

Case Study Report

Where Albania Walks Project

Pedestrianization strategies for healthier and inclusive neighborhoods, a report from the field

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Abstract

Albania is a country that has been through multiple political transitions for most of the 20th century. A process that transformed its capital -Tirana -into a constant construction site. Its first regulatory city planning projects date back to the 1940s. However, they have been reviewed according to contrasting ideologies of successive political shifts. Before the rise of the communist regime, Tirana was a small, compact city that provided its citizens with their daily needs. It had plenty of public and open spaces, housing, and schools, but everything changed after the fall of communism. Tirana's population increased rapidly, and the need to build more residential buildings led to unplanned occupation patterns. As buildings grew taller and tighter, public spaces became almost non-existent. In addition, the mobility system has not been upgraded to cover the demand of the growing urbanized area. That resulted in a sedentary and unhealthy lifestyle affecting most particularly children and the younger population that use parks and playgrounds as an essential part of their growth process. Therefore, the city council of Tirana is currently developing a comprehensive program to improve the quality of its urban environment combined with a city-wide active mobility strategy. It aims to expand the existing network of public places to increase both health outcomes and the perceived quality of life.

This paper reports on the Where Albania Walks - a partnership between the city council, GIZ, and the WOW team. WAW takes place during the European Youth Capital 2022. It aims to create evidence-based and community-driven strategies to regenerate the urban environment in the neighborhoods in Tirana with special attention to the needs of young citizens.

Keywords

Pedestrianization Strategies, Urban Regeneration, Active Mobility, Inclusive Spaces, Participation

1. Introduction

1.1. Public Health Issues

Sedentary behavior causes deleterious health outcomes and is associated with the attributes of the built environment (Handy *et al.*, 2002; Saelens and Handy, 2008). The obesity epidemic is a global trend (WHO, 2013) and affects children and adolescents in particular (Hills, King and Armstrong, 2012). Non-

communicable diseases are included in the target 3.4 of the Sustainable Development Goals (UN, no date). Study conducted in the Balkan region by the national health organisation of Albania found that 10.87% of children in Albania between the age 6.5 to 15.5 years are considered overweighted and 5.66% obese (Jarani, Spahi and Muca, 2016). The study concluded that children living in urban environments in Albania are more likely to become obese than their rural counterpart. To illustrate the problem, the capital city of Tirana has only 75 public playgrounds that can not cover the demand of public spaces for a population of 850,530 inhabitants (Municipality of Tirana, no date).

	Overweight (%)			Obese (%)		
	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls
Total	10.87	11.53	10.21	5.66	5.77	5.55
Rural	11.81	12.6	11.03	6.28	6.35	6.22
Urban	5.71	5.82	5.59	2.26	2.72	1.77

Figure 1 - Prevalence of overweight and obesity in Albania among boys and girls aged 6.5–15.5 years (2013-2015), difference between rural and urban areas (Jarani, Spahi and Muca, 2016).

Albania has a mild climate with average 300 days of sun, making it possible to sit and walk outside over the whole year. However, many areas do not offer appropriate conditions to pedestrians with lacking or cracking pavements. Additionally, private appropriation of public spaces - they are often filled with chairs and tables – hinders more intensive utilization.

1.2 Spatial transformation process and the lack of adequate public spaces

The city of Tirana has been through a historical process of political shifts with strong impact on spatial development. The documented evidence of private property in Albania goes back to the 10th century with the act of land donation of the Byzantine Emperor for the Albanian bishops in 1018 and 1020 whereas the city of Tirana begins in 1614 when feudal Sulejman Pasha Bargjini started building the mosque, the hammam, the bakery and the inn, which became the core of the future city. However, it is only in the beginning of the 19th century that Tirana started to establish itself as the country's main city. It was temporarily declared capital of Albania at the 'Congress of Lushnja' in 1920 and finally receiving the capital status in 1925 (Çaushi, 2014).

The first regulatory plans for Tirana were developed by Austrian and Italian architects in the period between 1923-1924. They aimed to open a new and more efficient road network and administrative centers, as well as to maintain existing roads and some of the historical buildings. The Italian architect Armando Brasini hoped to limit the amount of demolition needed to execute his projects. He is responsible for creating what is currently known as the "New Tirana". That includes the Skanderbeg Square (the largest pedestrian square in the country) and its accompanying boulevard. Both of which continue to act as the center of the city while managing to spare the Et'hem Bey Mosque and the Vlach built church of Saint Procopius (*Heritage and architectural evolution in Tirana*, no date).

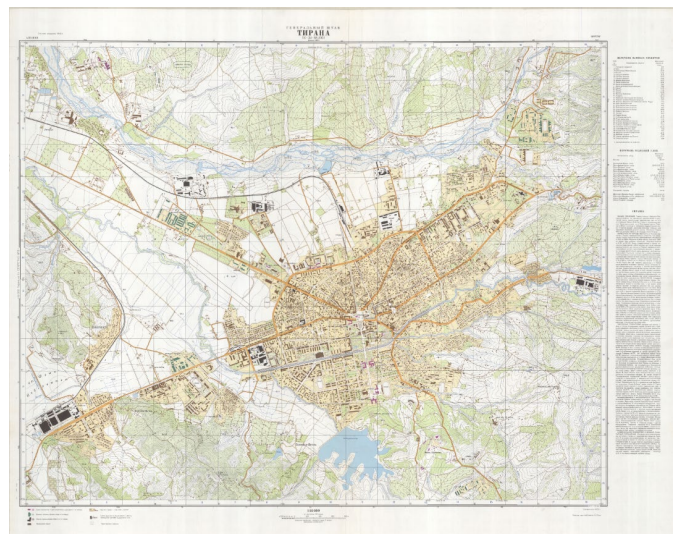


Figure 2- a) The main Boulevard of Tirana under construction, Italian architect Armando Brasini - Left , b) Map of Tirana 1975.

The end of the World War II positioned Albania on the Stalinist orbit and with the establishment of a dictatorial communist regime came the centralization of power and decision making which was also reflected on the urban interventions by a harsh and unique case of total abolition of private property. The soviet influence brought an urban plan in 1957 that resisted up to the 2000, with prefabricated building blocks, industrial enterprises and a road network being intact until 1990 (Resuli, 2014).

Political, social and economic crisis is what characterized the transition years after the fall of communism in 1991 (Pusca, 2008). Unclear tenure situation after the regime shift was manifested in the urban fabric in the form of informal occupations spreading over most of the city's public spaces, eventually choking the 'Lana' river . It was only after 2004 when all these new constructions were torn down in a structured demolition strategy that the river side green public spaces were returned back to the city. That was not the case in all parts of the city. The periphery was rapidly expanding through informal settlements to accommodate the influx of internal migration. Many squatters believed that it would be politically more difficult to remove well built houses. This prediction turned out to be correct. In mid-2000s, the Albanian government started taking steps to legalize and upgrade informal settlements throughout the country (Pojani, 2013).



Figure 3 – Irregular occupations on the Lana river, 2003

1.3 Lack of an effective public transportation network

The continuous expansion of the city's borders has not been accompanied by a comprehensive strategy to cover the growing mobility demands resulting in increasing dependency of cars. As repeatedly seen throughout its history, the haphazard development of the city consists of a sequence of demolishing and construction phases each time a transformative intervention was seen as necessary. That has been the case in recent years as well. Tirana is a radial city that relies on its ring road system to defuse traffic from center to its peripheries. The ongoing expansion of the city requires constantly addition of new rings. This process has been often proven impossible to implement due to the high requisite for expropriation after the legalization process that has been in place for many years. There are today 210 000 families in Albania that own a certificate of legalization of property making every meter of new road a long chain of lawsuits often accompanied by civil unrest (Monitor, no date).

Although public transportation has improved in the last years, with some of the bus lines being fully electric the large share of travels covered by private vehicles and illegal parking overload the road system causing traffic jams (Seitllari and Luga, 2016) which leads to air pollution in the main intersections of the city as studies shows alarming levels concentration of nitrogen dioxide (Banja *et al.*, 2010).

1.4 Challenges for a sustainable green development

The new masterplan of the city encompasses a new metropolitan dimension. To a great extent the vision is centered in preserving and promoting green space (Vokshi, 2021). The TR2030 approach covers key areas of the future city such as biodiversity, poly-centrism, knowledge, mobility, water, tourism, accessibility, agriculture and energy. The strategy of the Ministry of Urban Development in collaboration with a consortium of planning companies (Stefano Boeri Architetti, UNLAB, and IND) proposes a re-definition of open spaces in the already established city fabric, and combines this system with assets of nature and farming within the extended city limits. The most ambitious proposal of this masterplan is a forest ring around the new metropolis limiting sprawl and improving quality of leisure, sports facilities and biodiversity preservation. For this 'Orbital Forest' to come alive, 2 million new trees will be planted - out of which the ongoing planting campaign has reached to 350 000 tree plantings (Tirana 2030, no date).

Tirana has significantly increased bicycle lanes in recent years, nevertheless this sometimes has even created dissatisfaction, especially among businesses owners on the side of the streets where parking has been removed to make space for these new lanes. There are in total 44 km of cycling dedicated lanes making possible that 6% of the mobility share to be covered by bicycle travels (Porta Vendore, no date). That achievements raises the optimism for authorities to publicly express the ambitious aim of reaching 50% by 2030.

2. Methods

2.1 Project Design

In order to develop an evidence based strategy to improve the environmental quality of public and open spaces in Tirana we designed a project structured in six steps.

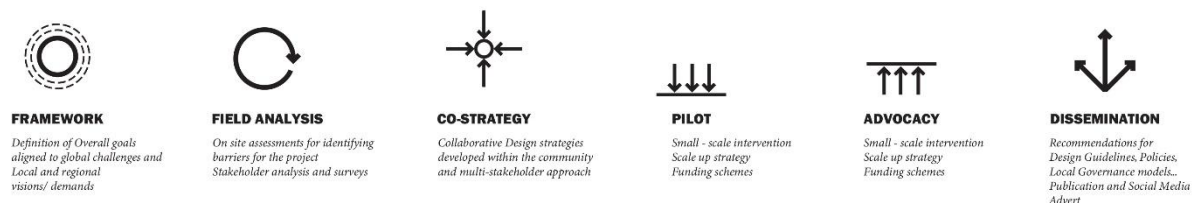


Figure 4 - Project design in six steps

Framework

In the first phase of the project, its general outline is defined. It consists of streamlining objectives/ visions of different levels – global such as the New Urban Agenda (UN Habitat 3, 2017) and the SDGs (UN, no date), National Visions, Local strategic plans, etc. to an overall mission which is meaningful for the study area in question. The formulation of this mission is stronger if developed in collaboration with established initiatives of the civil society active in the study area. In this phase we outline a preliminary research question. The preferred research method is a desk review using Content Analysis. Alternatively, we might conduct interviews with members of governmental bodies and other strategic sectors using storyline and thematic analysis. The interviews might be complemented by informal discussions and stakeholder analysis.

Field Analysis

In the second phase, we carry out data gathering to prepare a solid database enabling preliminary analysis. It consists of a combination of secondary data (statistic reports, inventory of studies etc) and extensive field work. The aim is to polish the preliminary question based on first evidence from the field as well as to define hypotheses to guide the further steps of the study. We have good experience to focus on quantitative methods at this point. Surveys on environmental perception, Mapping, Audits etc.

Collaborative strategies

The overall strategy is developed within a collaborative design framework. Co-Design workshops involving community members, experts and representatives of organized groups of the civil society and public authorities yield best results for customized solutions to tackle regional challenges using local sensitive measures (De Siqueira and Al Balushi, 2020). Often, the results of field analysis oversee important issues that residents of a specific area have the chance to expose.

Pilot Implementation, evaluation and Scale up

We secure the support of local authorities, or the project receives funds from third party donors (philanthropy, in country value or crowd funding) to realize a small-scale intervention. The aim is to test and validate the hypotheses and the collaborative strategy. The method employed for the post evaluation is the pre/ post-test through the repetition of Survey conducted in the field analysis.

Advocacy Program

An advocacy program with emphasis on capacity building is developed to increase the penetration of the project into more vulnerable communities, to maximize the impact, and guarantee projects sustainability beyond its completion (Balis, Houghtaling and Harden, 2022; Mendoza-Vasquez *et al.*, 2022). The method to gauge the success of the advocacy program is a monitoring routine using interviews/questionnaires.

Dissemination

The Progress of the project, achievements of milestones and innovation are documented and published through Project reports, events in the community, white papers, social media etc.

2.2 Selection of Study Areas

WAW is employing an action research approach (Adams, 2010) using pilots to validate and adjust assumptions. Aiming to capture the diversity of environmental qualities in the city, we planned to generate interventions in five study areas. The selection criteria includes three main variables

- 1) Density – The study areas should cover both low (suburbs) and high density areas (Central Areas).
- 2) Social economic status – Study areas from both affluent and socially vulnerable districts should be included.
- 3) Connectivity – Different driving distance from downtown/ business district, but all served by a bus line (formal or informal).

The process resulted in the selection of five potential areas: Xhamilliku, Kinostudio, New Tirana, Laprake, and Kobinat (FIG. 5).

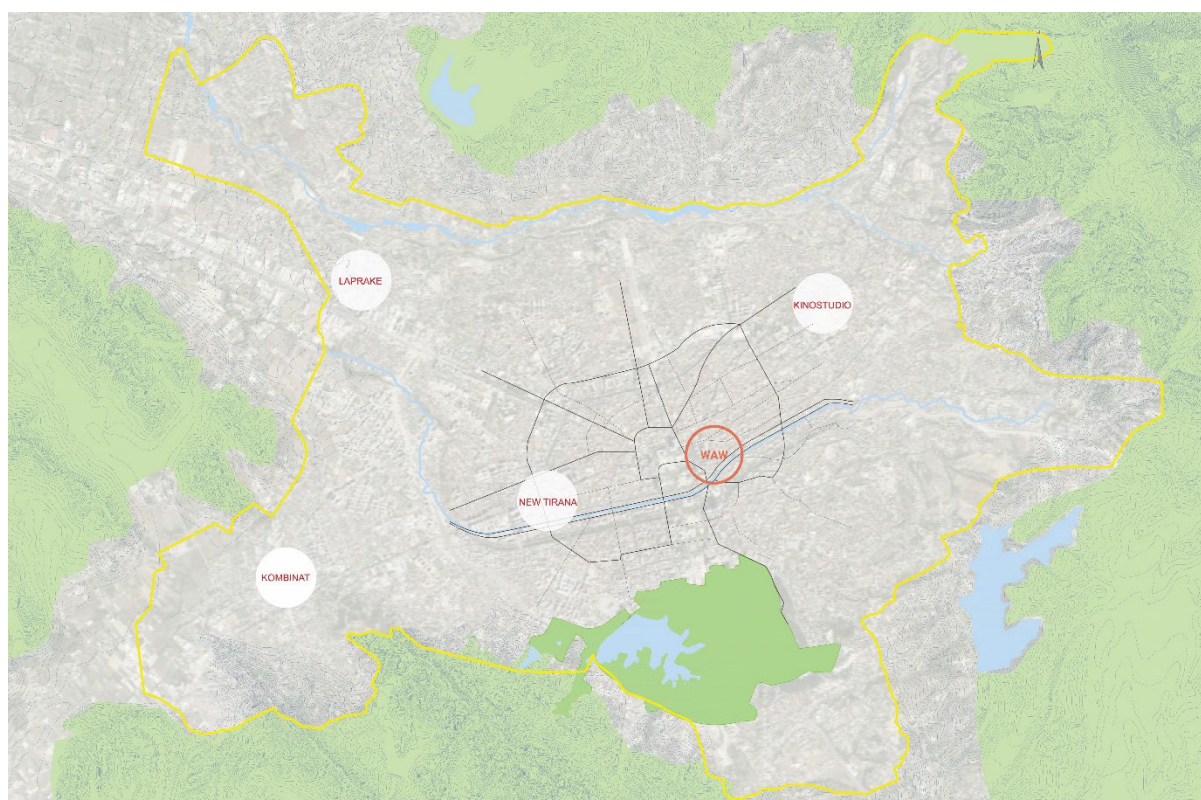


Figure 5 - Map of Tirana and location of the selected study areas – the current study area is highlighted.

The study areas are mainly residential and limited by a radial buffer of 500 meters equivalent to a five minutes walk. The centre of the area should be a public space and work as a local attraction point such as pocket space with a small shop area.

In this paper we will report about the results of the ongoing process of the study area Xhamilliku.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 Policies

The WAW project aligns to the TR2030 plan goals to turn Tirana into a healthier city. Further, it can work as an extension to the existing strategic plan for active mobility.

3.2 Field Analysis 1 Surveys

A survey based on an adapted version of NEWS questionnaire has been conducted in August 2022 in the district of Xhamilliku (see Fig 5). Overall, a group of 108 residents (N=108) from both ages and sexes responded to the questionnaire. The questionnaire has been translated to Albanian and back to English by two independent translators. The results discussed and discrepancies adjusted. The first version was piloted on the field and adjusted after the feedback by interviewers. The final version entails four demographic indicators, three questions to physical activity self assessment and 21 questions on environmental perception measured on a four points likert scale.

In terms of physical activity only 57% affirmed being engaging for more than ten minutes walking daily and only 12% are engaged in at least 150 minutes weekly as suggested by the WHO (WHO, 2013).

Question	N	Average Score
04. Type Apart 6+ Stores*	107	4.48
03. Type Apart 1-5 stores*	108	3.60
01. Type Single Family*	108	2.74
02. Type Row Houses*	108	2.26
08. Parking is difficult in local shopping area	108	3.49
07. It is easy to walk to transit stops	108	3.41
06. Many places to go within walking distance	108	3.39
14. Easy access to public transport	108	3.36
05. Stores are within easy walking distance	108	2.97
10. Short distance between intersections	108	2.95
11. There are many alternative routes	108	2.80
1-4. Density (collapsed)**	107-108	2.75
18. Too much traffic makes walking difficult***	108	2.61
19. Speed of traffic is low	108	2.57

16. Trees along the streets	108	2.44
15. Streets are well lit	108	2.35
12. Sidewalks well maintained	108	2.16
13. Sidewalks are separated from road	108	2.16
21. Unsafe to walk during the night	108	1.66
17. Interesting sights to look at	108	1.91
09. Major barriers to walk	108	1.31
20. Unsafe to walk during the day	108	1.29

Table 1 - Survey Items ordered by average scores of twenty one items questionnaire ordered by magnitude.
***items collapsed in one sub item – Desnsity**, Item 18 is a negative logic.**

The results of the survey suggest that some of the features related to land use scored well (Avg Score 3.9 and above) as well as demand management (Item 08) and public transport accessibility (Item 07,14).

Traffic safety related issues are possible constraints but rather at a moderate level (Items 18 and 19). Conversely, crime safety items (20 and 21) with average scores of 1.29 and 1.66 respectively. Similarly, pedestrian infrastructure related items (09, 12, 13) score at the medium-lower levels (Average scores below 2.5).

Aesthetic related items (Items 16 and 17) also scored from moderate to lower, suggesting that regeneration projects might have significant potential to increase physical activity.

3.3 Field Analysis 2 Maps

We developed digital maps to compare the results of the perceived barriers to pedestrian activity in the area with objective measures. As for the crime safety map, one of the lowest scores in the survey, we found that there are three main areas perceived as dangerous due to illegal activities (suspicious). Two of these areas coincide with areas lacking street lights. And some empty plot.



Figure 6 - Crime safety map - dangerous areas with "suspicious activities" coincident with areas lacking street lights



Figure 7 - Aesthetics map - interesting sights and trees missing in general

We also found that aesthetic elements are missing in the most parts of the area and three zones have special low environmental qualities. The Lana river bed has been transformed in a green boulevard. However, it misses to be attractive point for pedestrians both for leisure and walking for transport.

4. Next steps

The WAW team aims to develop a comprehensive regeneration strategy for the study area based on evidence from the field. This strategy will count with the participation of the community during a collaborative design workshop planned to take place during the week of 12th to 16th of September 2022.

The results of the field assessments and the co-design workshops will be presented during an exhibition and panel discussions in Tirana in the 13th and 14th of October. The Forum for Built Environment Research

(FABER) was organized by the WAW to involve the governmental sector and civil society in the discussion on active and inclusive urban environments in Albania. It will help to maximize the impact of the project.

Future activities also include the realization of five pilot interventions and a scale up of the project to create a Pedestrianization Master plan of Tirana to complement and extend the existing Active Mobility Master plan currently limited to the creation of bike lanes.

5. Funding

This project has been partially funded by the NYC program.

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