

Tirana. Four materials with an impermanent title

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Four homogeneous colours

The last Regulatory Plan of Tirana started its investigation process in 1986, and was adopted in 1990: just when the urban planning culture of the country completed its most advanced tool, its upholding socio-economic system collapsed. Consequently the infant Plan, with its load of provisions about the city's future, experienced a lonely decade – the 90s were a time of brutal transformations: in only 13 years, the population of the Albanian capital triplicates, as its urban form explodes following unprecedented migration and speculation anxieties. But this Plan, which to this day remains the only legally binding document, is now terminally ill, kept alive artificially and unable to provide support or solutions to the actual state of the city. Under the Plan's reassuring and homogenous coloured zoning, under its area partitions marked by clear lines, there lies a variegated reality of self-organized micro-transformations which have inverted its consistency, often completely reversing all urban provisions. It is impossible to presume how, by only looking at the map, one could really understand the city's real consistency. In this sense, today Tirana lacks a representative image, which would depict its character and guide the transformation energies towards a shared course. Production, Housing, Public Space and Nature – the four inherent elements of the Albanian capital, as its last Regulatory document predicts, have today a provisory and iridescent nature; to comprehend and describe them is the main bet that any new form of urban government will have to face.

Production

The first Communist Urban Plan, that can be traced back to 1957, assigns Tirana the role of an industrial city; with minor changes, this vision is substantially reconfirmed in the Regulatory Plan of 1990. The production is organized in large industrial islands, the *Kombinat*, in which all the phases of various production sequences integrally coexist, often together with the workers' residential neighbourhoods – all within the perspective of a centralized and self-reliant economy. The huge *Stalin* textile factories, the *Enver Hoxha* plant of motorized pieces as well as the *Josif Pashko* mill for the production of construction materials, were built in the 60s in semi-peripheral areas of the city, and surrounded by great fences. The 90s have seen these islands passing through periods of fading production, destruction, abandonment and lastly privatization



policies, which were not always managed in the most timely way, and which have allowed for pervasive processes of self-organized and abusive occupations. Much as corroded, the structures of the old industrial apparatus are still legible today, parcelled and deformed due to successive interventions of ensigns and the to the multitude of juxtaposed micro-activities that have violently acquired space in the vacuum of those public policies that should have been able to properly handle the passage from a centralized economy to a free market one. The old, huge fences enclosing the monumental accesses are a broken cord of junk that welds with the new informal textures surrounding them, therefore multiplying the access points. On the inside – a labyrinth of minor fences, occupied by molecular retail trade activities: import-export, handicraft, housing, minor services that reuse and deform the structures of concrete pre-fabricates: just like parasites inhabiting the body of a gigantic dead animal. A self-imposed hybrid model of both inhabited and productive district, that constitutes a presumably inventive counterpart to the great market road – made up of decorated sheds by western multinationals – rising and tacking the Tirana-Durrës highway like an unremitting filament.

Housing

The products of the communist Urban Planning policy in Tirana consisted of two main types of residential buildings: a solid body of 3-4 floors, built in brick walls, generally constructed within the perimeter of each block, and an isolated slab of 5-6 floors – built using a technology of pre-fabricated panels imported from the Soviet Union – generally organized in small nucleuses, homogenous in density and layout structure. The latter type constituted the majority of the social housing of the city in the 80s, giving birth to a series of residential neighbourhoods characterized by a rigid installation, a strenuous lack of services and which were erected in absence of a general strategy. Today these homogenous islands of pre-fabricated blocks, prematurely degraded due to the extremely low construction quality, remain one of the most resistant elements of the city – later on they were privatized, and tens of thousands inhabitants that do own their apartments, have transformed these buildings into cumbersome inhabited sponges that are very difficult to be relocated. They are almost illegible in the urban texture, because violently deformed not only in their bodies – additions, substitutions, closing of entrances, progressive appearance of ground floor commercial activities – but also in the adjacent areas and in the fragile open spaces surrounding the buildings. The distance between the residential blocks has been saturated by the rising of a pervasive residential-handicraft-commercial type that made the pedestrian walking very complex, and produced a problematic hyper-densification in the relations between the private and the open space. These are labyrinth textures, in which the Municipality is drafting a complex policy of demolishing and liberation – where it is possible – of the public sites that were abusively occupied:



both by restoring the previous road system, and by creating “active” green areas. However they remain an interesting and feasible model of re-functioning and mixture, showing the resident’s ability in reusing and transforming these old dormitory neighbourhoods, which is quite inedited if compared to European analogous social housing situations.

Public Space

The project of public space in Tirana, in its evolution from the Regulatory Urban plan of the 1942 to the communist one of 1956, till the one in 1990, has maintained a character that was predominantly celebratory and rhetoric, over-dimensioning, of excessive size. The systems of power that have succeeded in the capital have tried to represent themselves in the space through the axis and the system of central piazzas, as the ideal projection of their organization. Today, the entire area of the city centre is subject to a “rescue plan” by the french firm Architecture Studio, which proposes the redesign of a series of collective spaces assigning them some civic functions. What does it mean to project a public space in a country where, for fifty years, the “public” has been regarded as unfamiliar and hostile? A country that less than ten years ago revolted against and destroyed the collective equipments that were produced and managed by the State? A country in which the “public” space, on the contrary, during the 90s, was regarded as a terrain of unconditioned freedom, in which everyone could throw their garbage without the least of cares? On which practices would we base the project of a collective space, considering such context? Today the great marble plate opposite the National Museum – always empty and “absolute” in the official pictures, or crowded by military parades, presided by the statue of the headless head of state – is in fact a playground that is available to the entire city, a platform for playing with little for-rent bumper cars; the place of an informal economy of mobile telephones and other technologic devices, of street currency exchange and many other activities that enjoy the proximity with the post office. Analogous practices affect other open spaces throughout the main boulevard, from the steps of the University, to the mausoleum of Enver Hoxha, on whose inclined walls kids play and slide. The comprehension and the interception of this day-to-day individual dimension in the use of city space constitute an essential supposition if we want to start processes of collective consciousness, cohabitation and care, related to these spaces, and will be – beyond the great international architecture firms – the real nod of the new policy for urban regeneration.

Nature

A government that proclaimed the highest environmental standards in terms of green areas and transportation – from 11 to 13 square meters of green space per capita according to the foresights of the regulatory plans of 1959 and 1990, a



few hundreds of private cars in the entire country during the communist regime – has paradoxically alienated the citizens from the idea of nature as a public and collective gain. The Albanian's attitude toward nature and the natural resources of this past decade was of a predatory type: the mayor Edi Rama speaks about the nature represented in the collective imagination as a “treasure of the enemy”, of which everyone must get a hold of, in an individualistic manner. Today the vast healthy area foreseen in the plan of 1990, a green belt that should have marked the borders of the city, has been corroded by such a mushrooming illegal fabric of minute grain, almost capillary, that constitutes some kind of suffocating ring and an obstacle for the increase of communication between the city centre and a wider regional dimension. An area that, in only about a decade, has projected Tirana towards an essentially different dimension and unexplored system of territorial relations, if compared to the reassuring evaluation foreseen in its last Plan. Again, it is a fabric that exercises a dangerous pressure on the uncertain borders of scarce green episodes that have remained intact, like the large Lake Park, south of the centre, or *Lumi (river) i Lanës*, in the north. A fabric which is the result of the informal houses which in the 90s were constructed by tens of thousands of Albanians, who relocated from the north-eastern regions of the country, and abusively built their shelters on a territory that was not their own, following a faltering land regime. The environmental and social emergency that these areas present – today they represent about one third of the “Greater Tirana” – calls for an urgent policy of legalization and upgrading, but more fundamentally constrains us to consider new feasible molecular strategies, that would be able to react as enzymes of environmental consciousness and convivial prototypes inside this disordered nebulous of individual energies.

A plural image

In spite of an enduring impasse in releasing building licences, due to an open conflict between the Mayor and the Prime Minister, a new Regulatory Plan has been started. The Swiss group Urbaplan – third place in an international competition whom final results have been delayed several times – is actually leading a planning team which includes the local partner Co-Plan and the municipal Regulatory Plan department. The starting point is the palimpsest of the old Plan, re-written by the mosaic of urban studies that the local office daily updates in an exhausting compromise between developers and public rules. The preliminary analysis document is expected to be presented before March 2008.

What does the albanian capital is asking to this planner's team? Probably, not just another unitary vision, nor another violent planning act, aiming to follow and substitute the ones that have been projected on city's body until the 90s. But neither a new, west-imported image, just consisting in few slick and essentially iconic buildings. The implicit question raised by the city is rather how, today, we



could be able to draw out an image revealing its complex substrata processes, and verify the reassuring colours that dressed the capital both in its old Plan's zoning outlines and in the vivid and over-celebrated centre facades. An image capable to include, behind these aggregate representations, even the legacy of some minority experiences, that in the last decade provided some of the most interesting glances on Tirana, obliging us to look where the transformation processes were proliferating less explicitly, in the folds of the public policies. The participation processes managed in the informal settlements – the Bathore and the Allias experiences, leaded by Co-Plan – a series of brave art experiences – from the first Biennale, to the *Insurgent Space* happenings, until the artist residence program of the Tirana Institute for Contemporary Art – turned the city into that lab to which everyone is nowadays paying attention.

If Tirana will be able to build a new and fertile image for its future through the new Regulatory Plan, this should be first a modest interpretation line of its existing materials, able to understand them, to distillate them and ameliorate its performance. To name what still has a provisional title. This is, probably, what Tirana is asking to its technicians, and which should stay in the first line of their agenda.

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