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Aspects of the urban development of Tirana 1820-1939

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Introduction

The city of Tirana was founded at the beginning of the 17th century but its urban development was modest up to the beginning of the 20th century. Tirana was proclaimed in January 1920 the provisional capital of Albania. There were several factors that played a role in this decision. Firstly, at that time Tirana was one of the few cities of Albania that had no foreign armies stationed there, because the Italian army had left the city some time ago. Secondly Tirana was at the center of the country. Thirdly, through the port of Durrës, Tirana was closer to the outside world. Fourthly, Tirana was a city situated in a vast plain and could meet the government needs for administrative buildings and residences for its officials.

The proclamation of Tirana as the capital of Albania was a memorable political, historical and administrative event and played a decisive role in the further development of the city. Tirana, which until then had preserved its typical oriental street pal, covering an area of 1 by 1.5 km began to change rapidly. Efforts were made to westernize and modernize the city and make it appropriate for its new function as the capital. There were two main processes that took place during the 20ies and 30ies:

- 1) The construction of administrative buildings and residences for the officials. In the first years after the proclamation as capital, the offices were opened in the few houses that could be adopted as such.
- 2) The establishment of new administrative structures and the concentration of power on these structures.

These processes are the subjects of this presentation, which aims to analyze how these processes evolved.

The development of Tirana up to the beginning of the 20th century

Several legends about the foundation of the city have been published during the last two centuries. These legends revolve around the figure of Sulejman Pasha Bargjini, an Albanian military feudal, who served the Ottoman Empire. As founding year of Tirana is known the year 1614, when Sulejman Pasha Bargjini built a mosque, an inn, a bakery, and a hamam (Turkish bath), this way building the nucleus of a future town. The year 1023 was engraved in the portal of the mosque, which is equivalent to the Gregorian year 1614.

There is some controversy surrounding the origin of Tirana's name that lurks in these legends. According to one of them the name of the town was simply the continuation of the village that

existed before (Hahn 1954, 86). According to another myth, Sulejman Pasha Bargjini was the one to give Tirana its name in memory of all the military victories he scored as leader of the Turkish armies against Teheran or Tehran, Iran's capital (Degrand 2001,120). Last, there exists a local folk etymology, which ties the name Tirana with *tjerr ane*, *tjerr mendafsh*, meaning to spin silk (Myderizi 1937, 10).

Documentary sources on the development of Tirana in the first century of its foundation are very fragmentary. The Turkish historian and traveller, Evlia Celebi, who visited Tirana almost half a century later, in 1662 wrote: "... after nine hours we arrived in the Tirana *kasaba*. Tirana is under the administration of Ohrid prefecture, it has a military commander, a judge...the city is erected on a vast plain, and it has many mosques, inns, public baths, shops and gardens. The roofs of the houses are covered with tiles." (Shkodra 1994, 139)

The first historical nucleus of the town emerged and grew together with the old mosque of Sulejman Pasha at the center of the present-day structure of the city. Together with the mosque, other buildings were erected, including those of the feudal lords and their relatives on the right bank of the Lana stream. Some farther, at a distance of 50-60 meters west of the mosque, was built a bakery, a bath and an inn, three service facilities that influenced the expansion of the bazaar. These buildings, together with the dwelling houses, barns, courtyards, wells, green groves, lanes, squares and graveyards - centered around the building of the mosque, by so forming an entity of sociological, property, gender and family connections not only at the time of their emergence, but also very long afterwards (Miho 1987, 51).

The second urbanistic nucleus was created at the beginning of the 18th century around the Mosque of Fire, located some 600 meters northwest of the first nucleus.

The third nucleus was built northeast of the first nucleus beginning with the erection of the Mosque of Zajmi in 1770.

The fourth nucleus was created with the foundation of the Mosque of Haxhi Ethem at the beginning of the 19th century, which was located about 200 meters west of the old mosque and was surrounded by dwellings, gardens, graves, etc. (Miho 1987, 52).

During the 19th century other nuclei were formed with a mosque at their centres, all moving centrifugally from downtown to the suburbs and then back towards downtown through independent islets located somewhat far of each other, all of which later, without any organization, came to enlarge gradually until they intersected one another by creating an urban planning landscape of irregular layout and scant density, as conditioned by the existence of private land ownership. Feudal fragmentation of the land and the absence of a

central administration capable of enforcing laws have conditioned the emergence of irregular and very much scattered constructions without any technical pre-arrangement (Aliaj 2003, 16). In 1830 the town was divided into six quarters, each of which had its own mosque and constituted a separate unit, related to the others primarily for commercial reasons (Mauro 1940, 14).

At the beginning of the 20th century Tirana was characterised by an irregular, extended and fragmented urban structure. The town was made up of two areas, the dwelling one and the economic one, both connected with each other by streets and side streets. During the whole course of the town's growth, these parts have been in reciprocal connection and dependence in various levels, while always retaining their primary features. A typical Tirana dwelling of the time was a one- or two-storied building constructed out of mud-bricks and divided by other neighbouring ones by yards that were surrounded by relatively low walls lining the lanes (Aliaj 2003, 22). The bazaar that was entirely settled in the central part of the town presented the commercial and economic area.

Despite the growth of Tirana, the structure of the town didn't show important changes. These would happen after the proclamation of Tirana as the capital city of Albania.

Becoming a capital: Tirana after the proclamation as the capital of Albania

The year 1920 finds Tirana a town stretching over a space of 305 ha, where the residential area occupied 98.2 % of the town's space, and a population of 15,000 inhabitants with a density roughly of 50 inhabitants per ha. The town evolved around the old bazaar's nucleus with the residential area principally extending north and east of the town.

The residential section and the economic one communicated through a network of streets and lanes that marked the most characteristic feature of the town. They were too narrow and curved and often blind. The centre of the town was the bazaar, where the business and commercial activity took place. In the following year, 1921, the town grew by 15 %, and tended to stretch in the northeast and southwest directions (Aliaj 2003, 28). In 1922, cemeteries that had been up to this year near the mosques were transferred outside the city. In their place several public gardens were created.

In 1923, Austrian architects and engineers developed the **first regulatory town plan**. This plan intended to reach a compromise between the construction of a regular orthogonal street network and the improvement and adjustment of the existing one, thereby seeking to create a

rectangular and clean street network south and west of the bazaar, an area which has been almost empty, and in other parts of the town, north and east of the bazaar, this street network has to consider the direction of the main streets and lanes, especially the radial streets by straightening and widening them. The centre of the town still remains the bazaar. Although it was not a very successful study in terms of its feasibility, the plan led to the opening (widening) of the main streets of the town (Aliaj 2003, 28-29).

In 1925, the Italian architect Brasini developed the first master plan about the rearrangement of the new centre of the capital, which consisted of six buildings for the ministries and a central eclectic boulevard, a plan that would later be carried out with some modifications and, even later, would be translated into more pragmatic forms by the Italian architect Florestano Di Fausto who would work on Tirana some times later. The idea of the architect Brasini was to create a Roman isle in the city without combining it with the rest that was marked by a prominent Oriental character, an isle that would serve as a connecting joint between the old town and the modern one that was to be built in the future. The project consisted in developing a wide boulevard in North-South direction, which divides the existing city from its periphery and which was proposed as a monumental and governmental centre of a new autonomous city that was to be developed while ignoring the Oriental heritage of the old town (Aliaj 2003, 30).

In 1926, **the second regulatory plan** of Tirana was developed, one that was not only a revision of the plan of 1923 that had had certain shortcomings, but such one that, for the first time, comes to materialize architect Brasini's idea of the construction of a wide boulevard in the direction north-south. Three other authors contributed to this regulatory plan: the Albanian engineer Mr. Eshref Frasheri, the Italian engineer Castellani and the Austrian Weiss (Aliaj 2003, 32)

The third regulatory plan was that of 1928 as developed by the Austrian architect Kohler. This plan shows the quadratic system of the road network, especially in the Tirana e Re (New Tirana) area, which was almost uninhabited (Aliaj 2003, 32-33).

The fourth regulatory plan was that of 1929. The whole boulevard was designed as beginning not from the bazaar, but from the future stadium of the city that would be built in the place of the present-day railway station, down to the Royal Palace south. This regulatory plan defined the boundaries of the city as circumscribing a space of 4.5 km² and also outlined the area of the city's center that was to encompass both the North-South Boulevard and the main streets. These streets would undergo full reconstruction in accordance with the contemporary

architecture and the layout plan so as to become paved, wide streets, lined with buildings of a contemporary architecture (Aliaj 2003, 35).

In the 1930s, because of the economic development of the city and its greater role as an administrative centre, the new boundaries of the city were defined. The extension of the boundaries was made to enable the growth of the residential area, the landscaping of the eastern part of the city, and the growth of industry on the western side.

In the 30-ies, Tirana sustained major changes in the town planning area. Regarding private dwellings, they developed in two directions, one in the territory of old Tirana, the other in the uninhabited area of what was called New Tirana. This space (New Tirana), which until then was state property, was divided in plots that were sold at favourable prices to the functionaries of the Albanian state. Modern residences with straight streets according to a town plan began to be built in this part. The buildings had to be at least two-story high. On the contrary, the Old Tirana remained, as it was, with very few urban changes, the place where its inhabitants used to work and live. Gradually the difference between the two Tirana's grew wider and more distinct. Nevertheless, during the 30-ies, a number of new private buildings were constructed. Tirana had no water supply and sewage system, no asphalt roads (with the exception of the big boulevard). Houses built with mud bricks and not real bricks dominated among its buildings.

During 1929-1938, from the urbanistic and architectonic aspect Tirana witnessed a qualitative leap of development by building a number of new roadways, as well as by constructing the ministries' complex and many other objects of administrative, social and cult functions.

Creating the new administrative structures

The feudal anarchy particularly created during the 18th century and through the 30s of the 19th century, had considerably weakened the administrative and political power of Sultan in Albania. Instead of existing sandjaks, the inherited possessions of local feudals, pashalics were created. Until the 30s of the 19th century, the administrative domination of the country was transferred onto the hands of large Albanian feudal families. This also happened in Tirana. For a long period of time, Tirana was an arena of fighting between two large feudal families, the Bargjin, the early possessors of this region, and the Toptani, the possessors of Kruja. In the middle of the 18th century, Tirana was still ruled by the descendants and the heirs of Sulejman Pasha Bargjini, the founder of the city. The ruler who firmly developed a particular policy in the territory of Tirana was Ibrahim Pasha Bargjini, the grandson of

Sulejman Pasha Bargjini. He developed a regulatory plan of the city, regulated the street network and gave land to the inhabitants of the city. With the death of Ibrahim Pasha's grandson, who was killed by the ruler of Kruja, Kapllan Pasha Toptani, the Bargjini dynasty was extinct. The four granddaughters of Ibrahim Pasha got married to the sons of Kapllan Pasha Toptani, who came to live in Tirana. The city fell under the rule of Toptani family, who ruled the city until the beginning of the 20th century.

During the first years after the proclamation of Albania's independence in 1912, Tirana was occupied first by Serb armies and later during World War I by the Austrian and Italian armies. During the Austro-Hungarian occupation was set up a civil administration formed of Albanian officials. Its highest administrative bodies were called directorates, had departmental functions, but were not ministerial departments. From the administrative point of view, when it became the capital of the country, Tirana was still a sub-prefecture of the Durrës Prefecture. It became an independent prefecture only in 1925, and encompassed only one municipality, that of Tirana. In Tirana were situated the administrative organs of the prefecture. In 1927 there were 261 officials employed in the administration of the prefecture (Selenica 1928, 446). The mayor and the municipal council governed the municipality. According to the laws about the municipalities, the municipality of Tirana was considered as a special category.

Tirana, as the capital of the new state, would also be the center of the new government structures. Up to that moment, the power had been on the hands of few families who had governed in specific areas of the country. In order to build a centralized state, the power had to become concentrated on new administrative structures. These administrative structures were created following the example of the administration of western European countries. It was supposed that taking on these structures, the efficiency of them would be guaranteed, too. But this was not the case. The majority of the functionaries were persons who had been employed in the administration of the Ottoman Empire, and after the fall of the Empire had come back to Albania. They were unknown in Albania and in order to get integrated in the administrative structures they entered on service of a Bey and after 1920 they already had formed a clique that began to penetrate in the administration, parliament and army (Vlora 2003, 461). This category of functionaries brought the inefficiency and the corruption of the Ottoman administration in the new administrative structures of the Albanian state and obstacle the modernization efforts during the next years.

During the 20-ies and 30-ies efforts were made to improve the situation of the education in Albania. New schools were opened and many students were sent to study abroad, primarily in Italy and France. The second category of officials was composed of these individuals who

after finishing their studies came back to Albania. Being employed in the different ministries, municipality or other institutions was considered important and a good job opportunity.

A third category that was active in the administrative and political life were the members of the families that had served the Ottoman Empire and continued to play an important role during the first years after the proclamation of the independent Albanian state. As the majority of the population in the country was illiterate and the possibility to study had been a privilege of the rich and noble families, it was understandable that the administrative functions would be on the hands of these persons. The surnames of the prefects, ministers, members of parliament etc. were almost all surnames of well known families who had been holding the power in different towns of Albania, and now were all settled in Tirana. Only the way the power was practiced did change, the persons remained the same. An illustrative example of this process is found in the memoirs of Eqrem Bey Vlora, one of the members of a powerful family in south Albania:

“On 26 November 1923, when the elections for the National Legislative Assembly were announced, my father and my friends insisted on my candidature. I created my staff that would support me during the elections... I did not have to invest anything to win. I was elected just because it could not be thought that anyone but the Bey could be elected“ (Vlora 2003, 496).

Conclusion

The city of Tirana during the 19th century was characterized by a modest urban development and population growth. Tirana continued to extend without any regular city plan and this phenomenon resulted into an irregular urban landscape. The first two decades after the proclamation of Tirana as the capital of Albania were decisive for the urban development of the city. During these years, the city changed and the measures taken by the government caused its gradual transformation into a political and administrative center. The several regulatory city plans developed at this time almost completely changed the view of Tirana. At the end of the 30-ies, Tirana was composed of two large parts, the Old Tirana that remained almost as it was before the beginning of the transformation process, and the New Tirana, the part of the city erected to meet the needs for administrative buildings and residences for officials. These two parts showed differences regarding the street networks, density of the buildings, quality of the material used for the construction. An article published in a local newspaper described these differences:

“... If you want to get to know the Old Tirana, you must enter its exact center, where everything continues to go on in the previous rhythm. Neither the streets, nor the shops have changed. They continue their gradual evolution together with the life of their inhabitants.

Have you noticed it? Three main streets enclose the Old Tirana. There, civilization had not dared to enter. How far is the Ministry Square from the Old Market! Not even 100 meters in distance, but more than 100 centuries backwards in time!”(Shtypi 1937, 3)

Along with the extension of the city, the population continued to grow, too. In 1938 Tirana had 25,079 inhabitants in comparison to 10,251 in 1918. This population growth was more a result of the immigration of many individuals from the nearby villages or other cities because of better job opportunities in Tirana, than of the natural growth. Changes happened from the administrative point of view as well. New administrative and government structures were created.

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