
Research Paper

Exploring the sense of belonging in public spaces of Tirana

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Abstract

To understand public space, we must first embrace the political, historical, and social situation of society. Historical events have dictated a cultural environment that cannot be ignored. The knowledge of this context thus becomes an essential step to be taken to read and understand public spaces as perceived by inhabitants' eyes. It represents the key to comprehending the transformations and stratifications that have taken place over time in the public realm. Public space must be linked to the place and their transformation must appear, albeit in new forms, as if it had always been the same over time, improving the sense of belonging. Tradition, identity, and memory of the place are three fundamental elements that contribute to the quality evaluation of the public space. The questions that motivated this research are: - Is there a historical and morphological identity of public space? Is there a tradition to preserve or a memory to recall that creates an attachment? The research investigates if and how these concepts are legible in the public spaces of Tirana. The aim is to interrogate different urban places for morphological and perceptive characteristics and identify common elements of shapes and uses. These places came out if we consider these factors: urban context, design period, and transformation scale. This research is addressed to community and planning practitioners, local authorities, architects, urban designers, etc. It is an attempt to contribute to guiding future projects toward high-quality public spaces for Tirana, with a low risk to lose the sense of belonging.

Keywords

Urban space, public space, collective memory, place identity, sense of belonging

1. Introduction and methodology

1.1. Introduction

To understand the use of public space we must first embrace the political, historical, and social situation of the country. Historical events have dictated a cultural context that cannot be ignored. As Mumford (Mumford, 1953) declares in his writings "... the layout and shape of the city express visibly the developments of the associated life and perpetuate in a form the transient developments of history are stable". The knowledge phase becomes thus an essential step to undertake not to trace the reality learned from different eyes than the inhabitants.

The tradition, identity, and memory of the place represent three fundamental elements that add quality to the public space. Public Space Charter states that the community must recognize itself in public space. Lynch proved the long association that people have with parts of the city. He stated that city images were soaked in memories and meanings. (Lynch, 1960)

Tirana was founded in 1614 when Albania was under the Ottoman Empire. The old city had a mosque, a *hamam*, and a bakery. The mosque and the *hamam* were built after the Ottoman tradition. A few years later, the bazaar or *çarshia* was built close to the mosque. These buildings represented the center of the city until 1920. During three centuries of Ottoman occupation, the public spaces of Tirana were divided into two functional typologies: the bazaar and the street. Tirana had a typical structure of an Islamic city. The historical core of the city has developed around the Old Mosque of Sulejman Pasha – the founder of the city - located at the point of convergence of the main road lines. The centrality attributed to the mosque was not accidental and covers a symbolic meaning. The economic and political life of the city is organized around it. At the time, Tirana could not satisfy the needs of Capital.

Clarissa De Waal in her memories of Albania in the early 90s, collected in "Albania today", that she was surprised by the use of public spaces and writes that "Every evening, weather permitting, Tiranians went on the xhiro (pronounced jeero), the evening promenade which flourished under communism and still thrives today in every Albanian town". She described the city: "Tirana pavements are very wide but despite their spaciousness were always crowded in the mornings with groups of unemployed men meeting and chatting, greeting each other with repeated kisses on either cheek". (De Waal, 2007:31-32) Until the 2000s the interest in public space was insignificant: in fact, what it was before considered public it was invaded by buildings. The squares and streets became everyone's land to carry out various sales activities.

In post-socialist cities, rapid urban development marked the loss of the peculiar characteristics of the public space of what Pierre Nora called *lieux de mémoire*. Today's perception of space has undergone radical transformations that have affected the identity of the place - neglecting or denying - and the place-making process. Albeit Tirana is a relatively new city that has undergone radical changes at very short intervals, urban development was guided by the dominant ideologies of the time. It still struggles to develop its own identity. International architectural studios were invited to find solutions. It is the period of great international projects, which are changing the face of the city, making it a sort of open-air laboratory. The main question is whether to reconstruct the identity of the city or to consider the city as a "tabula rasa". The problem of contemporary architecture (Krier, 1979:16) is producing the same artistic solutions in different cultural situations over the world, in different traditions, and in distant geographic locations. Tirana is trying to reinvent itself as a contemporary city, but it doesn't have a clear strategy and doesn't know where current choices will bring it. Does Tirana have a collective memory to reconstruct? Building the city and the public space this way represents Albanian tradition or other. The architecture

and public spaces created in the period of Italian rationalism, socio-realism, and in the present day represent any kind of tradition. These questions are not asked to exhaust the topic and they do not tend to an explicit response, but rather to re-propose a cultural debate that for several years has been discussed widely by the designers working in Tirana.

1.2. Methodology

Tradition, identity, and memory of the place are three fundamental elements that contribute to the quality evaluation of the public space. The questions that motivated this research are: - Is there a historical and morphological identity of public space? Is there a tradition to preserve or a memory to recall that creates an attachment? The research investigates if and how these concepts are legible in the public spaces of Tirana. From the analysis of the Global Public Space Toolkit (GPSt) and the Public Space Charter, we understand the importance of using the term place that moves away from the traditional conception of public space and takes many different facets connected to principles of identity, memory, tradition, use, accessibility, etc. The concept of tradition, identity and collective memory that confer a sense of belonging in public spaces are discussed using the researchers of Hobsbawn, Norberg-Schulz, Bertozzi, De Benoist, Nora, Crinson, Boyer, etc.

The aim is to interrogate different urban places for morphological and perceptive characteristics and identify common elements of shapes and uses. These places came out if we consider these factors: urban context, design period, and transformation scale. The three case studies are central piazzas and were designed several decades ago. One of them represents an immutable space and the two others went through substantial changes in shape and use.

2. Identity and perceptual dimension

2.1. Tradition in Architecture

The theme of tradition in architecture is much discussed and is generally referred to in very recent historical periods, according to the place for which the tradition is being investigated. Tradition therefore substantially depends on the time, location, and geographic factors. It is obvious that, if we talk about tradition in the architecture of Rome, is not the same as Tirana, founded in the XVII century.

Polesello states that tradition can be understood as custom. Customs may change over time. Tradition can be a transmission over time, from one generation to another, through examples and testimonies. (Bertozzi, 2005:507) Tradition has two main conditions: static and dynamic. The condition of the stillness of tradition occurs when the work, the architecture of memory is transmitted and imitated. The dynamic condition is when tradition means "type" that is transmitted over time through a process of 'conservation, evolution, and therefore transformation. (Bertozzi, 2005) Unlike Hobsbawn (1984:4) who considers invented traditions and traditions as immutable. Immutability makes them repetitive, compatible, and even identical. The change is not excluded but is still very limited.

Rapid urban growth and technological development involve the evolution of new forms, functions, and meanings. Starting from these assumptions, the question of Polesello arises: How much back in time must we look to be able to claim for tradition? One, two, three, or much more generations? If you accept the possibility of building one "new tradition" as Giedion calls it, we automatically deny it the same possibility of referring to a unique tradition. George Pigafetta (Bertozzi, 2005:402) lists a series of main and common coordinates of traditionalism. I would like to highlight two crucial points, in my opinion:



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- continuity in the transmission of knowledge between generations and historical epochs, implying the permanence of fundamental values;
- the idea that architecture is linked to the place and that the new intervention must appear as if it had always been there.

2.2. The sense of belonging

Benoist's text deals with the concept of identity of a space, both public and private, as an identity of filiation, in other words: *of belonging*. (De Benoist, 2005) An identity is an act of deduction that is defined by local geographic character and society. He identifies two types of identities: one individual - which confines identity to interiority, thus becoming a lot subjective - and one community. Community identity is what identifies different communities. Pistidda (2015:11) instead, in interpreting Levi Strauss on identity, affirms that identities are in continuous redefinition.

Identity should not be confused with identification. In psychoanalysis "The identification concerns an interpenetration achieved thanks to the intrusion inside the object, projective penetration and therefore identified consequence". (Cotrufo and Pozzi, 2014:75) This identification process is also made clear by Norberg-Schulz while speaking of *genius loci*. According to him, identifying means becoming 'friend' with a given environment. (Norberg-Schulz, 2007:134) It is about a sense of belonging, a feeling of fundamental importance that shows the bond established between the individual and the public space. Therefore, in this research I do not deal with individual identity because for the use of public spaces we must refer to the community to which these spaces belong.

2.3. Historical and collective memory

The concept of memory is widely discussed in several studies. To frame the theme, I refer to the texts of Halbwachs (1980) Nora (1989), Boyer (1998), and Crinson (2005). Halbwachs identifies two types of memory, one individual and the other collective. If on the one hand, individual memory does present as facts or events that leave no traces in the memories of the community, but only in the individual, on the other hand, the sociologist affirms the concept that we are never alone. Memory is rebuilt in the individual through photos, videos, conversations, readings, etc., therefore the presence - not physical - of the 'others' affects and forms a collective memory in the individual. Hence, the "collective" term that is associated with memory, belongs to the individual as well as to the community in which the individual develops a relationship and differs from group memory. Therefore, to Halbwachs is useless to associate historical memory with collective memory since the latter shares with history only facts and events they experience, which are part of the consciousness of a group.

The philosopher Pierre Nora (1989) claims that the reason why memory is the subject of discussion for decades is that there is very little memory left. The memory of the places marks a moment of a break from the past. Nora discusses that "torn" memory, is the site of historical interest that does not incorporate memory into itself, thus becoming a *lieux de memoire* and not a context of memory (*milieu de memoire*). According to Crinson, if on the one hand, memory is a residue of past experiences, on the other hand, it indicates the way in which we collect pieces of our past. Starting from this presupposed, the memory of the place takes on subjective connotations that it can be used as a manifestation of the same or as added value. M. Christine Boyer, in her text "The city of collective memory", does not aim to define the term collective memory but to use it as a means for research purposes. Memory is reconstructed through the collected images of cities in inventories, archives, and encyclopedias as revoked symbols. The city becomes the place, where memory is fused with imagination, reality, and reconstruction.

3. What public space

3.1. Public Space Charter

The Public Space Charter is a document that constitutes the contribution of the Biennale of Public Space on the theme of public space. There Biennale of public space is an event created in 2011 by the National Institute of Urban Planning in Italy, to put the theme of public space at the center of attention by local administrations, professionals, universities, etc. The Public Space Charter was drawn up in Rome in 2013 and made a significant contribution to the Conference of the United Nations on Human Settlements in 2016.

The goal of the Charter is to consider public space as a fundamental element to ensure the well-being of the individual and society. The diversity of public spaces depends on the cultural and natural heritage of the community and is the foundation of their identity, through which the community recognizes itself in its public places and pursues the improvement of its spatial quality. One of the fundamental indicators of the quality of the public space is its use by the community. The Public Space Charter defines public space as: *"... Any place of public property or public use accessible and usable all for free or non-profit. Each public space has its own spatial, historical, environmental, social, and economic characteristics."* (2011:6) The Charter clarifies also which public space by specifying: *"Public spaces consist of open spaces (such as streets, sidewalks, squares, gardens, parks) e in covered spaces created on a non-profit basis for the benefit of all (such as libraries, museums). Both, when they have a clear identity, can be defined as "places". The goal is that all public spaces can become places".* (2011:8)

Public space must be accessible and must not have architectural barriers for motor, sensory or intellectual disabilities. Public spaces may be distinguished in:

- a) spaces that have an exclusive or prevalent functional character
- b) spaces that presuppose or favor individual uses
- c) spaces that, due to interweaving of function, form, meaning, and in the built / non-built relationship, have a prevailing role of factors of grouping or social condensation.

3.2. Global public space toolkit

The Global public space toolkit represents an outcome of a consultative process organized by Un-habitat and INU, together with a group of 30 experts from public space, and representatives of different countries and disciplines, to draft this toolkit, in 2015. The aim is to support local governments in creating and promoting inclusive, integrated, connected, sustainable, and safe public spaces. This toolkit defines public space as: *"Public spaces are all places publicly owned or of public use, accessible and enjoyable all for free and without a profit"*. (GPSt:24) The term space/place alludes to the quality that all public spaces must have. Public spaces include roads and public spaces (streets, squares, tunnels, bicycle tracks, pavements), open public spaces (parks, gardens, promenade, riverside, park games) and public facilities (civic centers, library, sports areas). This toolkit identifies the qualitative aspects of the public space. The study of hundreds of public spaces, located throughout the world, noted that the most successful public spaces had these qualities (GPSt:15): they are accessible, the users may conduct various activities, the space is comfortable, it is a social space, and people meet. This document recognizes and complements the principles of public space expressed in the Charter of public space.

4. Exploring the sense of belonging in three public spaces

4.1. The immutable space

The project Piazza del Littorio was designed in 1939 and was inserted within the project for the Avenue of the Empire, the square that determines the end of the avenue itself. The linear axis had to connect the old city with the new representative buildings of the Fascist Party. The central square close to central the old city hosted governmental buildings of ministries and the city hall. At the end of the axis, the new social and political center of the city was growing, following the fascist philosophy.

The square has a rectangular shape of 105x110 m, stretched out towards the main building of Casa del Fascio. It looks like an extension of the avenue that closes at the foot of the hill. The shape of the square, the use of the stairways and the base, the continuity of the facade, the rhythm, and the sculptures are clear references to monumentality as an expression of political power. The Florentine architect tries to connect his architectural language with the territory in which it operates to consider the existing context. Some of the traditional elements and re-proposed symbolism in the project are listed below:

- Building type: the tower. The tower as compositional volume, if on the one hand, it is a direct expression of the designer's style, it is also proposed as a recall of the traditional building typology, kulla.
- Materials: the use of natural stone as a tribute to the culture of the city palace (Capolino 2011:122), and traditional construction material of northern Albania, kulla.
- Architectural elements: the portico and the rectangular window. It recalls vernacular architecture and represents elements of rationalist language.

Since 1957 Casa del Fascio is the Polytechnic University of Tirana branch, the O.D.A is the location of the Academy of Fine Arts and the two buildings of the G.L.A have become the location of Tirana University Rectorate and the National Archaeological Museum. In 2014, the Institute of Cultural Monuments prepared a restoration plan of the square, with the intent to restore it as designed by Bosio. In the center of the piazza artists have created the "Tirana sixhade". This is a colored design on pavement forming a typical mosaic produced in the ShenGjergj area near the capital.

4.2. New Bazaar

As Tirana became the Capital, the old bazaar located in the city center grew up very fast. Following the friendship pact with Italy, two Italian architects, G. Becciarri and T. Giuliani were called in 1926 to design a whole complex dedicated to trade and retail. In 1931, the public administration decided to build another market area, known today as the "new bazaar". The market was the place where meat, fish, and vegetables were sold. It represents a tradition that continues nowadays. A public square was designed close to the "new bazaar", originally called "Parthern". Nearby is located the Kokonozi mosque. Before the redevelopment of the area, this situation was totally chaotic, and it was no longer possible to read it as a commercial complex. The pedestrian and vehicular flows were disorganized. Merchants sold in free spaces.

The interventions can be grouped into four main categories: restoration of building facades that delimit the area of the market, the restoration, and reconstruction of existing buildings representing architectural interest, the reconfiguration of the fruit and vegetable market, the reconfiguration and redevelopment of the public space of bazaar. The restoration of building facades consists in adding a symbolic value to buildings that delimit the market area. These buildings had not any peculiarities or

architectural identity to preserve. Considering the prevalence of Islamic architecture - also note the presence of Kokonozi mosque - the decorative motifs of the facades symbolize the oriental motifs of the handmade carpets. (fig. x)

The fruit and vegetable market were subject to total reconstruction since it did not represent historical or architectural values. The project re-proposed the roof covering. It is a steel and glass construction that occupies the central part of the square. The cover glass mirrors the facades of the adjacent buildings and illuminates the pedestrian area.

The study of the architectural elements of tradition plays a central role in the area's redevelopment project market. The project area represents a layering of architectural styles starting from the Islamic-Ottoman one up to the contemporary one. The project includes the restoration of buildings with historical and architectural values. In this project, the tradition is revived on different scales and on different elements. The reconstruction of the fruit and vegetable market has a roof that stylizes the tiled roof, as per tradition. The roof is proposed with accentuated flaps to be in line with existing buildings. The material used for sales counters and wood represents the material used in the initial project of the 1930s. The market square pavement was made of stones with a linear shape to imitate the typical flooring of the Albanian culture in *kalldrem*. In park areas, benches were made with traditional materials such as stone and wood, using stone support and wooden seat. The driveway part of the square has been paved and decorated with paint that imitates the motifs of oriental carpets.

4.3. The main historical place

Durres street, the most important road in the city was inaugurated in 1923. The path follows a straight line, in a direction that, the prospect of his extremity towards the square coincides with the silhouette of the mosque and Clock tower. These two buildings are part of the Albanian monumental and cultural tradition. (Faja, 2008:18) In 1925, the Italian architect Armando Brasini, after his work experience in Tripoli, was invited to deal with the urban planning of Tirana. He designed the new square close to the bazaar and Et'hem Bej mosque. The square aimed to orient the expansion of the city to the west and south so as not to intervene in the existing city, which Brasini plans to preserve. (Giusti, 2006; Capolino, 2011) In the project of the Italian architect, Florestano Di Fausto for the center of Tirana, the mosque, the clock tower is part of a system consisting of 3 floors of buildings, giving shape to a special and harmonious ensemble. Investigating this project, we can identify a possible grid/structure that may have dictated the composing rules of the square. There is a direct reference to past styles, with the use of simple forms that follow a game of overlapping between a regular quadratic grid and the geometric figure of the ellipse, which tries to cope with a missing monumental character.

The Roman architect claimed that in his architecture he always tried to balance the relationship with the existing context inspired by the environmental characteristics and the identity of the place. The architect stated that "not a stone was placed by me without first being filled with the spirit of the place so as to make it mine". (Tramonti, 2012:28) The projects for the square are related directly to the Et'hem Bej mosque. In his drawings, we note that the mosque influences the project in plan and section. In section, the mosque influences the height and the composition of building volumes. Note the correspondence of the alignments between the two volumes of the mosque: central body and dome, and Di Fausto's buildings with the central body and a rear floor to create the discontinuity of the facade.

With the end of II World War and the withdrawal of the Italian troops the square has been reorganized. Only the ministerial complex remains from the initial project. The vision of the 1957 plan was to cancel some traces, considered insignificant, of the old historic city and replace it with new rationalist approaches using large modern buildings. The architect of the Palace of Culture argued that the facade



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was inspired by the architecture of the city because it proposes the high porch - as an attractive walk - which closes in a quadrant with a view of the Et'hem Bej mosque. (Faja, 2008:18)

After the fall of the regime, the square had some insignificant interventions. The degradation continues for more than two decades. The piazza was invaded by vehicles. The current intervention was designed by a Belgian architecture studio and was completed in 2017. The proposal consists of one empty space, conceived as an urban void within the chaos of the existing city. The choice of the central empty space aims to offer an open view of surrounding buildings of historical and cultural interest. The piazza becomes all pedestrian probably to recall its use in the past. The oppressive monumental character of buildings under the communist regime is contrasted by the shape of the square: a huge low pyramid. According to the architects, standing on top of this pyramid, one is no longer overwhelmed by the architecture of the past. The project develops around four main themes:

- The flooring was made with natural stones from all regions of the country with a thickness of 10-12 cm. It creates a kind of puzzle that changes color due to climatic conditions as the color of the stone stands out in the rain.
- The proposed water sources will refresh the paved area during summer. They represent the fountain in the historical public space.
- A green crown with native vegetation (decorative trees, fruit trees, cuttlefish, and decorative flowers) surrounds the square.
- The lighting is concentrated on the perimeter of the square to highlight the buildings.

5. Conclusions

The design of public spaces in Tirana has become a topic of particular interest in the last ten years. In order not to risk producing unsuccessful spaces, the approach to designing must consider the existing urban context and the peculiarities of places. This research is addressed to community and planning practitioners, local authorities, architects, urban designers, etc. It is an attempt to contribute to guiding future projects toward high-quality public spaces for Tirana, with a low risk to lose the sense of belonging.

Designers are sometimes disconnected from the space-time dimension - in the strict sense - proposing spaces far from the needs of the users. In this context, the knowledge of 'space' and 'belongings' becomes crucial in future planning. Places that report false truths and that do not juxtapose - in terms of scale, shape, and size - with the urban texture, do not enhance the city. From the history of urban planning by Tirana, we learn that every project for the city center considered the mosque and the clock tower in the configuration of the square. In retracing the evolution of the traditional public space, we noticed that the existing historical public places did not have a precise and clear shape - because they were not designed spaces but instead interstitial or random spaces.

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