separated plot with a garden (Figure 1-left). They were designed according to Italian rationalist or Novecento architectural styles. These urban dwellings not only reflected the contemporary architecture of the period but also were designed with personalized spaces (Bushati, 2012). Some of the important dwellings of the period were Villa Kareco and General Aranitasi House (Figure 1-right). After the invasion of Albania from Italy in 1939, the Fascist regime built also low-rise apartment blocks. Apart from the Italian

administration and possible colons that were planned to live in apartment blocks, in some of the villas used to live Italian tradesmen that belonged to a high socioeconomic status.

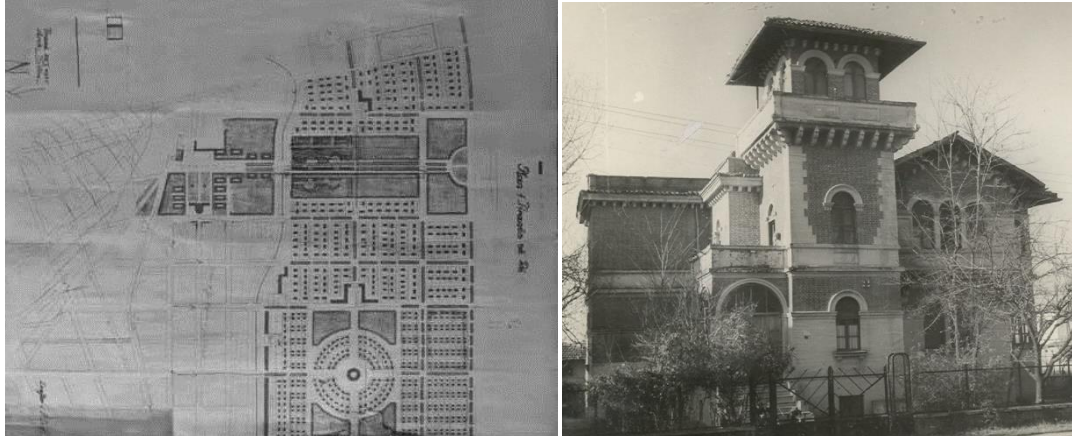


Figure 1 The Plan for "Tirana e re" zone by Hans Köhler in 1928 (left- from Migliaccio) and General Aranitasi house (right-from Gazmend Bakiu)

Socialist Period Housing in Block

The new communist administration that started to rule Albania after WWII, found 'Bllok' as a very appropriate district to install its leading group members and their families. While the Italians had gone in 1942 and their apartments were expropriated easily, in the case of wealthy Albanian merchants and Zog regime officials, they were forcefully deported, and their property was "grabbed" by the state.

The socialist period dictator Enver Hoxha would settle in Villa Belloni, which belonged to an Italian engineer that had left Albania, while the other leaders of the communist party were placed at the other houses in the district. Fevziu (2016) speaks also about a clear hierarchy in the Bllok among the dwellings of the members and candidates of the Politburo. Members of the government who were not Politburo members were not allowed to live in that neighbourhood. The road right in front of Hoxha's house was accessible until 1947. After that it was closed and so were the whole district citizens. It is important to mention in this period there were also built low-rise apartment blocks. Bllok was defined by the boulevard on the east, Lana River on the north and Sami Frasheri and Abdyl Frasheri on the south. According to Fevziu (2016), its area was about 151,400 square meters. Compared to the socialist period average standards, the Bllok dwellers lived a privileged life in higher living conditions. The built environment quality was depicted as very high also by Kalo (2019), who describe it as an oasis of different shape and size villas with nice gardens with trees and greenery. According to him, the Bllok members were provided private drivers, doctors, servants, and bodyguards. However, the members fear each other thinking they could be spied.



Figure 2 Partial image of Bllok on the left side of Tirana's main boulevard (left-from Tirana Album) and some of the villas during the socialist period (right from Top Channel Tv)

Post-socialist Period Housing in Bllok

The post-socialist period had a deep impact on the urban development of Bllok and especially on housing. During this period there started to be constructed residential buildings higher than 8 floors. These high-rise buildings were constructed at the expense of the public green spaces, reducing them drastically. Additionally, such development led to a dichotomous urban pattern (Nase & Ocakçi, 2010), featured by buildings of different forms including pre-socialist period villas, socialist period low-rise apartment blocks and post-socialist (Figure 3-left). Apart from urban aesthetics and identity issue (Manahasa, 2017), the addition of entertainment functions on the ground floors of apartment blocks and sometimes the transformations of historical villas into the nightclubs or restaurants raises the issue of the living quality in such a neighbourhood (Figure 3-right). While the nightclubs produce a continuous acoustical discomfort, the reduction of green public spaces also impacts the neighbourhood quality.



Figure 3 Cacophonous urban pattern of Bllok neighbourhood (left) and (right) a coffee bar close to the ex-Enver Hoxha villa

According to sociologist Dervishi (2017), initially, there was a group of persecuted persons who intentionally wanted to settle in Bllok. Before the years 2010 when started the fury of gated communities, Bllok had become a neighbourhood of wealthy people and high-income professionals.

HOUSING QUALITY ASSESSMENT THEORETICAL CONCEPTS

In this section, we aim to provide certain concepts related to housing quality evaluation approaches. The first concerns on the assessment of buildings and houses included their environmental factors and were conducted by Solow (1946), whereas Twitchell (1948) focused on housing efficiency. By the 70s Kain and Quigley (1970) measured the housing quality through different parameters like housing units, structures, parcels, and micro-neighbourhoods. Ozsoy et al (1996) depict the quality of high-standard housing as related to three aspects: i. related to building materials; ii. to the development of the surrounding environment which includes design and services; and iii. they give the provision of kitchen and bathroom electrical equipment. Alongside the existence of different approaches, in the below part we provide a housing quality assessment divided based on the indoor, outdoor, physical, and social aspects. Although, the interdependence of physical and social elements is present in both indoor and outdoor spaces inseparably.

The outdoor assessment aspects are related to the standards/parameters that determine the efficiency of a building in a larger context like a neighbourhood. These parameters include the general features of the area, noise, threats and the presence and proximity to various facilities and infrastructure. Apart from that, the availability of utilities and amenities is one of the key concerns within the neighbourhood quality assessment criterion. The availability of services in the residential

community, such as stores, cafes, hospitals, medical centres, and leisure facilities influence positively living there (Brkanić, 2017). Also, other research on the evaluation of outdoor spaces indicates that the perceived neighbourhood satisfaction is not only on the quality of their homes, but also is dependent on the existence of violence, pollution, environmental factors and qualities of the local authority, or the crime rates, physical decay and other activities and land uses (Greenberg & Crossney, 2007).

The quality of the indoor settings becomes extremely significant since people pass more than half of their lifetime inside homes. Patino & Siegel (2018) states that most of the research on indoor environmental quality is related to air pollutant concentrations, thermal comfort, or health effects. Frontczak et al (2012) define indoor environmental quality based on the thermal environment, air quality, sound quality and light quality. Other scholars (Raugh et al, 2008) found that low housing conditions, when combined with low socioeconomic status, can have negative consequences on the health of the dwellers.

The physical aspects of a dwelling in comparison to social are concrete and they include dwelling type, number of rooms, presence of facilities, and the condition of the dwelling (Elsinga & Hoekstra, 2005). Apart from them associated with the will for increased living standards elements related to thermal insulation, acoustical comfort or solar radiation are added. Elements regarding physical aspects can be related to the quality of the spaces. Khair et al (2015) provide a very detailed list of physical environment elements such as safety, security and health, lighting, ventilation, temperature and humidity, noise, aesthetics, dwelling unit features, location, utilities, and housing condition.

The social elements of housing quality assessment are related to the community and neighbourhood that the dwelling is part of. The socio-economic status of the dwellers is an important input which provides hints on the social quality of the housing settlement (Muoghalu, 1990). Neighbourhood in fact is directly related to community ties and good quality housing is supposed to provide also good socialization. Being part of a community requires interaction among the dwellers. Community ties quality can be measured by interaction, sociability, social stability, and the behaviours of neighbours. Such requirements include the prevention of violence, preservation of privacy and overall satisfaction with homes (Brkanić, 2017). Also, it is important to mention that in order for community functions properly there is a need for certain rules related to its shared common spaces. Such rules are needed not only for their maintenance but also to protect the social environment from bad customs, which can damage the children (Chaiken, 1980).

Based on the theoretical definitions explained in the above sections we organize the housing assessment by dividing it into three main aspects that are general characteristics, outdoor spaces, and indoor spaces. Furthermore, both outdoor and indoor spaces are investigated through their physical and social features.

THE PERCEIVED QUALITY OF HIGH-RISE HOUSING - CASE STUDY OF BLOK

To measure the perceived quality of high-rise dwellings, we selected 10 buildings, within the Bllok neighbourhood, which is part of both Tirana e Re zone. It is a rectangular plot with street patterns that is limited by “Bajram Curri” Boulevard, “Abdul Frasherri” Street and “Sami Frasherri” and “Ibrahim Rugova” Street on the other sides (Figure 4). This urban fragment is the subject of a dramatic growth associated with the construction of many new high-rise buildings, which had overshadowed the low and mid-rise ones. The selected high-rise dwellings are shown in Figure 5.

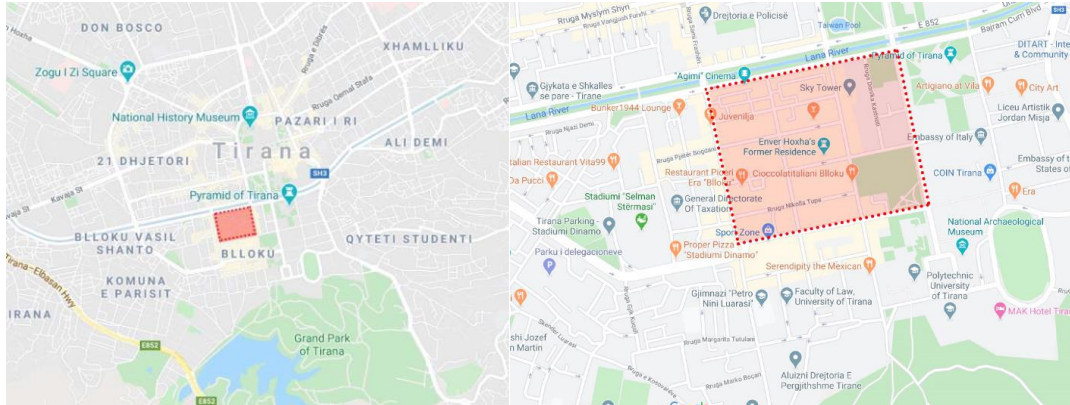


Figure 4 The location of Bllok within Tirana map (left) and the selected plot (right)

Questionnaire

The questionnaire is organized into three main parts including general characteristics, outdoor spaces, and indoor spaces. The questions on outdoor and indoor spaces are grouped through physical and social features.

The general characteristics analyzed are related to overall conditions, overall satisfaction, and the quality of the air.

The outdoor spaces physical assessment includes common physical spaces, the presence of greenery and benches, presence of sports facilities, riding paths, parking's, and other facilities, whereas the social environment assessment aspects measure socialization hours in the community, safety in the zone and places they use for meetings.

The indoor spaces' physical characteristics are measured by analyzing the dwellings' plan scheme, kitchen physically divided from the living room, visibility of the entrance of the building from the distance, storage room in the apartment, presence of sunlight in all the spaces, thermal and acoustical insulation, presence of light in the staircases, the kitchen and the bathroom and the double-glazed windows. The social features of the indoor spaces are analyzed including their relationship with the neighbours, their connection with them, the social integration, the presence in the condominium meetings and kids' frequentation to neighbours' homes.

Dweller Profile

There were interviewed 100 dwellers who lived in 10 high-rise apartment blocks (Figure 5). Regarding the gender of the dwellers that have answered our questionnaire are 88% females and 12% males. Their reported duration is in unison with the life of the buildings as 37% of them have lived in their apartment for less than five years, 20% have lived in their apartment from 5 to 10 years, 18% have lived for more than 20 years, 15% have lived from 15to 20 years and 10 % have lived from 10 to 15 years in the apartment.

Regarding the education of the responders, 86% of them have high education, whereas 14% of them have a middle education. Regarding ownership, 58% of the interviewers are owners, whereas 42% are renters. Although many of the dwellers did not report their profession 20% of the interviewees were students, 10% economists, 5% engineers, 4% architects, 3% lawyers, 3% businessmen, 3% nurses, 3%doctors, 2% bankers, 1% estheticians and 1% teachers.



Figure 5 The location and images of high-rise apartment blocks included in the research

Results and Discussion

The results are given according to the structure of the questionnaire under general characteristics, outdoor spaces' physical and social features and indoor spaces' physical and social features.

General Characteristics Quality Assessment Perceive

Based on the answers of the interviewed dwellers, the majority, consider the overall conditions of the dwelling between satisfactory and very good, and interestingly no one considers as very bad. The favourite aspect of their dwelling for most of the responders is reported to be the accessibility, whereas a considerable minority report the location. About the quality of air in the Bllok neighbourhood, while half the consider normal, less than half consider it polluted and highly polluted (Figure 6).

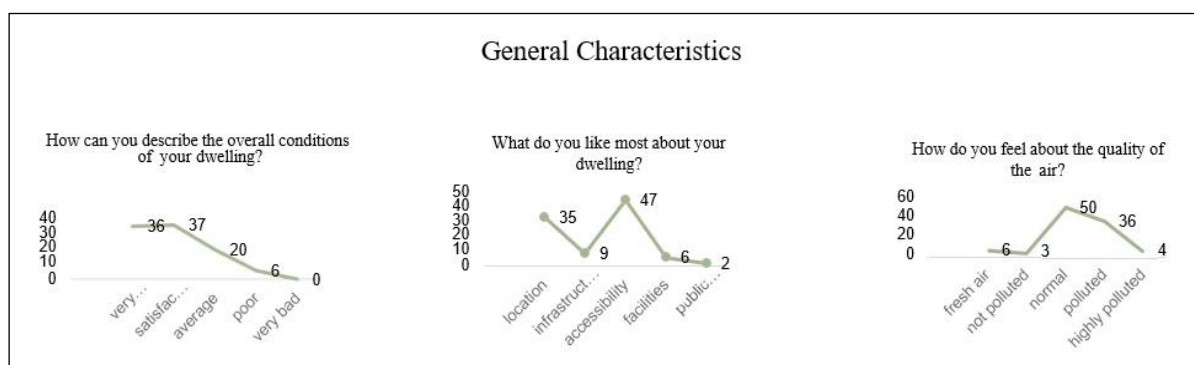


Figure 6 The results of the dwelling's general characteristics perceive

Outdoor Spaces Physical and Social Features Assessment

The physical characteristics of the common outdoor spaces are reported as satisfactory and very satisfactory for most of the dwellers while the remaining have been reported as average. One reason for this evaluation might be the fact that it is a neighbourhood that offers many facilities.

The presence of greenery in their building block is reported as poor and very bad for most of the dwellers and lesser values were reported as av. This evaluation might be due to the lack of greenery in the zone.

When asked about the presence of benches in their community area most of the responders said they have no benches. Similar results were reported for the sportive activities in the area. Such results can be linked to the fact that there is only one small recreational outdoor space in the neighbourhood. When asked about the presence of walking and cycling paths in the building block, most of the responders replied they are not enough. This evaluation may be linked to the lack of cycling paths in general.

Asked about the presence of the parking spots in their dwelling most of the responders answered no and not enough, whereas a considerable minority replied yes. The results about the accessibility of the spaces for the handicapped in the majority report that there were no such spaces or hardly any ramps in the zone. One reason for this evaluation might be the fact that most of these buildings are realized after the collapse of communism when the building construction boom happened and there was no attention to such standards.

The dwellers predominantly are satisfied with the presence of the commercial, educational, and healthcare facilities in the area. Interestingly the neighbourhood is reported as safe for most of the responders. This can be related to the fact that Bllok is one of the most expensive neighbourhoods in Tirana and as such, it can be an of the reasons for dwellers to give this evaluation (Figure 7).

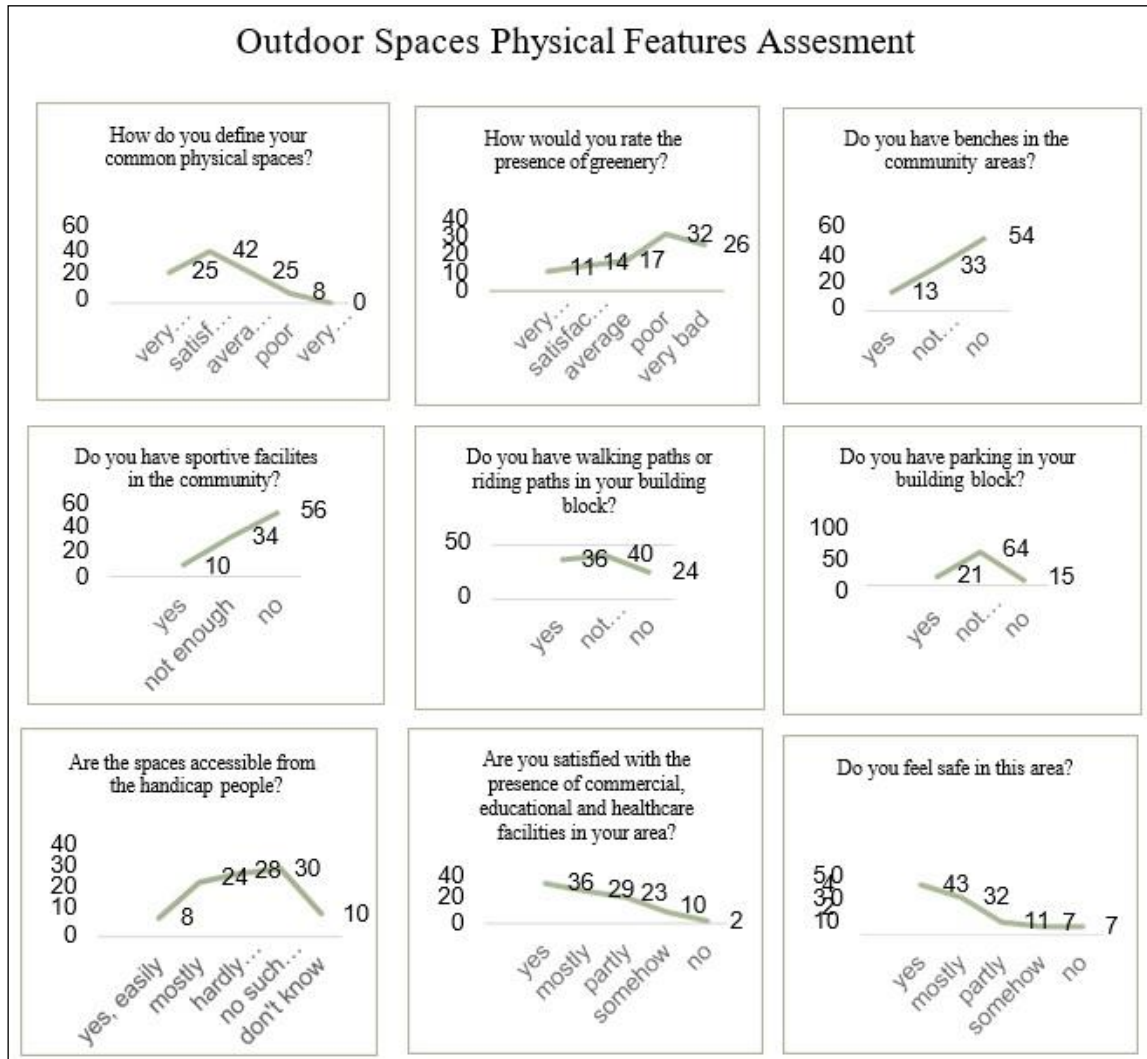


Figure 7 The results of the dwelling's outdoor spaces' physical features assessment

The social characteristics of the outdoor spaces showed that a little more than half of the interviewees use these outdoor spaces to socialize, whereas a less than half do not use them. Also, most of the dwellers answered they only pass by these outdoor spaces and don't use them to sit. A reason that leads to this response might be the fact that there are no parks or benches or other socializing spaces other than bars and restaurants.

For most of the dwellers, the social space is considered safe, and the vast majority of the responders use coffee shops to meet with friends before benches or greenery which is an easy choice when you don't have benches near your dwelling (Figure 8).

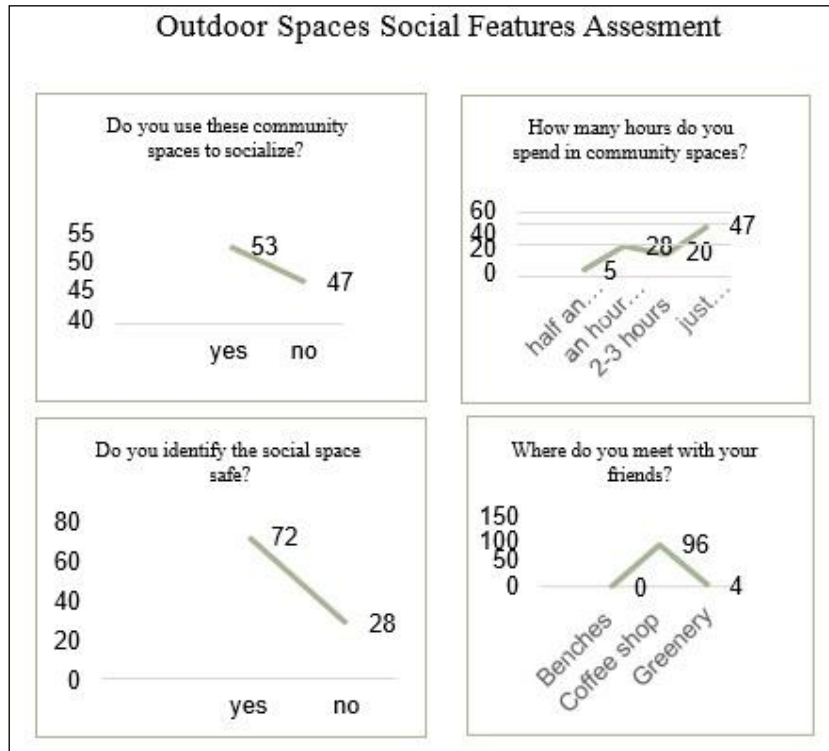


Figure 8 The results of the dwelling's outdoor spaces' social features assessment

Indoor Spaces Physical and Social Features Assessment

The physical characteristics of the indoor spaces in the charts showed that the majority of the responders live in a 2+1 apartment with a kitchen that is physically divided from the living room. One reason for this evaluation might be the fact that such apartment type corresponds to the average Albanian family number of members.

For most of the dwellers, the entrance of the building is visible from the distance and there is enough space in the balcony, but they don't have a storage room in their apartment. Furthermore, for most of the dwellers, all the spaces receive the right amount of sunlight. They report that quasi half of the buildings are not thermally or acoustically insulated. Such features show that these buildings built during the post-socialist period, partly are insulated.

The results show that the majority of the dwellers reported their building staircase to be naturally lit and to have kitchen and bathroom naturally lit and ventilated and also their building's windows double-glazed. Such results can be interpreted that the design of these post-socialist period high-rise dwellings is over Tirana average standards and there are implemented new construction technologies (Figure 9).

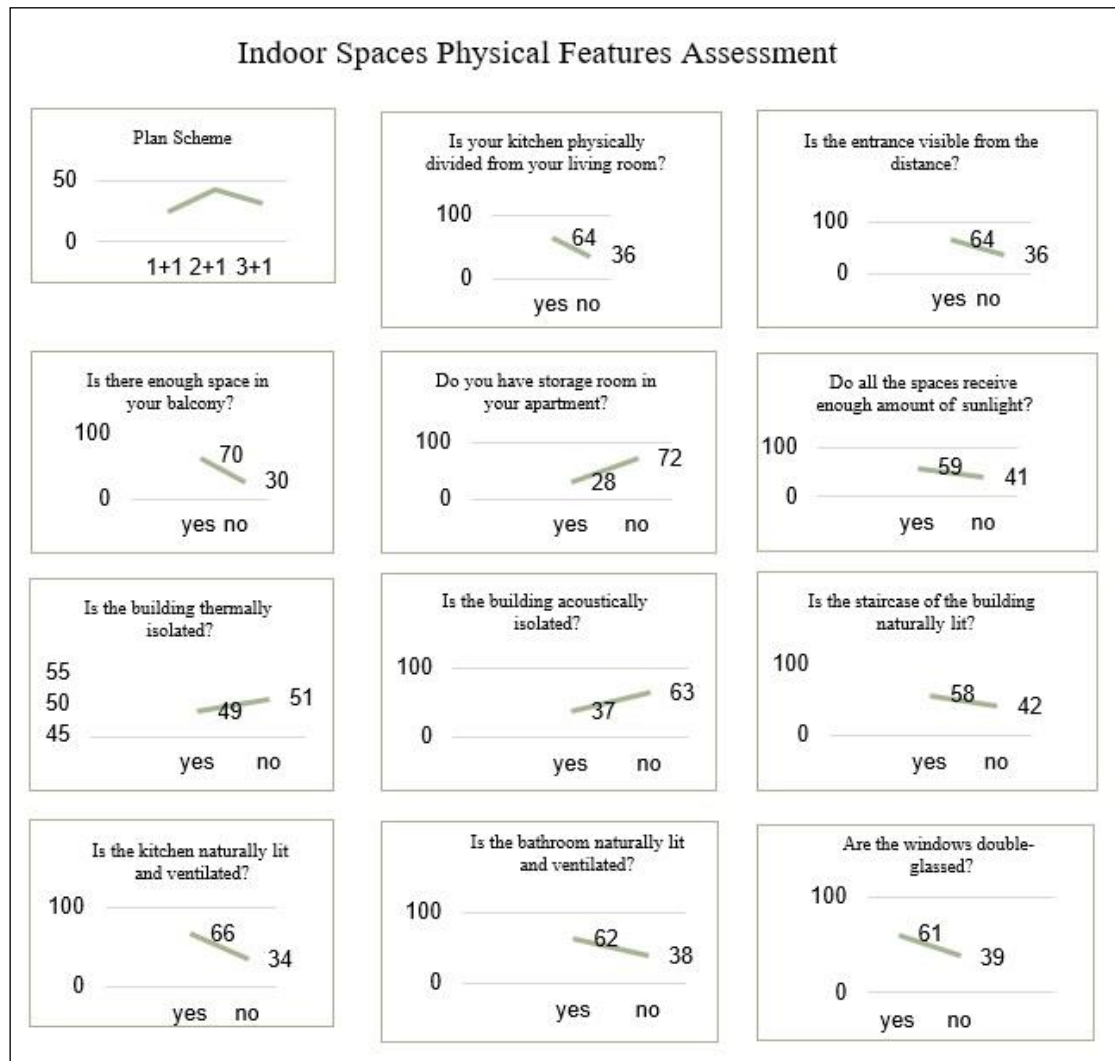


Figure 9 The results of the dwelling's indoor spaces' physical features assessment

The assessment of indoor spaces' social characteristics showed that most of the dwellers knew each other and they salute the other apartment dwellers of the building. However, the dwellers reported that most of them do not socially integrate. The level of socialization is reported even lower when they are asked whether they hang out or have a coffee with their neighbours. This might be related to increased mobility among the dwellers of such a neighbourhood and their socio-demographic profile. Interestingly, most of the dwellers included in the research responded that they don't attend condominium meetings. In addition, a predominant majority replied that they do not allow kids to go to each- other's apartments. This might be related to a feeling of insecurity and disbelief among the dweller of such a dynamic, entertainment and business-oriented nature neighbourhood (Figure 10).

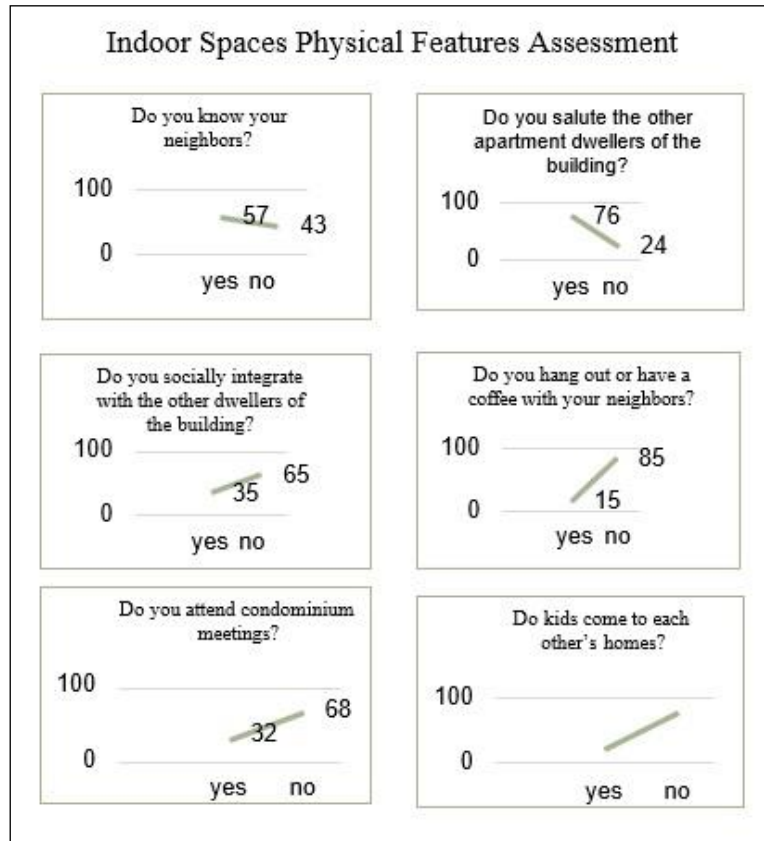


Figure 10 The results of the dwelling's indoor spaces social features assessment

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The study assesses the indoor and outdoor spaces in high-rise residential buildings in the Bllok neighbourhood in Tirana, measuring both their physical and social features. The perceived overall condition of their dwellings is mostly reported as very good and satisfactory, whereas the dwellers reported accessibility and the location of their dwellings as the most favourite features. In addition, the air quality is described as "so-so" between normal and polluted.

Most of the outdoor physical characteristics of their dwellings are reported as satisfactory by the majority of the responders, but the presence of greenery is predominantly listed as poor. Furthermore, benches and sports facilities are lacking, and the availability of walking, cycling, and parking is usually reported as insufficient. The majority of residents believe that their outdoor spaces are inaccessible to people with disabilities. Finally, they report being mostly satisfied with the presence of facilities, and they feel safe in this area.

The outdoor social aspects of the neighbourhood are reported as balanced, since more than half of the interviewees use communal spaces to socialize, although strangely, the majority report that they just pass by. Although the communal spaces are predominantly considered safe, instead of them, the dwellers use the coffee shops as socialization places.

The indoor physical characteristics are featured mostly by 2+1 apartments, which in the majority possess a divided kitchen and living room, The apartment blocks have visible building entrances from a distance and have balconies with enough space, but the majority do not have a storage room.

While the indoor spaces are assessed as receiving the right amount of sunlight, most of the dwelling staircases are naturally lit, as well as the kitchen and the bathroom, which are naturally lit and ventilated at similar values. Meanwhile, half of the buildings are reported to have thermal insulation, but in the majority, they do not possess acoustical insulation, whereas in most cases, they are reported to have double-glazed windows. The high-rise dwellings' indoor spaces do not generate

very strong social features, as the dwellers predominantly know and salute each other, but they do not socially integrate, hang out with neighbours, or leave their kids to visit each other's homes. Finally, the study recommends that special attention be given to the outdoor physical spaces, due to the lack of greenery and sports facilities in this neighbourhood. Furthermore, it suggests maintenance and upgrading interventions for outdoor spaces, which are so crucial for the creation of a healthy outdoor social environment. Although it can be said that the indoor physical characteristics are generally assessed as satisfactory, their social features in such high-rise apartment blocks are reported as low. Further studies can focus on the mechanisms needed to increase the socializing potential of indoor spaces in high-rise dwellings.

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