

GRADUATION PROJECT

M.Sc. Urbanism

TIRANA NEW PARADIGM: FROM POST-COMMUNIST
TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE CITY

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REFLECTION

01 REFLECTION

Reflecting on your one-year-long graduation thesis appears to be a tough initiative which intends to reveal to what extend this master fulfilled the education goals. To my opinion, the graduation thesis aims not only to understand what you have learned from this academic program but also to report what is your contribution to the topic. Shortly, I may say I have learned more than I have expected, and this research and design process has brought my state of critical thinking to a more advanced level. The essential explanation of my aims and achievements on this graduation project is explained as follows.

01.1 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RESEARCH AND DESIGN

Due to the topic broadness, the research product of the graduation thesis was multi-dimensional and it gave room for many approaches of further elaborations. The objective of understanding the contextual complexities required an adequate recognition of economic tendencies, cultural dynamics and political approaches. In this connection, the research process considered each aspect of Albanian everyday life and assessed them through the frame of historical facts on city planning and decision making. Inevitably, this attitude went against the desirable narrow scope of research, but however, the outcome provided a clear and hierarchical panorama of the city’s development from the national degree to the neighbourhood standard. Thereby, in this thesis I tried to involve a variety of scales in urban design and planning, and the proposed strategic vision worked as a balance between different scopes of urbanism while considering the problematic closely related to the dynamic socio-economic context. The upcoming design proposals were a coherent materialization of the specific understandings that were generated from the research process. Seen together, the most used approach was research by design but a pure experimentation on design by research was also practiced.

The review of Tirana’s problematic in a larger scale put forward the need for reflecting on the previous proposals approved by the local and national government, which as a

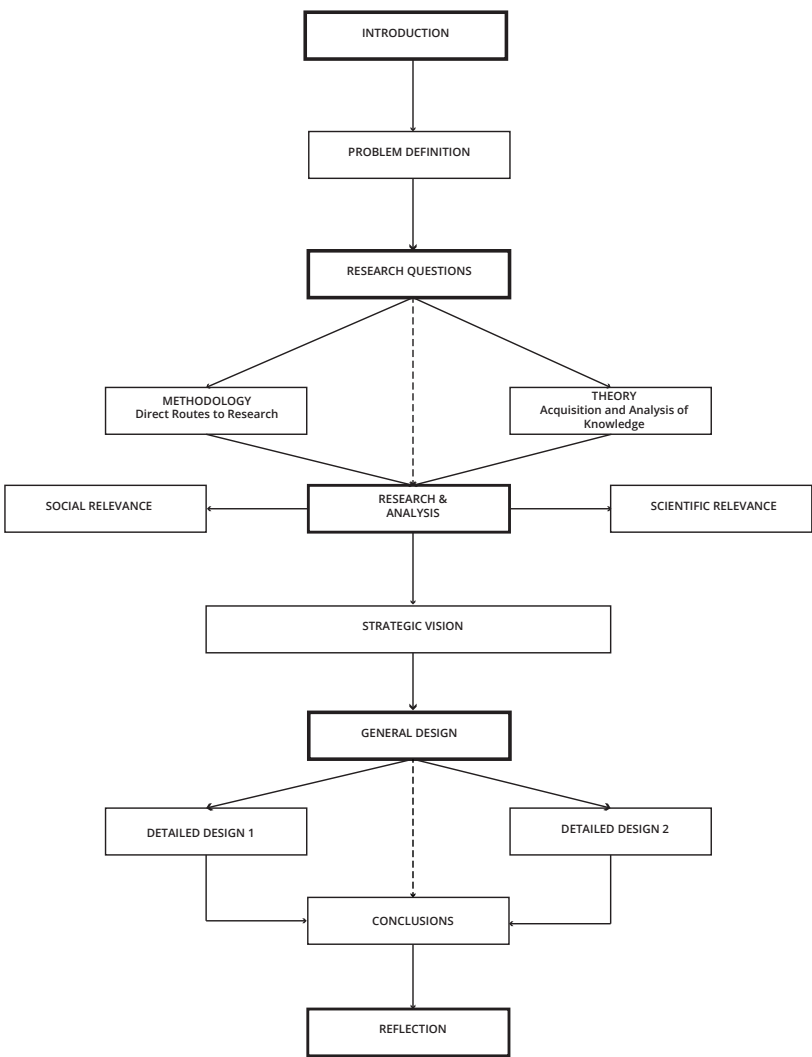


FIG 01-1 Schematic explanation of the developing process of the graduation thesis.
Source: Author

result constitutes a considerable part of my analysis chapter. A professional guidance by my mentors Paul Stouten, Francisco Colombo and Maurice Harteveld helped significantly on making a natural transition from the research outcomes to the vision and later to the design product. These consecutive steps were followed by a strong theoretical framework mostly focused on the urban regeneration, sustainable development and creative economy. Parallel to the strategic vision for the metropolitan Tirana, I worked on the elaboration of the design assignments for specific areas aiming to understand what can be the interventions effects from the small to the large scale and vice versa. The concept of “Small, Medium, Large and Extra Large” found a pure embodiment in each line I drew for this project.

A pivotal aspect of my research was the everyday attempt to think and write critically. An efficient supervision from my main mentor resulted in a conceiving and coherent analytical text which accompanies each chapter of my project. Joining the Design of Urban Fabric research group appeared to be a natural choice which came along with my involvement on the Honours Programme Master (HPM), where my research was focused on the urban renewal of the communist residential blocks in Tirana.

Additionally, theoretical framework in particular served as a foundation for the thesis development. Each step of the research and design advancement was subjected to the theoretical consultation thus increasing the fruitfulness and the efficient use of the time available. This concluded to a coherent project storyline where the initial ideas were refined and elaborated but never left halfway.

01.2 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE THEME OF THE GRADUATION LAB AND THE SUBJECT/CASE STUDY CHOSEN BY THE STUDENT WITHIN THIS FRAMEWORK (LOCATION/OBJECT)

In this project, the topic of urban regeneration was seen in a combination with the effect that it might have in the socio-cultural aspect of the location. The controversial history of

Tirana, which appears to be strongly connected to the political ideologies, do have its materialization in the city urban fabric. In this connection, the graduation lab of research and design of urban fabric fulfilled perfectly the questions put forward by the problem analysis. The focusing of the designing process in the city centre of Tirana was chosen due to the complexity and variety of problems that the urban fabric showed.

Urban regeneration in former communist countries has always been a fascinating topic for many researchers and designers worldwide. This interest derives not only from the confrontation of the communist political system to the recently established democratic one, but comes also as a result of the consideration of communism as a system that shapes tremendously the societies' behaviours where it performs. In this connection, in my graduation thesis I tried to deal with issues regarding urban regeneration not only on the physical level, but also aiming to understand to what extend the Albanian society can house new trends of local and national economies and how we can shape the future of the capital city within its specific cultural frameworks. A fully and long-term implementation of communism does not restrict only the basic human rights and needs but injects the idea that the other systems are ideologically failing and continuously intending our social and political destruction. This fatalistic lesson in combination with the congested propaganda and the lack of international sources of information builds slavery societies which day by day loose the nerve and the confidence for change. This happened to Albania in 46 years of communist dictatorship, one of the most severe regimes in Europe.

However, the fall of Berlin Wall had a domino effect in other communist countries and Albania couldn't stay behind. The immediate change of political system put forward another reality, tremendously different from the previous one and alien to the eyes of the majority of Albanians that were born and grew up in a internationally self-isolated country. However, the fall of Berlin Wall had a domino effect in other communist countries and Albania couldn't stay behind. The immediate change of political system put forward another reality,



FIG 01-2 The dictator's monument torn down, February 20, 1991. Source: Central National Archive of Albania

tremendously different from the previous one and alien to the eyes of the majority of Albanians that were born and grew up in an internationally self-isolated country. This revealed the need for a transitional period that would soften the way of integration towards a consolidated democracy. This period was recognized as post-communism and unfortunately, after 25 years since the collapse of the regime, it is still continuing. The country and its capital city in particular express the need for making the final step of detachment from the bitter past. Given this background, the embracing of this topic “Tirana new paradigm: From post-communist towards a sustainable city” goes beyond the legacies left by this totalitarian regime and tries to understand which were the trends of city development during these 25 years of post-communism. This juxtaposition of the political eras reflects perfectly its force of change into the built environment, and in this connection, my research aimed to extract the translation of communism and democracy into the urban fabric of the city centre.

01.3 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE METHODOLOGICAL LINE OF APPROACH OF THE GRADUATION LAB AND THE METHOD CHOSEN BY THE STUDENT IN THIS FRAMEWORK

For conducting my research, the methodology that I applied followed the guidance of the graduation lab and slightly changed during the designing development period. It embraced the fundamental ideas from the theoretical framework and developed them further through a process of sequential sketches and analytical diagrams. The process of analysing the built environment accompanied each step of the project elaboration and it was extended on a variety of scales. This kind of flexibility was a product of mentoring from different teachers with different academic and professional backgrounds. To my opinion, the restriction for choosing the mentors from different research groups appeared to be a successful attitude.

In addition, an important part of the methodology applied was the site observations and questionnaires, which filled the

gap imposed by the lack of data that developing countries usually face. The most important graphical documents were provided by the respective offices of the Albanian institutions (i.e. Municipality of Tirana, Central National Archive and Polytechnic University of Tirana) and some other data were extracted by the online publications of several non-governmental organizations. Furthermore, case studies from many European cities that share the same problematics were also substantially taken into consideration. They became the preliminary basics for shifting easily to the design proposals. Even though the approximation to the Albanian context was difficult, these cases appeared to be relevant and very helpful. Due to the different approaches of urbanization, not the same was experienced with references from United States.

01.4 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE PROJECT AND THE WIDER SOCIAL CONTEXT

Having a native attachment to the project location, the

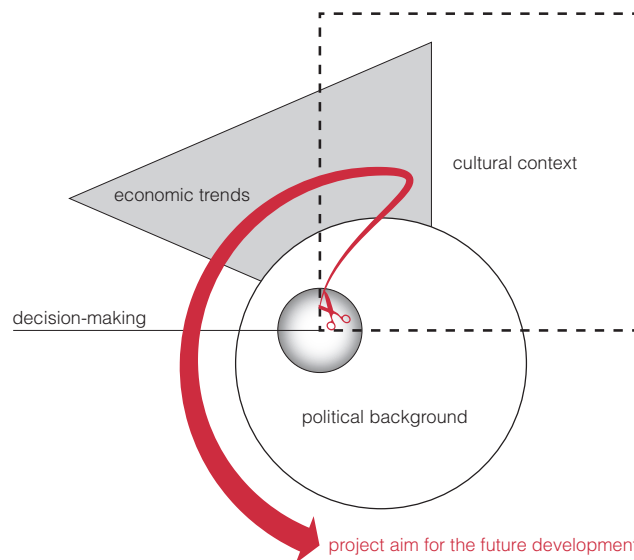


FIG 01-3 Schematic explanation of the cultural, political and economic context of Tirana and the project aim for a less politically controlled decision-making and for a future sustainable development.

Source: Author

graduation thesis resulted on changing my perspective of analyzing the urban issues. Indirectly, this experience shifted my attitude towards the built environment from the level of the ordinary occupant to the level of the researcher and designer. Besides, the personal social implication in the project location resulted to have a significant effect on the way how I perceived and analyzed the city problems.

The city of Tirana represents the troublesome history of a small country in south-eastern Europe but one the oldest one in the region. In this context, the understanding of its complexities took time and effort. A congested period, which resulted to be very successful with the submission and presentation of the work done during the first half of this academic year, represented the major social issues that the city of Tirana faces nowadays. As a result, the next phase of the project enters comfortably the existing physical context, and on the other hand, navigates freely on the socio-cultural background of Tirana. Lastly, the product of this graduation thesis embraces the most challenging aspects of the rising metropolitan city such as public transportation, housing, creative economy, cultural consumption and sustainable development, and offers some basic guidelines for similar cases on other post-communist cities of south-eastern Europe.

Personally speaking, my reflection on this project conclusions tend to pose the arguments for considering the urban composition of former communist cities such as Tirana not as a matter of glamorous designing but as an issue strongly connected to the freedom of acting and reacting. A pure top-down approach that these cities practice widely and the lack of the participatory process will always bring proposals backed by the big investors, but on the other side, continuously opposed by the community. The so far development of Tirana's urban fabric shows clearly this inconsistency of the proposals with the actual needs. To my conclusion, this disorder in the decision-making predominantly comes parallel to the unconsolidated institutions of the emerging democracy, but, however, the aspiration for joining the European Union is expected to accelerate the development process.