

PLANNING BETWEEN VACUUM AND ENERGY!

The case of Co-PLAN, Tirana Albania

Besnik ALIAJ

Abstract

This presentation will show a summary of architectural and urban development' phenomena in Albania since the collapse of centralized economy by early 90-s up to date. During this period the national urbanization level grew from 35% to 60%; while Tirana the capital city doubled its own built-up area and tripled its population! The presentation will focus on the efforts of society and authorities dealing such complex reality. Special attention will be paid to the experience of the non-governmental initiative namely Co-PLAN Institute for Habitat Development; starting from the piloting of upgrading and formalization of informal settlements of Tirana, towards models of realistic planning systems; as well as the creation of critical mass of expertise necessary for undertaking successful reforms, via the establishment of Polis University, International School of Architecture and Urban Development Policies.

Albania – is located in the Balkan Peninsula of Europe, as part of Mediterranean South-East European region. Its neighbor countries are Greece, Italy, Montenegro, Kosovo and Macedonia. Albania counts 3.5 million inhabitants and 1 million emigrants in EU countries and North America, not mentioning the Albanian speaking communities in adjacent countries. Its total surface has about 28,000 square kilometers (comparable somehow in size to Holland, Costa Rika or South Korea. The capital city - Tirana - counts nowadays at least 700,000 inhabitants, while Tirana-Durres Metropolitan Region hosts beyond 1 million inhabitants. Albania has quite an interesting and ancient history. It is famous how Muslim, Orthodox, Catholic and other religious communities coexist in harmony for centuries. Although nowadays it's open and easily accessible, because of its past, Albania remains still unknown for most of the Europeans and professionals... Why such "mystery"? A former part of Roman, Slavic, Ottoman and Centralized Economy rule, Albania experienced during the second half of the 20th Century a harsh regime of several decades of nonsense self-isolation from the rest of world. Private property, religion and freedom of movement were practically denied. This was neither "communist" nor "capitalist", but instead a pseudo "no-east no-west" almost feudal system ending up by the end of 80-s at the brink of a national humanitarian collapse. Since then Albania became parliamentary republic committed to democracy and market economy. After a volatile start during 90-s, since 2000 the economy is relatively stable and leading in the region. The authorities are working with a wide support from the public for the full integration of the country in European Union and NATO. Actually Albania is one of the ten fastest growing economies in tourism together with countries like Croatia, Montenegro, etc. During the last decade the economy in total grows at an average of 6% per annum, while inflation is by average 3% despite global crisis.

Tirana, A Planning Laboratory - From one of the most rural societies in Europe (20% by late 40-s; and 35% by late 80-s) applying strict anti-urban policies, Albania transformed aggressively in less than two decades in an urban society of almost 60% urban population. According to National Institute of Statistics (INSTAT), the urbanization and migration rates in the capital, Tirana, emerged dramatically by early 90-s at 7-9% per annum, while unequipped authorities have been caught surprised by enormous pressure coming from individual

initiatives. The capital Tirana nowadays has at least doubled in surface, and the population at least tripled. Furthermore, the capital tends to form a metropolitan expansion together with the country's main port-city Durres, as well as the newly informally developed peripheries. Imagine a former strictly-planned society which suddenly explodes towards a mentality where there is almost no space for planning. So, despite the boom of formal investments, also more than 500 thousands extralegal properties and businesses mushroomed in the country, mostly in the capital region and coastal areas. According to the Albanian Government and UNDP, they are worthwhile almost 13 billion Euros, which is 4 times more than international aid given to Albania during transition, 9 times more than foreign direct investments, and 9 times more than national reserves minus gold (the actual national GDP is around 10 billion Euro). Indeed Albanian metropolitan region accumulates 1/3rd of country's population. Co-PLAN claims that if continuing so, probably by 15-20 years it will end up by accommodating probably 2/3rd of national population at the costs of the society and environment. In fact, Tirana is struggling hard in such situation! It represents nowadays not only the most vibrant city of the Albanian speaking territories, but also one of the most emerging urban economies and construction booming in the Balkans. It is also an extremely interesting planning "laboratory" in itself.

Albania has indeed many progresses in several directions, but still tries to address inherited restitutions problems of historic owners; setting up sustainable information systems; reforming urban and environmental planning systems; fighting up corruption and informality; etc. However it has all undergone unbelievable changes, and exactly because of such tremendous, fast and furious features, Albania and its capital Tirana offers a unique perspective for urban planning and development. It holds an enormous energy within, which deserves to be explored, analyzed and studied... Tirana is a city where the glorious-crazy urban "dreams" of a local Monarch (King Zog) and of a dictator (Mussolini), meet with those of an authoritarian communist leader (E.Hoxha). It blends together both planning from the perspective of centralized and market economy; and reflects planning under conditions of institutional vacuum and chaos of energy of people. It mixes planning top-down and bottom-up, between extreme order and total freedom. It is a city where formal and informal planning coexists and competes seriously. A city with a formerly "forbidden" neighborhood serving at that time only to communist authorities; which suddenly transformed in a lousy hot-spot business and entertainment downtown center of 24-hour life. They are all there: mixed together with the enthusiasm of present; inspired by freedom of movement and private initiative; within an almost drunk-able "urban cocktail". One can say that 'love' and 'hate' for planning lives in Tirana, while society and authorities are struggling to cope with them. But Tirana is also well-known for its creative and charismatic municipal governance. It is famous for the project of painting main building facades, as part of a city beautification process as well as its international "Art Biennale". Tirana is also known for its latest international urban design/planning and architectural competitions Not occasionally the Municipality and Mayor of Tirana Mr. Edi Rama received several international awards and acknowledgements, including "Mayorship of the World" by UN for the improvement of life in the city. Even in this sense Tirana is quite interesting...

Co-PLAN Institute and POLIS University - After 2 decades of almost total "freedom" that came suddenly after 4-5 decades of authoritarian regime, there is a clear need for a new concept of realistic architecture and city planning in Albania! And that is the space elaborated by Co-PLAN (www.co-plan.org) and POLIS University (www.universitetipolis.edu.al). During these years U_POLIS has created an alternative university in Albania and region in the field of Architecture & Urban Planning. Indeed POLIS was established on the experiences and values of Co-PLAN, Institute for Habitat Development; a pioneering non-government organization in the field of urban planning in Albania. It intends to establish a critical mass and expertise for change in this field in Albania. Indeed city planning almost do not exist at other schools in Albania because of the lack of capacities and research. Even public university has more an urban design type of planning. This renders U_POLIS, albeit a young university, in a leading position. U-POLIS responds practically to the educational and research needs in Albania and Kosovo, and other Albanian speaking areas in the region. These countries often lack quality

education in the field of Planning. POLIS wishes to contribute to national and regional development, by offering education and research in planning and architecture through international exchange. As it was explained above the legitimacy of Co-PLAN, Institute for Habitat Development is being for almost 15 years in the forefront of the research and practice in the field of urban design, planning and development in Albania. Co-PLAN received support from various local communities, authorities, and international donors while developing several pioneering urban projects in Albania. Among others, Co-PLAN received international recognitions and awards, including World Bank recognition in 1999 and UNDP Best Practices in 1998. In 2003 Co-PLAN and Municipality of Tirana organized the European Conference of Housing and Urban Development "Making Cities Work", on behalf of ENHR, European Network of Housing Research, not mentioning numerous national and regional workshops, seminars and sensibilization campaigns. In 2005 Co-PLAN submitted to the Albanian Parliament a Platform with recommendations for reforming the National Planning System, including formalization of informal settlements. The Platform is considerably adapted by the Albanian authorities, including several legislative actions. Actually, Co-PLAN has joined U-POLIS research arm and involves students and academic staff in practical exercises in Albania and internationally.

Lessons learnt from Co-PLAN experience:

Co-PLAN experience so far could be summarized in three main stages:

1. Establishment of organization and first urban upgrading models.
2. Consolidation of organization/models, and replication at wider scale.
3. Impacting society and policy/decision-making, and dissemination of knowledge.

The first phase originates since early 90-s up to the period of conflict in Kosovo (1999). During this stage Dutch (non-)government organization supported strongly the establishment of organization and its capacity building. Co-PLAN built up the first model of urban upgrading at Lapraka informal neighborhood of Tirana. During 6-7 years a local CBO was identified and strengthened, to lead neighborhood participatory planning processes, including: opening 3 km of roads and public space, as well as setting up a community center with social, health and educational facilities. A plan was submitted to and approved by local authorities and a memorandum of understanding for cooperation between local CBO and Municipality guided public investments on 5 main services/infrastructure like water, sewerage, power, roads and garbage collection. It has been selected as a Best Practice of UN Habitat in 1998. The project was then replicated at bigger scale in the informal settlements of Bathore (Kamza 2000-3) and Keneta Durres 2003-6 (backed by Austrian Government), as well as in the formal areas of Tirana and other cities. It also leads to a large scale Urban Land Management Program of Albanian Government, supported also by the World Bank.

The second stage continues between 2000-2006, where Co-PLAN shifted more towards assisting communities and local authorities in Albania to prepare bottom up urban/city (strategic, action and regulatory) visions and plans. This includes planning exercises/processes in municipalities of Kamza, Kruja, Elbasan, Fier, Durres, Tirana, Librazhd, Peshkopi, Fush-Kruje, Vau-Dejes, Koplik, Kukes, Fush Arrez, Berat, Lushnje (Albania), Mitrovica, Junik (Kosovo), and recently in Tetovo (Macedonia) and Tbilisi (Georgia), etc. The most important program of this phase becomes "EGUG – Enabling Good Urban Governance" focused in the cities of Elbasan and Fier supported by Dutch Government. Participatory planning processes were followed by participatory budgeting exercises that led to efficient concrete social and infrastructure investments in these cities. Such examples become references of a new city planning philosophy in Albania. Since 2005 Co-PLAN has been also committed to influence decision/policy-making in Albania. During this phase Co-PLAN drafted and submitted to Albanian Parliament a political-technical platform on reforming territorial planning and property system in Albania. It also included issues of formalization and integration of informal settlements. Part of such platform has been adopted in concrete legal initiatives by government and parliament. Nowadays among others Co-PLAN is also working

towards reforming of regionalization in Albania according EU guidelines. Establishment of POLIS University as mentioned above was another initiative of Co-PLAN to create critical mass of expertise and knowledge transfer that will hopefully bring changes in Albania in this sector.

Some of the main lessons drawn from Co-PLAN experience are:

1. The role of NGOs and CBOs in channeling local city planning processes during stages of early development for post-traumatic and transitional economies is not only essential but often becomes the origin of change in itself. It is so important that international experiences are blend and interpreted on local context by local initiative owners.
2. The role of international (non-)government organization in implanting and promoting local development is essential when they relay on local structures and in absence of such structures in key individuals that tent to build sustainable local institutions, especially under the conditions when authorities are weak.
3. Successful development and planning can happen only when local authorities are part of discussion, and especially when they have clear ownership of development visions with concrete participation of other local stakeholders.
4. There could not be successful planning processes in place if politics and political interests are not counted. It is not even fair to say that planners must be 'neutral' in the political game. Without necessary getting involved in politics, planning in itself could be considered public politics. The clever advice is how to match local political and economic interests with interest of people and communities, and maintain the professional/intellectual ethics of planners and architects.
5. There can not be a "happy ending" with planning, if tentative to reform traditional systems in place are not followed by strategic human capacity development actions. Therefore, education is essential in order to establish a critical mass of expertise at local/public administration which will hopefully produce positive changes and sustainable institutions.
6. In order to build sustainable physical, social and economic living centers people, communities, businesses, and authorities must make a choice to see each other as partners or "enemies". The first option is complex, costly and difficult at short term but sustainable in long term, while the second one means endless conflict...
7. Most of the world nowadays suffers from inefficiency of governance, corruption, lack of access, and exclusion. This has produced a high degree of extralegal economy, which if considered carefully might change positively the performance of authorities. The extralegal sector in itself is compounded by several segments from criminal activities to "light grey" economy, and if they are analyzed in details, special policies could be applied to incorporate people in need towards formal sector, while isolate/fight against criminal activities.