RESEARCH ARTICLE

Quality of Public Open Spaces in Tirana

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ABSTRACT

With the fall of the communist regime and the start of land privatization, Tirana went through a period of rapid urban expansion that generated an unprecedented explosion of informal settlements and the loss of public/collective spaces. This transformation is reflected in urban form and spatial configuration/perception of the public spaces. To measure the performance of public spaces, it is important to avoid on-size-fits-all, as Carmona states, while pointing out principles for public space design. This research investigates how public spaces succeed in creating a sense of belonging and, thus, creating places. To address this research question, we highlight the qualities of Tirana's public space through a proposed model of analysis. It develops from the attributes of placemaking with theoretical reference to Kent and GPTs. Attributes are composed of entities measured or quantified to be used as indicators of the quality and livability of public spaces. Compare the four case studies with each other to frame public spaces in relation to their spatial configuration, confronting the project proposal both for its design and the state of livability. The results of this evaluation process will serve as a basis to address future improvement intervention for the community and for the planning practitioners.

Keywords: Placemaking, public space, quality, urban form.

1. QUALITY IN PUBLIC SPACES

The importance of public spaces as vital places in urban life is the key for future developments in the contemporary city. From a social and economic point of view, public spaces improve the quality of life and the urban image. They also encourage economic development. These open spaces represent an opportunity for social interactions, community events, and recreational activities (Arendt, 1988). To be successful and liveable, they must produce a sense of identity and belonging to users. The Public Space Charter states that the community must recognize itself in public space. These open spaces represent an opportunity for social interactions, community events, and recreational activities. To be successful and liveable, they must produce a sense of identity and belonging to users and enrich the lives of those who use them (Gaventa, 2006). 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.*" (Habitat UN, 2015a).

The Global Public Space toolkit (GPSt) represents an outcome of a consultative process. It was organized by UN-Habitat and INU with 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. The term space/place alludes to the quality that all public spaces must have. This toolkit identifies the qualitative aspects of public space. The study of hundreds of public spaces located throughout the world noted that the most successful public spaces had these qualities: they are accessible, the users may conduct various activities, the space is comfortable, it is a social space, and people meet (Habitat UN, 2015a). On the other hand, the 2030 Agenda seeks to reach the SDGs. Target 11.7 aims to provide inclusive and accessible green and public spaces by implementing policies toward inclusion, resource efficiency, adaptation to climate change, etc. The New Urban Agenda envisages human settlements that '*engender a sense of belonging, prioritize safe, inclusive, accessible, green and quality public spaces that are friendly for families, enhance social and intergenerational interactions, cultural expressions and political participation, as appropriate, and foster social cohesion, inclusion and safety . . .*' (Habitat UN, 2017). Tirana is a city in constant transformation. This transformation is reflected in the urban form as much as in the spatial configuration and

perception of the public spaces. It is important to measure the performance of public spaces, but it is also important to avoid on-size-fits-all as Carmona states while pointing out principles for public space design (Carmona, 2019). When public spaces have no quality, the activities that can be carried out are limited and they are transformed into connection spaces. Quality spaces invite people to stop, sit, etc., transforming the public space into a livable, usable space (Gehl, 2011; Carmona *et al.*, 2010).

2. A Model to Measure and Evaluate the Quality of Public Spaces

The aim of the research is to investigate the qualitative character of public open spaces in Tirana and to understand their state of liveability. Four case studies were selected based on three variables: urban context, design period, and scale of transformation. This research investigates how public spaces succeed in creating a sense of belonging and creating places. This approach shows the bond that is established between the individual and the public spaces. To address this research question, we can highlight the qualities of Tirana's public space through a thematic approach. Four case studies were selected based on three variables: urban context, design period, and scale of transformation.

In the reading of various urban theorists Sitte (Sitte, 1981), Krier (Krier, 1979), De Sola Morales (De Sola Morales, 2008), Gehl (Gehl, 2011), and Aldo Van Eyck, it was useful to frame the theme of public space and understand what the characteristics of public space are, recognized worldwide and at the same time character of the place. The analysis of the Global Public Space Toolkit (Habitat UN, 2015a) and the Charter of Public Space shows the importance of the use of the term place, which moves away from the traditional conception of public space and takes many different facets related to principles of identity, belonging, use, accessibility etc. The character of the place can be observed through the elements that Fred Kent calls attributes, as they make the space liveable. Two different approaches to the public place are distinguished: one connected to the spatial configuration and the other to placemaking, which does not revoke and oppose the first approach, it rather uses it as a 'means' to 'create the place'.

The model of analysis develops from the possible interpretation of these two approaches, aiming to differentiate the attributes of the physical space (morphological and compositional form) from the attributes that make places great places, according to Fred Kent (Fred, 2016; Habitat UN, 2015b). The latter are measurable and quantifiable, and they can be used as indicators to describe the quality and liveability of public spaces. We use four major attributes with their respective measurements:

   i)   the Accessibility (location, access, pedestrian, public transport),
   ii) the Environmental sustainability and image (environmental comfort, sustainability environmental, walking/observing, art and history),
   iii) the Activities (variety of functions, functional mixite, attractive spaces, vital),
   iv) the Socialization (talking/listening, playing, sitting, lighting).

Each measurement is assigned a score to measure the presence $(+1)$ or absence (-1). In the cases where the entities are present but in a state of decay or not usable for any reason, the value will be zero (0). The total sum will be useful for comparing the four case studies (located in Fig. 1, Skanderbeg Square, Mother Teresa Square, New Bazaar, and KM Runaway Park) with each other and to frame public spaces in relation to their spatial configuration: confronting the project proposal both for its design and the state of liveability. The points for each entity were derived from the results of the 20 survey questionnaires for each site.

3. Attributes and Entities of Public Spaces in Tirana's Case Studies

After the fall of the communist regime and the start of land privatization, Tirana went through a period of rapid urban expansion that generated an unprecedented explosion of informal settlements and the loss of public/collective spaces. Although it is a relatively new city which has undergone radical changes at very short intervals, it is in a phase of eternal transition yet struggling to develop its own identity. The timeline and evolution of the most important public spaces related to the historical background that influenced architecture and urban planning is represented in Fig. 2. Nowadays, the appropriate term to define these spaces is non-place, instead of public or collective spaces. The usual public spaces such as the square, the Urban Park or the boulevard are now replaced by shopping malls, supermarkets, ATMs, etc., which are all the same all over the world. It seems that urban design in Albania is no longer capable of creating culturally habitable public spaces. Even in the recent urban projects carried out in Tirana, the primary attention of the municipality, stakeholders, and the designers are to create privately owned collective spaces. Public space, from a social and economic point of view, improves the quality of life the urban image and encourages economic development. Public spaces

Fig. 1. Site location.

represent an opportunity for social interactions, community events and recreational activities. To be successful and livable, they must produce a sense of identity and belonging to users. The identity of a place favors contacts between people.

The Scanderbeg Square was designed in an empty area near Ethem Bej Mosque in 1926. The Italian architect Armando Brasini wanted to preserve the existing structure of the city and developed the expansion of Tirana towards the west and south. It was called Ministry Square because of the new government building facing it. Il became the main piazza of the Capital. The square is also a symbol of Albania's complex and convulsive history, as it reflects the influences of different regimes and ideologies that have ruled the country. The recent project for Scanderbeg Square was completed in 2017 and developed around three main themes: water, material, and greenery. The pavement was made with natural stones from all regions of the country and covers an area of almost 41,000 m^2. They create a kind of puzzle that changes colour depending on climatic conditions because the colour of the stone is highlighted in the rain. The use of water on the paved area to prevent overheating. A green crown of native vegetation surrounds the piazza. The rainwater is collected and recycled (51n4e, n.d.). The square is well connected with other means of transportation. The renovation of the square aimed to create a generous pedestrian area and a local ecosystem that fosters urban biodiversity and microclimate control. The square hosts events and concerts throughout the year.

The Mother Teresa Square was completed in 1940 and designed by the Italian architect Gerardo Bosio. The square has a rectangular shape, and the area occupied is almost 14,000 m^2. It represents an extension of the main boulevard that connects Scanderbeg Square with the Casa del Fascio (Aliaj *et al.*, 2003). The shape of the square, the use of the stairways, the continuity of the facade, the rhythm, and the sculptural projects are clear references to monumentality as an expression of political power. The square and the buildings are subject to protective restrictions. In the center of the square, there was a fountain but after its removal, the space is occupied by "Tirana sixhade". It is a colored painting on the surface representing the traditional texture of Shengjergj area near the capital. The buildings facing the piazza have only public functions.

In 1926, two Italian architects, G. Becciari and T. Giuliani were called to design a new complex dedicated to trade and retail near the center of Tirana. A few years after, near the sales area, a square was also designed. The tradition of selling meat, fish and vegetables is preserved nowadays. The new Bazaar continues to live thanks to the reconstruction and restoration project of 2015. The reconstruction of the fruit and vegetable market follows traditional motifs. The roof shape is proposed to be in line with existing buildings. Wood represents the material used in the initial project of the 1930s. The pavement of the market square is made of stones shaped like the typical flooring of the Albanian culture *kalldrem*. In the areas of the park, benches were made using traditional materials such as stone and wood. Since 2015, the public space has been lived from the morning to late hours for the presence of bars and restaurants.

The 1 km Runaway Park is a themed public space strongly desired by the residents and by the local government to recover an abandoned airstrip that has been abandoned for several decades. The project proposed by the Athena Studio in 2008 deals with two parts of the city, the existing context on one
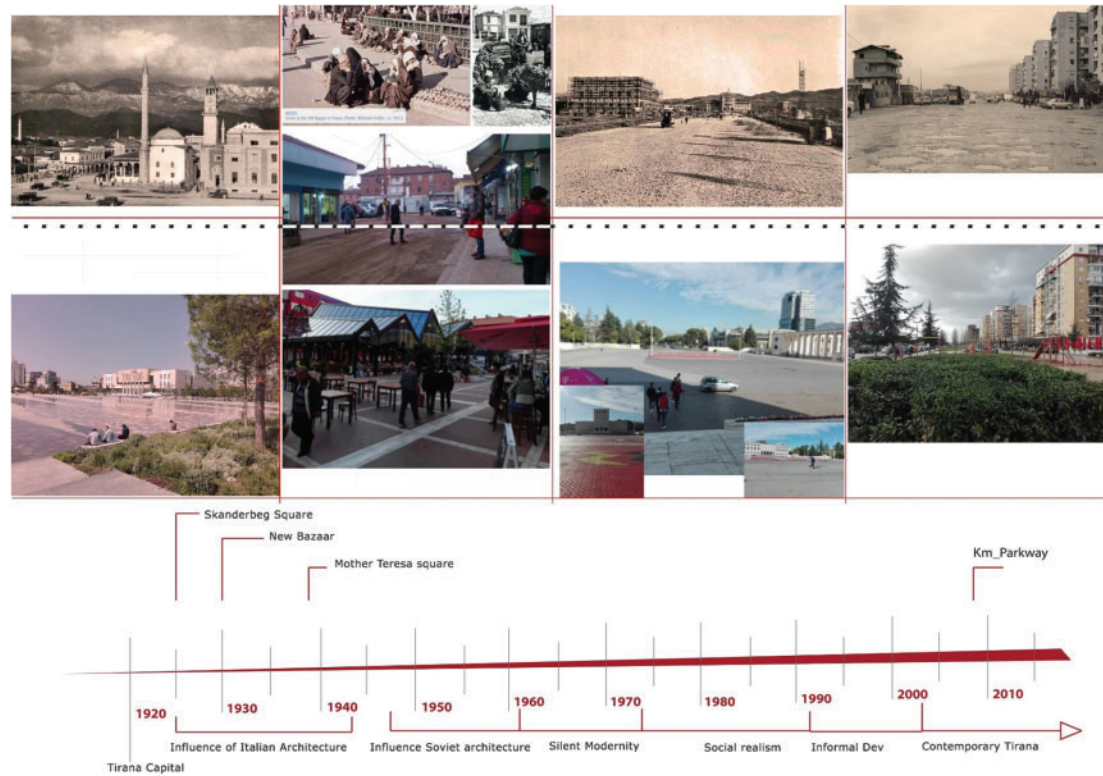
Fig. 2. Timeline and evolution of public spaces.

Attributes	Entity	Scanderbeg Square		Mother Teresa Square		New Bazaar		KM Runaway Park	
		Description	Points	Description	Points	Description	Points	Description	Points
Accessibility	Location	central	1	central	1	central	1	suburbs	0
	Entrance	multiple (both main and secondary)	1	four (three main and one secondary)	1	four (two main and two secondary)	1	several entrances along the entire length	1
	Pedestrian	the area is entirely dedicated to pedestrians	1	limited (weekend-days and holidays closed to traffic)	0	the area is entirely dedicated to pedestrians	1	space dedicated entirely to pedestrians with alternating permeable and waterproof spaces	1
	Transport	all the bus lines in the city are nearby no internal cycle path but accessible for cycle use cycle path in the perimeter area not open to vehicular traffic	1	an active bus line no cycle paths but accessible for cycle use open to vehicular traffic	1	two active bus lines no cycle path but accessible to the cycle path not open to vehicular traffic	1	an active bus line with cycle paths and spaces accessible for cycle use no vehicular traffic	1
Environmental sustainability and image	Environmental Comfort	presence of native vegetation and soil permeability 50% use of native materials and with low thermal capacity presence of water packs	1	no presence of vegetation soil permeability 0% use of materials with high thermal capacity	-1	presence of vegetation of furniture soil permeability 0%use of materials with low thermal capacity use of filters to reflect the sun's rays	1	presence of native vegetation soil permeability >50% use of materials with high thermal capacity	1
	Environmental Sustainability	use of recyclable and local materials non-use of renewable energy reuse of rainwater	0	no use of recyclable materials no use of renewable energy sources	-1	use of recyclable and local materials non-use of renewable energy reuse of rainwater	0	use of recyclable materials non-use of renewable energy reuse of rainwater	0
	Walk and Observe	presence of areas for pedestrians visual openings	1	presence of areas for pedestrians visual openings	1	presence of areas for pedestrians visual openings	1	presence of areas for pedestrians visual openings	1
	Art and History	presence of historic buildings with high aesthetic value buildings subject to second category constraints presence of permanent and temporary art installations	1	presence of historic buildings with high aesthetic value presence of permanent and temporary art installations	1	presence of historic buildings with high aesthetic value buildings subject to second category constraints presence of temporary art installations	1	No presence of historic buildings with high aesthetic value No presence of permanent or temporary art installations	-1
Activity	Variety of Functions	buildings for public, cultural, administrative and religious use Refreshment areas	1	buildings for public use no alternative function to the primary use of buildings	-1	Residential buildings commercial and tertiary buildings	0	space delimited by mainly residential buildings with commercial and catering fronts	1
	Different activities	flexible areas to host events and demonstrations	1	no permanent activity	-1	permanent sales activity	1	various permanent activities	1
	Presence of Attractive Spaces	visual arts installations	1	figurative arts installation	0	figurative arts installation	1	visual arts installations	0
	Vitality	the square visited by any time	1	absent vitality	-1	the square visited by any time	1	present vitality	1
Socialization	Talk/ Listen	presence of intimate open spaces to talk and listen	1	presence of spaces to talk and listen even if they are always empty	1	presence of spaces to talk and listen	1	presence of intimate open spaces to talk and listen	1
	Play	flexible spaces also for play	1	no spaces to play	-1	flexible spaces also for play	0	flexible spaces also for play	1
	Sit	many spaces to sit	1	many spaces to sit	1	many spaces to sit	1	many spaces to sit	1
	Lighting	sufficient and attractive lighting	1	sufficient but not attractive lighting	0	sufficient and attractive lighting	1	sufficient but not attractive lighting	0
SCORE			**15**		**1**		**13**		**10**

Fig. 3. Results of the evaluation.

side and the proposed unbuilt structure on the other, by connecting them using greenery. The project approaches two different scales: the urban scale and the human scale. The measurement unit used in the composition of the park is 1 km. The length was divided into 10 creating spaces dedicated to greenery or sports with dimensions of 100 m. Every area differs from the others based on function, color, and use. It was designed to refer to the human scale. The materials used are different to highlight this concept. The designers divide the space into two categories: hardscape, which accounts for 61% of the total space, and landscape spaces, which occupy the remaining 39%.[1]

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[1] Project information from AtenaStudio

The results of people's perception of each entity of the attributes are shown in Fig. 3 are measured with points. Their perception was useful because people use the space differently, and the physical design does not always correspond to the real use.

4. Conclusions

This research proposed a tool to measure the quality of public spaces according to the physical configuration and the user's perception. From the results, we can notice that one of the main historic public spaces has a very low score, mainly due to the lack of activities and the poor design that can activate socialization. Anyway, the first two cases, Skanderbeg Square and Mother Teresa Square, which represent public spaces with aesthetic-architectural value, are not lived in a similar way. Based on the score achieved, Skanderbeg Square shows to be a great place, while Mother Teresa Square is not used. The recent revitalization project of the New Bazaar, on the other hand, can be considered a good project and a good example for future projects to be developed in the city. Whereas the KM Parkway project has failed on what it had to represent as a public space designed for a planned urban context, to be developed. Fifteen years after the conception phase, nothing has changed. Despite the initial problems on the perception of the space, we note that the public space is partially appreciated (average evaluation). This model can be used to identify the reason why certain spaces are not used. It can be used to evaluate the current situation and identification of future interventions that can foster socialization. The results of this evaluation process will serve as a basis for addressing related issues to the community and to the planning practitioners.

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