The Detriments and Benefits of the Fall of Planning: The Evolution of Public Space in a Balkan Post-socialist Capital

Dorina Pojani\textsuperscript{a} & Giulia Maci\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a} Delft University of Technology, The Netherlands
\textsuperscript{b} International Federation for Housing and Planning, Denmark

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The Detriments and Benefits of the Fall of Planning: 
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DORINA POJANI & GIULIA MACI

Delft University of Technology, The Netherlands; International Federation for Housing and 
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ABSTRACT The purpose of this paper is to trace the evolution of the concept and role of 
public spaces in the capital of Albania, Tirana, since the fall of communism almost a 
quarter of a century ago. During this time, public spaces have undergone a complete 
transformation, which is examined through a theoretical framework based on under- and 
over-management critiques of public space. Processes of public space under- and over-
management are ongoing in Tirana, with neglect, car invasion and space privatization 
being the most problematic issues. However, the authors argue that both under-
management and over-management have had benefits as well as harm, in terms of urban 
diversity (economic and visual) and security.

Introduction

This paper discusses the evolution and management of public spaces in the 
capital of Albania, Tirana (an urban conglomeration of one million), during its 
transformation from an orthodox Stalinist socialist state to a democracy with a 
vibrant market economy and a weak public sector. During this time, Tirana’s 
public spaces have undergone a complete transformation. While in some ways 
the transformation has been similar to that experienced in other post-communist 
Eastern European capitals, it also reflects some of the unique Albanian 
circumstances.

This transformation has been marked by a lack of public planning control, 
management and order which has been both a curse and a great benefit. This 
paper considers these changes through the lens of theories of public space 
management that focus on themes of over-management and under-management. 
This perspective seems particularly pertinent to the Albanian situation in which 
the pendulum swung from extreme over-management exercised during the 
communist-era to acute under-management by the public sector and takeover by a 
de-concentrated private sector.

While focusing on public space, this research agenda is connected to some of 
the larger issues, trends and developments currently faced by former socialist 
cities in an increasingly globalized and privatized world. Meta-questions are

Correspondence address. Dorina Pojani is now at School of Geography, Planning and 
Environmental Management, The University of Queensland, Australia. Email: 
d.pojani@uq.edu.au

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explored, including: whether the fragmentation of public space in Tirana is a product of increasing deregulation and state withdrawal or increasing amounts of democratic action; whether patterns of public space provision increasingly mimic those of the West; and whether planning is the ultimate solution to the problems facing contemporary public spaces and the public realm.

Two well-known works of Matthew Carmona (2010a, 2010b) provide a theoretical framework, primarily based on Western examples, which reveals a dichotomy among public space critics. On the one hand, those responsible for the design, development and management of public space are criticized for the under-management of public space, leading to neglected, invaded, exclusionary, segregated, domestic, third and virtual spaces. On the other hand, others widely criticize planners for allowing the over-management of some types of spaces, resulting in privatized, consumption-oriented, invented and scary spaces. Criticism is underpinned by a growing awareness of the economic, social and environmental value of public space. Carmona’s hypothesis is that, in Western contexts, the combination of under-management and over-management forces has led to public space homogenization (Figure 1).

As a case study, this paper produces concrete, in-depth, context-dependent knowledge rather than ‘hard’ theory (see Flyvbjerg 2006). The authors argue that in Tirana both under-management and over-management have benefits as well as harm, in terms of quality of urban space, economic and visual diversity and security. Tirana’s particular combination of under- and over-management trends has not led to the homogenization of public space. On the contrary, it has produced a lively city with a varied and very individualistic creative character. In many ways its public space is more attractive than other more heavily regulated modern cities with stereotyped commercial landscapes.

The first part of this paper provides an overview of Tirana’s post-socialist development in the context of Eastern Europe and discusses the research methodology used by the authors. The second part deals with the evolution of Tirana’s public spaces. The analysis is placed in the multifaceted under-management vs. over-management framework constructed by Carmona, which is developed and adapted through the case study analysis.

![Figure 1. Theoretical framework proposed by Matthew Carmona.](image)
Tirana’s Post-socialist Development and the Eastern European Context

Tirana is located in the centre of Albania, half an hour east of the Adriatic Sea. It sits on a flat site, crossed by a narrow culvert (Lana River) and is flanked to the east by a mountain range (Mount Dajti). The climate is subtropical, with hot and humid summers, mild and wet winters. (Figure 2 (top) shows the site and the main landmarks discussed in the following sections.)

Tirana’s origins date back to the 1600s, during the Ottoman rule. For several centuries, a small oriental settlement, formed around a tiny mosque, served as a trading centre for agricultural products. When Tirana became the capital in 1920,
eight years after Albania’s independence from the Ottoman Empire, it had just 17,000 inhabitants. The main public space was a bazaar (a mainstay of Mediterranean cities in the past), adjacent to the mosque. The windy residential road system, lined by tall, whitewashed garden walls, was punctuated by irregularly shaped mini-plazas. During the period of Italian influence and occupation from the 1920s through World War II, Tirana was transformed into a colonial urban centre with a modern configuration, including a ring-radial road system, a straight north-south main boulevard, a realigned river and a scenographic centre. By the end of the war, the city had 60,000 inhabitants (Pojani 2010b).

In 1945, an exceptionally repressive communist regime, led by Enver Hoxha, took power. Under this regime, which remained in power until 1990, the capital’s population grew to 300,000. The communist government led the creation of a compact and relatively attractive car-free city (private car ownership was not allowed), with extensive parks and other open spaces. However, the city centre was a mono-functional administrative space and dreary parade ground. Open neighbourhoods were built with uniform mid-rise functionalistic housing estates (although not massive as in the rest of Eastern Europe). Most religious and ethnic buildings were demolished. The city offered few services and amenities and, unlike other communist countries, did not have a decent public transportation system (Pojani 2010b).

Under communist ideology, which governed Albania and the rest of Eastern Europe, the life of every individual must be public at all times, based on the notion that private interests must be subordinated to the common good. This ‘publicness’ found expression in numerous public spaces, including squares, boulevards and parks, in a dispersed pattern around the cities. Monumental central squares, which served as arenas of choreographed political demonstrations, coexisted with a multitude of small and medium-sized open spaces for daily sport and recreation activities. The abundance of public spaces and a ban on commercial activities in them resulted in a lower intensity of use than in Western Europe (Stanilov 2007).

The establishment of a new democratic government operating in a free market economy in Albania in 1990 led to drastic economic, social and physical transformations in Tirana. Its new physical development patterns were hyper-dynamic and chaotic. An enormous wave of rural and small town migrants led to the doubling of the population to well over 600,000 within a decade. The metropolitan area grew to almost one million inhabitants (one-third of the entire Albanian population). The urbanized area expanded more than fourfold (Figure 2, bottom). This rate of growth may be contrasted with the growth rates of other Eastern European capitals, which were not nearly so drastic or even minimal.

The emigration of almost one-third of Albania’s national population (mainly to Greece and Italy) led to massive remittances, with construction and real estate purchase serving as the only attractive investment vehicle (Pojani 2010b). In the rest of Eastern Europe remittances have played a role but not as large as in Albania.

Tirana’s new rural-urban migration was divided between the inner city with quickly built high-density mid-rise apartment buildings and the suburbs with sprawling, solidly-built single-family informal settlements without formal infrastructure. In contrast with other Eastern European capitals, middle-class suburbs and gated communities did not develop. The inner city remained the most desirable area to live. It became a vibrant space packed
with consumption and entertainment options, and unfortunately also jammed with cars (Pojani 2010b).

Eastern European capitals, including Tirana, came to be dominated by commercial activities. Street trade and small shops proliferated everywhere. In a sort of return to the medieval city model, parks and squares turned into improvised retail markets. Major cities expanded and sometimes densified. The turmoil surrounding property restitution procedures encouraged the appropriation of public space. Empty urban land in state ownership, from designed squares to leftover spaces between buildings, began to rapidly erode. In a reversal of urban values and meanings, cities filled with walls and fences to protect seized private property, as well as the private lives of urban residents (Stanilov 2007; Hirt 2013).

In Tirana, the urban growth was particularly intensive and chaotic. Tirana also differed from other Eastern European capitals because it was not flooded by large international food and clothing chains. While its informal suburban settlements are poorer and marginalized relative to the central city, their dwellings are now being legalized, infrastructure has been added, and urban commercial areas have developed. Although Tirana’s infrastructure is in a poorer condition and its appearance is disorderly by Western standards, its amenities are now similar to those in western European cities (Pojani 2010b).

Car invasion is also typical in post-communist Eastern European capitals. All have experienced an explosion of private car ownership and use which has overwhelmed roadway networks. In addition to the usual externalities associated with the automobile, speeding and reckless driving became standard, since enforcement of traffic regulations has been very lax in some post-socialist countries (Pucher and Buehler 2005). Tirana’s case was particularly extreme because it transformed from a city with no private cars to a city which was flooded with cars without any driving or parking rules (Pojani 2010b).

Methodology

The qualitative data for this paper were obtained in 2011–2013 through interviews and observations.

Twenty-three semi-structured detailed interviews were conducted with key informants from the public sector, the private sector, universities and research institutes, non-profit organizations and independent experts, including prominent architects, planners, artists, civil society activists, politicians and journalists. For a broader context, a few interviews conducted by the World Bank for another project were used as a cross-reference. The interviews included detailed questions on: the definition and meaning of public space in Tirana; the recommended physical setup and amenities of public spaces; the most emergent problems evident in public spaces; funding sources and funding levels for public space creation, renovation and maintenance; perceived safety levels in public spaces; the organization of outdoor events and activities; the accessibility of public spaces; planning regulations governing public space; the role of the public sector in public space production and management; private sector involvement in public space production and consumption; current public and private projects targeting and/or affecting public space; and resident participation strategies in public space design. The interview data are summarized in the text, but the interviewees are not quoted by name in order to protect the anonymity of their responses in Tirana’s extremely controversial political environment.
Participant observation was carried out in selected public spaces (1–3 hours in each) with different functions and morphology, both in the centre and in the peripheries. The authors noted the transport access, parking availability, handicapped access, presence of commercial activities, cleanliness, activities, visible management and maintenance, and general attractiveness. Notes were complemented by photographs, sketches and conversations with users.

The Evolution of Tirana’s Public Spaces

As previously mentioned, the transformation of Tirana’s public space will be examined through a theoretical framework based on under- and over-management critiques set forth by Carmona (2010a, 2010b). Carmona’s framework was constructed through a literature review. Each of the following sections opens with a summary of his main theoretical points derived from the literature, before moving to the analysis of Tirana’s case. In the interest of brevity, specific references to each critic’s work, which are provided in Carmona’s review, are not repeated here.

Under-managed public space includes ‘neglected space’, ‘invaded space’, ‘exclusionary space’, ‘segregated space’ and ‘domestic, third and virtual space’. This set of classifications stems from the notion that public space and the public realm are experiencing a decline. Over-managed public space includes ‘privatized space’, ‘consumption space’, ‘invented space’ and ‘scary space’. This paradigm revolves around a notion of increasingly commodified public space. Unavoidably, there is overlap among the elements of the framework. These classifications are not mutually exclusive and some could arguably be placed in a number of the categories.

Under-managed Public Space

Neglected space: ‘publicness’ under attack. Neglecting public space, both physically and in the face of market forces. Some international accounts paint a picture of public space that is littered, piled with rotting garbage, covered in graffiti, choked by traffic and filled with ugly buildings. According to ‘the broken window theory’, minor signs of decay, if ignored, can lead to a spiral of decline. The blame for this situation is placed on public authorities and the general public, because they are uninterested and uninvolved in public space management.

Tirana’s public spaces have been subjected to neglect and abandonment, or worse, attack from residents. Lack of maintenance and cleanliness was identified by many interviewees as a major problem of public spaces. Blight was common and greatly diminished comfort in public spaces. Some newly renovated public spaces have failed to kindle a regenerative effect and are already decaying (Figure 3). These outcomes were seen as a failure of both the public sector and the residents.

Public sector interviewees lamented that an overwhelming majority of people still believe that the responsibility for maintaining public spaces lies solely with the public sector. However, with meagre local revenues, the City has limited staff and resources to ensure ongoing public space maintenance at a satisfactory level. Residents have not taken an interest in the maintenance of neighbouring spaces even though this factor affects their property values. This concept has not taken hold yet in Tirana. Interviewees opined that the passivity of much of the
population with regard to the maintenance of public space has to do with the fact that people equate the maintenance of ‘public’ space with excessive ‘authority’ or ‘government’. These entities are seen as hostile rather than supportive, due to the still vivid memory of communist oppression and to the high levels of corruption in the current public administration. ‘Voluntary’ activities benefiting the ‘commons’ are associated with the forced labour of the communist era. Loss of concern for public space was also explained by regional differences and rivalry among new urbanites. While in prior eras neighbours judged each other based on their informal contribution to the maintenance of common areas, these values have now disappeared. Newly established neighbourhoods are less cohesive than others and have no long-standing traditions that can be harnessed for maintenance purposes. The population has become increasingly individualistic and family-oriented rather than community-oriented (Dervishi 2001). Therefore, no grassroots initiatives have been undertaken to clean and tidy up public spaces.

Notwithstanding these shortcomings, the research also revealed that neglect can be overcome without major investment, and that rejuvenated public spaces become heavily used by citizens. Some small-scale interventions by the public sector have been very successful. These include the creation or revitalization of neighbourhood pocket parks and open spaces, a holistic intervention in May Day (an inner-city neighbourhood), the creation of a 1 km-long linear neighbourhood park, and the pedestrianization and design enhancement of two short streets in the centre (Figure 4). Observations showed that the provision of dense vegetation
for sun protection, light fixtures, benches, small game tables, tot lots and small sports fields, as well as the application of simple car control measures (i.e. installing guard rails and raising squares a few steps from the sidewalk to prevent a takeover by parked cars), was critical to the success of renovated parks.

Interviewees emphasized the importance of finding creative solutions with regard to public space maintenance, involving the private sector. An example of a public-private hybrid scheme is a ‘gentlemen’s agreement’ in 2000 between the mayor and shopkeepers operating in the ground floors of buildings along some main streets, who were allowed to occupy 50 cm of public sidewalk in exchange for renovating the façades of their buildings. Formal agreements have been reached with a few large private companies, which have donated street furniture that carries the company logo. A type of public-private partnership formula (development rights in exchange for project cost coverage) has also been utilized in the case of the renovation of a few large neighbourhood parks. With a public sector desperate for funding, theoretical concerns over public space commodification were not mentioned.

So far, the City’s public participation efforts have been limited to informing residents through public meetings or to obtaining information from the public through surveys. Apart from the general antipathy towards public authorities, there is little experience of active citizen involvement at the city, neighbourhood or square scale. Professionals cited different reasons for the lack of community participation, including lack of institutional co-operation, power clashes between government tiers, citizens’ lack of belief in the efficacy of participation, lack of planners trained as facilitators, low confidence in public institutions, resistance from developers who desire quick permitting processes, and an inward-looking culture focused on blood relationships rather than the community.
Invaded space: from car-free to car-full. Sacrificing public space to the needs of the car, effectively allowing movement needs to usurp social ones. Starting in the 1960s and 1970s, numerous critics worldwide have highlighted the negative effects of the automobile on public space. Traffic and parking has seized and sliced large portions of pedestrian space in cities, including those in countries with strong planning traditions, while creating other externalities and irritants such as air, noise and visual pollution (traffic and the clutter of car-related paraphernalia, such as gas stations, etc.)

In Tirana, with the rapid motorization of the population in the post-communist era, automobile traffic and parking have become the city’s most serious problem. Associated with status, in addition to utility and comfort, cars are used excessively, even for short trips. The inner-city streets and through roads, which were not designed to handle a mass of traffic, are now jammed with car traffic and pedestrians. Many squares have become traffic islands (Figure 5). Furthermore, a substantial portion of the new mid-rise condominium buildings and all the communist-era buildings do not contain parking spaces. Parking is free almost everywhere in the city. Many sidewalks, front yards and children’s playgrounds have been turned into parking lots. Parked cars often block building entrances. Walking is unpleasant for pedestrians in a city with few traffic lights. Car emissions have fouled the air. Traffic noise hampers the full enjoyment of the outdoors (Pojani 2011a). Numerous interviewees lamented this situation, which was seen as a consequence of a laissez-faire attitude of the public sector but also the result of citizens’ choices.

However, local citizens do not have to rely on automobiles, because unlike some other large Eastern European capitals, Tirana is a dense and compact city that could work well without cars. Bicycles and buses could fulfill most transport needs. While the shortage of parking spaces has created problems, it has also had the unintended consequence of helping preserve a high-density urban core, while an abundant parking supply would have diluted the land uses.

Exclusionary space: a city for wealthy men. Allowing physical and psychological barriers to dominate public space design and management strategies. Physical barriers (street kerbs, moving traffic, darkness, etc.) can entirely exclude some groups (particularly the disabled, parents of small children in strollers and the elderly) from a space. Psychological barriers (fear, suspicion, tension and conflict between different social groups, and the presence of ‘undesirables’ such as the homeless or teenagers on skateboards) are equally important. They can result in the fragmentation of activities by age, class, ethnicity, race, occupation, etc. into ‘parochial’ spaces. These are spaces which are appropriated by particular groups, making others feel like strangers or guests (upper-class suburbs, communities for the elderly, immigrant neighbourhoods, etc.). This represents a failure to appropriately manage shared public spaces in a manner that allows their equitable use by all groups without diminishing the welfare of others.

Physical barriers are certainly present in Tirana due to the general neglect on the part of the public sector (discussed above). However, the psychological barriers are virtually non-existent because there are no safety issues related to violent crime. Few types of parochial spaces have formed. Despite an ongoing process of economic polarization, location-based segregation has been modest relative to other cities. The inner-city poor retained their positions in popular neighbourhoods because the former state-owned housing stock, which comprised
approximately 60,000 apartment units in Tirana, was sold at a nominal cost to the existing tenants. In addition, as mentioned, no middle and upper-class suburbs have developed. Ethnic Roma people (less than 5% of the national population), who are among the most poor and discriminated population segments, are a visible presence in Tirana’s public scene (begging, selling knick-knacks and used clothes in improvised markets, and collecting recyclables in trash cans). However, their presence has not deterred the use of the same public spaces by others because in Albania, unlike some other Eastern European countries, ethnic prejudice and conflict has not been accompanied by extreme hatred and violence.

Gender-based differences in the use of public spaces are the most noticeable. Observations showed that in cafés and other public spaces the female presence is much lower than that of males. Certain cafés are informally designated as ‘male-only’. These are typically lower-end establishments, which are seen as inappropriate for women. Counterpart women-only gathering places exist only in the form of beauty salons. Interviewees explained that the disparity in public space use has its roots in a pre-communist patriarchal and oriental culture, which prescribed gender separation in public (and even private) spaces. (While during communism women achieved important milestones towards emancipation, the transition has weakened these achievements.) A perceived lack of security and vulnerability (mostly driven by sensationalist news reporting) also limits women’s freedom of movement, although Tirana is relatively safe. It is difficult for the planning sector to counter gender-based exclusion in public spaces, which stems from the local culture, unless larger cultural changes take place.

Tirana’s main entertainment district, the Bblock, represents a type of parochial space, which serves the evening economy and a youthful, wealthy clientele. The Bblock was once a gated single-family residence area where only the communist politburo was permitted. After communism, the area was redeveloped with 10 to 12 story condominium buildings at high densities; however, substantial green spaces and low-rise uses were also maintained, resulting in an attractive mixture. Cafés, restaurants, bars and clubs with outdoor seating occupied the ground floors. This redevelopment process, carried out entirely by the private sector, turned the Bblock into a ‘hip’ entertainment district with plenty of shopping, eating and music options, packed with pedestrian activity until late at night (Figure 6). While the area is popular and visually attractive, the poor cannot afford to participate. Patrons tend to be fashionable youth from the upper income strata. Satisfied with the spontaneous creation of a frenzied entertainment district, the public sector has intervened little in the Bblock. The presence of discotheques and pubs, which play loud music until late at night, has led to sharp clashes with local residents about noise, which the city has been incapable or uninterested in managing (Pojani 2012). Leisure and entertainment destinations such as the Bblock (also called 24-hour spaces in Carmona’s review) are common in large European cities. They are often the locus of conflict between businesses and local residents.

Segregated space: the centre-periphery dichotomy. Following the desire of affluent groups to separate from the rest of society. Crime, or fear of crime, and the desire to be and be seen to be exclusive are major causes of retreat from the public realm for those with choice. Segregation excludes the poor from certain areas and leads to the creation of dangerous spaces, which concentrate poverty. Hence the contemporary trend of gated communities, in which often the most law-abiding
citizens withdraw. These are common in Eastern European cities, as previously mentioned. In the Americas, they are ubiquitous.

By contrast, Tirana has no gated communities or other areas where public access is officially prohibited. Due to the still recent legacy of communist egalitarianism, in the inner city the Bllok (which is relatively small) is the only ‘exclusive’ upscale district. However, there is a clear dichotomy between the centre and the peripheries (Figure 7). As in other Balkan cities, the inner city is the most desirable place to live. It encompasses the most expensive real estate and most formal public spaces (created during the fascist and communist rule), which, however, are not the most popular due to their sterile design. The peripheries, on the other hand, which until recently had little infrastructure, are the loci of poverty and deprivation and consist of large expanses of informal settlements. The peripheries entirely lack neighbourhood squares and parks, although houses here have small flower and vegetable gardens. The failure of the public sector to provide extensive infrastructure networks in the peripheries had the unintended benefit of concentrating city growth within a relatively compact area, thus providing a constant supply of public space users within a short radius. In the last decade, the city has prioritized the redevelopment of centrally located squares and parks, thus accentuating the centre-periphery divide.
Domestic, third and virtual space: Westernization vs. Orientalization. Failing to halt a more general retreat from public space into domestic, private and virtual worlds. Critiques centre on the increasing emphasis of individuals on their private life, family and intimate friends. Introspective trends, driven by the rise of secularism and capitalism, as well as the rise of new technologies, have led to a decline of public life. Entertainment, chatting, access to information, shopping, financial services, voting and even work can increasingly be undertaken from home using the Internet. Some commentators argue that the advent of virtual space will eventually lead to new forms of urbanism, while others opine that new technologies have reinforced the role of traditional cities, which concentrate business headquarters and the creative professional class. Moreover, the spread of new private venues for social exchange is a key threat to the very notion of public life. The concept of public space has now expanded to include ‘privatized’ public spaces (or ‘publicized’ private spaces), such as corporate plazas, shopping malls and theme parks, or even bars, taverns, beauty salons, pool halls, cafés, bookstores, health clubs, video rental stores and the like. In a consumer-oriented

Figure 7. Public space dichotomy. Top: inner-city communist and post-communist space. Middle: inner-city pre-communist space (of which there is little left). Bottom: peri-urban post-communist informal settlements.
culture, these settings (third spaces) are increasingly popular destinations or even icons of public life. They are liked because they are inclusive, low-profile, comfortable and conducive to conversation (see also Banerjee 2001).

Tirana’s culture is still very social relative to the West. However, lifestyle changes have contributed to changes in the use of public spaces. Research revealed that both Westernizing and Orientalizing forces (i.e. a revival of Albania’s Ottoman legacy) are at play. While westernizing trends have led to a withdrawal to domestic and virtual spaces, Orientalizing (or re-Orientalizing) trends are held responsible for the move of social encounters from public spaces to ‘third spaces’. The IT, ‘third’ and domestic worlds are beyond the realm of civic society to manage.

Interviewees explained that currently, at least for the middle and higher-income portions of the population, the diverse new opportunities for financial gain and the emergence of a more involved parenting style occupy large portions of the afternoons and evenings. Moreover, relationships with neighbours are now more anonymous. Contemporary flats are more spacious and comfortable and include a range of electronic entertainment (TV, Internet, videogames, music players), which provide a reason for staying indoors (and spending time alone). Once outside the home, socializing tends to take place in cafés, bars and restaurants, where entry is limited to the more affluent, in contrast to the communist era when socialization took place in parks and promenades where access was universal. The inner city has thousands of ‘third’ spaces, which are full most of the day with people of all ages. They give the city a kaleidoscopic look.

Factors such as increased disposable income, high unemployment among youth, a flexible work schedule for many, a spontaneous culture (i.e. meetings arranged with a few minutes’ notice), and a lack of many alternative activities (sports, arts, shows, etc.) have also fuelled the café trend. While favoured by many, the ‘café culture’ was also blamed for an apathetic, unproductive and unhealthy lifestyle, especially among youth, who spend disproportionate amounts of time ‘sitting around’ and engaging in ‘idle chats’, even in the middle of the day. Conversations with public space users also revealed that an overwhelming majority of citizens feel a renewed need for spaces that are truly public. Many stated that they would like more opportunities to sit in the fresh air, without having to spend money in noisy, smoky indoor environments.

Over-managed Public Space

Privatized space: the takeover of no-man’s land. Allowing public space to be privatized, with knock-on impacts on political debate and social exclusion. In many cities, space has been privatized by corporate or commercial interests. Many city centres have lost their small-scale businesses, which have been replaced by big box malls in suburban locations with vast parking lots. In city centres, many public uses of space are increasingly outlawed and policed (hence the concept of ‘loitering’). This is due to the fact that the state has transferred the power for the management of public space to private individuals by (a) privatizing road infrastructure; (b) renting out of public space for commercial events; (c) selling advertising space in and around public space; (d) allowing commercial interests, such as outdoor cafés, to spread across the pavements of public spaces; (e) permitting the creation of corporate plazas, which are ostensibly open to the public but are not easily accessed by the poor; and (f) encouraging the creation
of private entities (business improvement districts or BIDs) that control through private security local streets and squares and ban anti-social activities ranging from alcohol consumption and smoking to skateboarding and begging (i.e. they displace social problems).

In Tirana, the public–private relationship is a crucial issue related to public space development in both legal and spatial terms. The last two decades have been characterized by privatization, or rather usurpation, of public spaces. Pressures for development in all free parcels of the inner city have been enormous. However, they have originated from small private owners and local developers rather than large corporate interests (Figure 8). This is fundamentally different from public space privatization processes experienced in Western cities. Private owners have taken over the maintenance of the spaces in front of their buildings, but this has been tied to the creation of exclusivity based on the cost of entry into their cafés.

The takeover by private interests has greatly reduced the amount of park land in the city. While the popular Lake Park, which occupies a large hilly area within a few minutes’ walk of the centre, has been mostly preserved, developers have succeeded in obtaining permits to devour portions of the park to build condominiums. Interviewees lamented the loss of the green spaces of the old, garden-city Tirana, which contrasts with today’s inner city, suffocated by buildings and traffic.

![Figure 8. Public space privatization through informal building additions, street vendors, cafés and store extensions.](image)
With the reinstallation of private property and market relationships in the 1990s, many spontaneous mini-bazaars have resurged on Tirana’s streets and open spaces, despite the city’s spasmodic efforts to prohibit street vending on already crowded sidewalks. A bazaar was present in the centre of Tirana since the formation of the settlement and remained active until the 1950s when the communist administration decided to demolish it. This gesture was symbolic; it signified the uprooting of commerce, private property and the Ottoman legacy.

The governance of private interests has generally been weak. In a few cases, the city has repossessed public spaces, which were seized by private entrepreneurs. For example, in 2002–2003, a major ‘Clean and Green’ public programme was carried out. During this programme, a large majority of kiosks housing small businesses, which had sprung up on public land in the centre, along the main boulevard and along the city river, were removed and the spaces that they occupied were restored to their prior state. The programme provoked controversy, but in reality the implementation was relatively smooth. Most businesses in kiosks simply relocated into legitimate buildings. This public programme was very well received, revealing that many were resentful of the appropriation of public space by fellow residents based on the law of the strongest. Observations confirmed that a small park in the centre, Rinia Park, now free of kiosks, is one of the most loved public spaces in the city.

Consumption space: the city as a stage and canvass. Failing to address the relentless commodification of public space and the dangers of the financial exclusion of the less prosperous segments of society. Some international commentators describe a world dominated by multi-national companies, which produce a standard urbanism where public space and events are for consumption by an increasingly large middle class that desires quality goods and ‘interesting’ experiences. While some districts are thus designed in fashionable styles and images, others contain the realism of social decay. The poor are excluded from certain public spaces through financial means (i.e. charging a fee for an event or internal public space) or subtle visual cues (i.e. the clothes that people with a right to entry are expected to wear). In theory, another concern related to consumption spaces is their being ‘apolitical’; here, the traditional role of public space as a venue for political debate is barred as a distraction from the shopping purpose. This weakness, which is particularly evident in the suburban locations of higher income countries, is seen as having an insidious impact on democracy.

Large international food and clothing chains, which are present in a major way elsewhere in Eastern Europe (as mentioned), have barely entered the Albanian market, arguably due to widespread corruption (rather than any concerted public sector efforts to prevent their entrance). Since 2005, at least three large suburban shopping malls have been built in Tirana, which appeal to some portions of the middle class because they constitute a novelty and often offer entertainment options such as large playgrounds, swimming pools, bowling alleys and skating rinks. These malls are inaccessible to the poor in multiple ways: physically (since they can only be reached by car), financially (due to high prices), and psychologically (due to a perception of exclusiveness). Suburban malls have fared poorly and have not supplanted the historic role of the inner city (Pojani 2011b).

With regard to commercial events, in Tirana there is little tradition in using public spaces for art, music, culture and displays of creativity. The limited events initiated by the city often have commercial sponsors, who request to display their
logos and advertisements. For this reason, they take place almost exclusively in city centre locations, which are more visible to prospective customers. Peripheries suffer from a dearth of cultural and artistic spaces, thus cognitively receding further in the background. In interviews, the concern about the lack of cultural activities overrode any concerns about the commodification of public space. The promotion of public events was seen as a planning area that the public sector has failed to address.

In recent years a latent creative energy has emerged in Tirana. Individual artists have begun to transform previously dormant spaces, independent of the public sector and major commercial backers. Small-scale interventions using visual art (i.e. murals, graffiti and installations) appear in unexpected spots, rejuvenating distant peripheries and forgotten pockets (Figure 9). This informal and impetuous approach contrasts with the self-conscious post-modern ‘revival’ architecture encountered in many formally designed public spaces in Western cities.

The forces of privatization have not diminished the political function of Tirana’s public spaces. Politics is an intrinsic part of Albanian daily life, a situation which has been beyond the abilities of the public sector to manage. Many interview respondents felt that a primary function of public spaces is still, as during communism, the display political propaganda. TVs in cafés frequently broadcast political speeches for and against the party in power. Outdoor public spaces are regularly used for the electoral campaign rituals of the main political parties, which are deeply antagonistic in tone, and have also witnessed a number of violent anti-government displays since the end of communism. New types of political rallies and peaceful marches, organized by the civil society rather than political parties, to raise awareness on specific issues that face local society, are increasingly common as well, although they are fewer and less well attended.

Invented space: memory and urban renewal. Condoning the spread of a placeless, formulae-driven, entertainment space. Invented public spaces range from the entirely fictitious theme parks at one end of the spectrum to the reinvention of
historic urban quarters at the other end. Quarters or entire cities of simulation, with pseudo-historic links to an idealized past, are thus created. They are seen by many commentators as unauthentic and indistinctive due to their over-design. A product of formulaic copycat responses to leisure space across the world, invented spaces are meant to cater primarily to tourists, neglecting local residents. While they are criticized for being sterile caricatures and urban surrogates, devoid of place-derived meaning, many are undoubtedly popular and full of human activity.

While the theme park notion has not yet been imported into Albania, the issue of the reinvention of historic urban quarters is significant in Tirana. Redevelopment efforts here are directed at local residents as foreign tourism is minimal. The two principal examples that illustrate how public spaces in the city centre are reinterpreted and governed are Skanderbeg Square and the Bllok.

For a century, Skanderbeg Square, the main city square, has been a theatre for the dominating ideology of the era – Ottomanism, fascism, communism and consumerism. One interviewee commented that Skanderbeg Square is Albania’s family album. In the post-communist period, the city engaged in intense planning efforts to create a new, highly emblematic centre. A nostalgic search for identity and a desire to revive a stabilizing and familiar past, while purging the painful episodes of history (i.e. the communist era), drove the planning agenda. International star architects were invited to flashy competitions to craft a contemporary image. Several ‘designer’ proposals were presented to a perplexed local public. For nearly a decade, these imported proposals, which excluded local needs, spurred vigorous debates and controversy among all levels of government, the private sector, the media elite and ordinary citizens. However, none of these proposals were implemented. Its development frozen while its future was being decided, Skanderbeg Square was doomed to see its hub value vanish. Eventually, it became a traffic roundabout (Figure 10). While indecisive planners and politicians battled over land uses and site design details in the centre, the nearby Bllok (mentioned earlier) flourished according to the market intuition of numerous competing private developers, with little formal planning involved. This area thrived in terms of attraction and economic vitality (without succumbing to Disneyland motifs), while its heavily and inappropriately controlled counterpart languished (Pojani 2014).

Scary space: the ‘eyes on the street’ effect. Where crime—or heightened fear of crime and of ‘others’, i.e. strangers (driven by media reporting)—has been allowed to dominate perceptions of place, and where crime prevention strategies—public and private—impact
on the freedom with which space is used and enjoyed. Across the world, undesirable public space users and uses are increasingly controlled through private security, cameras and regulation, or though passive, symbolic restrictions, turning certain public spaces into fortresses. Some commentators argue that users of public space have the right to enjoy a minimum level of decorum and those who transgress the societal norms should be confined to zones set aside for their use. Others contend that this strategy exacerbates rather than solves social problems, which inevitably spill over in surrounding areas.

By international standards Tirana is a safe city, despite the difficulties posed by the post-communist transition. A brief period of anarchy in 1997 was widely covered by international media and implanted a permanent stigma that Albania is an unsafe and anarchic nation. In fact, the use of force and random violent crime are rarities, and women and men are safe in any area day and night, although petty theft is common. The entrances of many apartment buildings open directly on the street, with no gates, porters or cameras. Dilapidated, high-vagrancy areas (i.e. skid rows, red light districts, etc.) are non-existent. There is no visible presence of, or need for, law enforcement officers in public spaces (other than traffic police). While citizens lock their doors, they have no fear outside their homes.

These fortunate circumstances are not due to direct interventions by the public sector but to the presence of “eyes upon the street, eyes belonging to those we might call the natural proprietors of the street”, which, as Jane Jacobs (1961, p. 35) noted, ensure the safety of both residents and strangers. The city’s high density, mixed uses and layered and diverse built environment (see next section) results in a high number of passers-by, reinforcing the sense of safety in public spaces. A small national population, with nearly everyone known or potentially recognized, has also helped make Tirana safe.

Homogenization of Public Space? Chaos as a Complex Form of Order

An overarching critique is that public space is being homogenized due to under- and over-management processes, as well as contemporary design and development processes. Cities which are at the forefront of the national and international competition for investment feel the need to create environments that are seen as safe and attractive for white collar residents and tourists. Conversely, cities with sparse global investment suffer from abandonment and neglect. Global businesses in partnership with city governments have re-ordered the historic functions of public space through the production of public spaces that bring together those in society who can afford to consume. Moreover, designers, developers and clients are not tied to particular places but operate across countries. As a result, design templates are repeated from place to place with little thought to context. At the same time, many public sectors have adopted a range of standards, guidelines and control tools, which simply imitate generic, globalized, design principles. Other local guidelines that are meant to manage risk and liability have the same homogenizing effect.

While Tirana has received little international investment, the combination of under- and over-management has not resulted in the homogenization of public space. In the spirit of Balkan ‘turbo-urbanism’ there is little order or ‘rationality’ (Leontidou 1993; Voeckler 2008). Uniform planning rules, similar to Western Europe, are in place but their enforcement is lax. ‘Post-regulation’ is the norm, i.e. the legalization and improvement of the urban structure after it has been
With few exceptions, urban design has been led by local architects and comprises a pastiche of styles, including functional modernism, imported post-modernism and an emerging local vernacular (Figure 11). Although official street names exist, people use activities, colours, smells and landmarks for spatial orientation. The inner-city neighbourhoods are porous; while they continue to densify, narrow passages and open space pockets are preserved or created anew. One interviewee commented: “I believe that public spaces are everywhere in Tirana, diffused in the city capillaries. The sidewalks, the alleys, the front yards, the neighbourhood gardens …”. Social encounters such as neighbour visits, evening walks, soccer games, outdoor cooking, food vending and chess playing take place regularly but spontaneously in small, improvised micro-spaces near people’s homes (Figure 12).
Conclusion

The profound transformation of Tirana’s public spaces has reflected its drastic political, economic and social transition. Carmona’s theoretical framework about the evolution and management of public spaces, while mainly built on Western-based critiques of public space, is certainly instructive in this case. Both under-management (especially neglect and car invasion) and over-management (especially privatization) are evident in Tirana. To an extent, they are due to the abrupt changes brought about by the collapse of the communist regime. However, similar forces are also at work in other cities, either post-socialist or Western, as the public sector is on the retreat, and cities are increasingly reliant on the private sector to provide public goods.

Elsewhere, their combination has often led to the homogenization of public space. Here, the public space outcomes do not necessarily mimic those of the West (or even other post-socialist cities). While harmful in many ways, under- and over-management processes have had many positive impacts. Divergence as well as convergence with the development model of other European public spaces is occurring. Neglected, privatized and car-invaded public spaces in Tirana demonstrate that planning is needed, while the vibrancy, safety, originality and inclusiveness of the unplanned public spaces demonstrate that planning is not the solution to all the ills that plague the contemporary city.

Revisiting the theoretical points, the transformation of Tirana’s public space can be summarized as follows.

On the negative side, public spaces have been subject to degradation and privatization. The major failure has been the lack of any management of automobile use (or perhaps the enabling of unrestrained automobile use). Apart from the roads, the main space privatization organizers have been small- and medium-size businesses, which are not part of chains, and local citizens themselves, aided by deregulation. The community is both uninterested and feels powerless in designing and maintaining public spaces. Recreational activities have shifted from outdoor to indoor ones (i.e. from walking in the park to socializing in restaurants). The advent of the myriad of cafés and other consumption spaces, while making the city much more interesting and lively, has been controversial. However, controversies centre on morality rather than politics (i.e. the exclusionary nature of these spaces). The centre-periphery relationship is tense in both spatial and social terms. The centre is more upscale and expensive while poverty is more concentrated in the peripheries. Accessing centrally located public spaces from the peripheries is costly and time consuming. Various forms of exclusion and marginalization—of women, racial minorities, the elderly and the poor—are evident in public spaces throughout the city.

On the positive side, spontaneity is part of the city’s identity and is being helped by a burgeoning creative energy of small individualistic entrepreneurs. The absence of controls that tend to formalize, homogenize and segregate uses has resulted in lively mixed-use spaces. The designs of the buildings and shops reflect individual imagination rather than the homogeneity of urban environments dominated by chain businesses and strict design regulations. Residents express a renewed need for genuine, truly public community spaces. Some of the most successful public spaces are the small, informal and residual ‘lost’ pockets in urban neighbourhoods, which however need to be augmented.
and improved. The city is very safe, which has had a big positive impact. Despite the increasing wealth in the centre, it has also remained socially diverse, due to the distribution of dwellings to everyone by selling communist government flats to sitting tenants. In fact, the political role of public spaces as a democratic forum is growing.

However, the public space is subject to increasing fragmentation due to increasing privatization, deregulation and state withdrawal. The under-management has opened the gates to extensive private intervention and innovation. Over-managed spaces are more likely to be in private hands than under-managed spaces. These outcomes demonstrate that under- and over-management are two sides of the same coin, with each directly and indirectly contributing to the other. The behaviour of users is shaped by external factors such as the weakness of the public sector, the lack of civic culture or consciousness and belief that public advocacy can be fruitful, and the domination of the private sector. In a situation where neither the government nor individuals have power or money to manage public space, the main player has become the private sector. While the population and the media vigorously debate political issues, civil society is passive and there is no tradition of community action to safeguard public space. This has brought about imbalances, which are typical in market-led contexts with a weak public sector.

While the under-management has brought about substantial benefits, increased public management and intervention is seriously needed to deal with the massive problems created by automobile use. The need for traffic and parking management, including traffic calming, bike and bus lanes, and reasonable parking fees, is paramount. The loss of neighbourhood green spaces also needs to be countered. Low-cost, basic interventions (an ‘urban acupuncture’ approach) such as tree and flower planting can do much to improve the look and feel of public spaces for daily use. In the periphery, which has been dominated by informal action, valuable natural elements, such as small rivers, lakes and hills (now contaminated and inaccessible) should be recovered and connected in an ecological network. This could become a principal tool of urban ‘re-sewing’.

It is imperative that the community (including children) and the private sector become involved in these efforts in order to reverse the culture of passivity. A bottom-up approach is required to ensure the proper management and maintenance of new or renovated public spaces, in lieu of dependence on ‘expert’ public direction. In keeping with the local culture, piecemeal processes are needed here rather than total plans and grand designs. Processes must be flexible and incremental, as well as adaptive and responsive to local circumstances. These would strengthen the role of individual actors rather than opening the field to control by large private players in the future, and can be thought of as seeds, which can trigger larger changes.

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