


Tirana as an Open Lab: A Pilot for an Integrated Research Tourism Vision Pre-/Post-Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The event we are facing at a global scale, the COVID-19 pandemic, can be considered a real death blow to the real markets, in general, as well as to a local heritage-based tourism market, in particular. The closing of both near and distant “borders,” due to the imposed social-spatial limitations—as an early answer to the pandemic—has hugely affected the micro, small, and medium businesses within their local contexts. This article aims to identify how and if an alternative tourism offer might take/give a kind of advantage of the urban features and cultural layers of Tirana by positioning it as safe tourism in the current long wave of post-pandemic. Tirana is proposed as an experimental open lab. The adopted survey methodology was based on both traditional urban analyses as well as on an e-survey aimed to catch the overall common inclination in the city’s vocation for an unconventional tourism offer. The paper is mostly focused on the survey as the base material from which to get further information to be used in subsequent co-planning and co-designing phases.

KEYWORDS

Co-Planning, COVID-19 Pandemic, Digital Acceleration, E-Survey, Hybrid Survey, Integrated Relational Tourism, Multi-Layered Cities, Research Tourism, Tirana Open-Lab, Urban Tourism

INTRODUCTION

The stress we have faced on a global scale for almost two years, the COVID-19 pandemic, can be considered a real death blow to many aspects of our old-normal lives. This research stage is focused in highlight those aspects that strained the local real-markets, as well as the ones that affected the local tourism market in the demand/offer increasing metamorphoses in the post-pandemic. The closing of both next and remote physical boundaries, indeed, together with the list of health provisions due to the inflicted set of social-spatial-economic limitations -as the new answers given to the issue (vaccination, green pass, etc.)- have hugely affected -and are hugely affecting- the micro, small and medium businesses’ fabric, within their normal local contexts, as well as conventional living habits and behaviours, due to updated dwellings’ needs.

This article, which tells about the early results of still-ongoing research -Tirana Next Pilot project (TNP)- as updated in the post-pandemic, in the drafted “Path C: Sustainable Urban Tourism offer

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for an Integrated Relational Tourism next-vision” aims to identify how and if a form of alternative tourism offer might take advantage from the various urban features, and to release benefits to the cultural layers of the city, mainly in the current long-wave of post-pandemic uncertain and mutable scenarios and new wishes.

The acceleration in the digital dimension practices at the daily-scale in working, studying, and living, the boosting in searching of “suitable, cosy locations” benefitting from micro-accommodations local networks within more-free-of-rules places (OECD, 2020), and the rise of new mixed real-virtual direct relations between insider/outsider places’ actors, indeed, they seem they are encouraging a safer and opener individual answer fully respecting of social-distancing and self-isolation (new connections), in scattering the grouping into both indoor/outdoor spaces (new denseness), and in claiming new short-radius physical flows network (new proximities).

The conducted e-surveys overall aim, in 2019, was initially started to catch the overall common feeling and awareness by internal and external users on Tirana’s possible vocations (Claeys-Kulik & Jørgensen, 2019), as well as on the richness of its cultural/physical multi-layered structure, to be addressed to an unconventional integrated relational tourism offer (Gulotta et al., 2004) driven from an unconventional City’s peculiarities and perspicuity. Later on, a subsidiary goal was added in early 2020 in the attempt of understanding both the quality and quantity of an alternative growing demand, so as begotten by the impact of the pandemic event and its consequent reflexes. In the post-pandemic, Albania was one of those regions that became a middle-long period destination for a new flow of moving towards less-regulated and low-cost, but comfortable countries; precisely thanks to that digital speeding up in practices such as e-working, e-relationships, and e-services.

The main question we would like to give an answer belonging to the “Path C” of the said TNP project -as updated in the post-pandemic- is, does this city with all these overlapped layers of physical and socio-cultural facts provides appropriate services and rich enough spatial and social diversity for visitors?

The present paper intends then to tell us a tale, voluntarily leaving out other results and proposals within the overall Pilot, on the conduction and on the early results of that mixed survey, as a means from which to get further evidence and participated visions on the matter. Both are useful materials to highlight the new role of e-planning and e-designing processes in drafting renewed development strategies human-sized, also for many other developing areas, even trying to register what kind of advantages -or disadvantages- may raise for both the local market and the small dimension of urban economics.

THE CURRENT PANDEMIC SCENARIO

In current times many natural events, political issues and outbreaks of diseases have deeply affected the worldwide trends in the traditional tourism market by bringing down to minimize its contribution to national GDP (Abbas et al., 2021). As well as, they are conditioning those emerging alternative tourism forms, more beneficial in local development, and so also impacting the local businesses fabric mainly within urban contexts. Earthquakes, tsunamis, epidemics, and political instabilities have acted as a whip shot in this decreasing process within many countries and places, showing dramatic effects, especially in the weaker ones. This is due to one of the most rooted characteristics of the tourism market that is the instability of both demand and offer, because of its influential link to and from the territory’s trust and its internal dynamics.

The current event we are still facing on a global scale since early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic, might be considered a real death blow to this specific real market, often affecting both the big and the micro and small businesses (the less protected ones at the local scale). On the other hand, it is making greater and greater the global mega-companies (Shafi, Liu & Ren, 2020).

The current pandemic clearly stated we are experiencing an epochal challenge reflected in the extraordinary transformation in both physical, digital, and virtual connections, so as in the

interrelationships among people, places, and times, as led by a new huge network of “flows”. The networks of “relationship nodes”, today more than just a few months ago, is re-structuring the territories and it is opening the system to shaping - and planning/designing - a new idea of digital cities and societies. Indeed, together with the physical networks those “invisible” networks already shaped, suddenly and in a very short time, a new idea of urbanity and, maybe, a new idea of society, slipping into a new holistic process of real/virtual/digital city-(re-)forming (Cathelat, 2019). We are nowadays witnesses of a historical (rapid and unpredicted) overpassing of digital dimension over the real dimension, where these two new terms seem to deal between a contraction to closest proximity and an expansion to largest globality. So, on one hand, both social and individual interactions are currently strongly limited in many ways -as well as spatial relations are- stressing and bringing back to a new idea of proximity capable to drive us all toward a super-local smaller dimension (the close-proximity). On the other hand, both virtual and digital social and spatial relationships are expanding their (our) connecting network-systems to the planetary global-scale leading citizens to a huge new world dimension within our conventional life (the enlarged-globality). Last but not least, we are also struggling in the middle of two other crucial concepts linked to urban living times. We may synthetically summarize them as 1) the losing relevance of our physicality in many human activities, such as working/studying, interacting, living; and 2) a split between the temporariness and the permanencies on those changes/challenges we are facing in the new normality (Mohareb, 2020). Indeed, some of the challenges we are dealing with will be shortly forgotten, meanwhile others are destined to become permanent deeply transforming our lives, our mindsets, and our places.

New equilibria are definitely reshaping digital, virtual, and real dimensions, between proximity and expansion, and between temporariness and permanencies, in a renewed cycle of flows-spaces-times.

THE BACKGROUND OF URBAN TOURISM AND ITS POTENTIAL RELEVANCE

The term Urban Tourism (Gilbert & Clark, 1997) refers to a phenomenon that gained popularity starting from the '50s, but until the '80 it was not recognized as an autonomous subject of scientific research. It took a while, but with the proliferation from swarms of mass tourists in some art cities in Europe during the '90s, it nourished a huge debate about the supporting capacity of some well-known and overly visited cities (in Italy the debate was led for cities like Venice, Florence, Rome, etc.).

Economically, it is a segment of the whole tourism market, which embodies an interesting niche market, considering the increase of travelling to and from cities since the last fifteen years (OECD, 2020). It is recognized as a crucial cultural-sociological-psychological item that brings towards cultural identities contamination in favour of a city's multi-cultural progress. Tourism into the cities certainly has become one of the main attractions for an even larger target group of people thanks to cities' released opportunities in terms of dynamism, activities, events and, last but not least, its rich package in terms of cultural and historical heritage, not leaving behind its physical, cultural, and social features and peculiarities (such as food, art-craft, urban environment, etc.). What is highly interesting about this subject is the connection system that establishes strong relationships between host and guest, visitors, and locals; a binomial which, if well handled by place-based management, can bring rewards to both of the parties. If not, it can instead drive to the most destructive effects in both material and immaterial features by strongly reducing those more direct social-economical interactions, proper of that kind of local-driven offer (Purpura, Naselli & Ruggieri, 2007).

For several reasons, urban tourism can be considered a sub-branch of the main branch named alternative tourism, in contraposition to the largest (and dominant) massive tourism, also said traditional or industrial tourism. Moreover, taking its room within the city, this kind of tourism is a combination of various normal (daily) and extraordinary (events) living activities that guests and hosts, as well, perform together bypassing social and cultural boundaries, in an urban context nourished by physical both anthropic and natural elements, so as by the whole set of immaterial

values, present within any peculiar urban environment. These “minimal” but significant elements very often become the main attractions for tourists, more and more self-informed in advance about the destination places’ values thanks to the virtual accessibility, and more and more interested in discovering the real features of normal life (food, habits, costumes, traditions, etc.). By making it possible to turn cities into cities that serve not only the permanent residents but also a new variety of temporary users, such as temporary dwellers, visitors, and travellers (the whole of contemporary city users) (European Union, Regional Policy, 2011).

Urban tourism is then a phenomenon acknowledged recently as a kind of tourism that can easily be distinguished from the other targeted typologies, such as rural tourism, mountain tourism, religious tourism, and so on. However, both scholars and professionals approach the subject from different viewpoints related to their specific discipline of study or interest. Though, being such a huge and multifaceted phenomenon to analyze and to understand, it has somehow still some gaps that only can be filled through a trans-disciplinary scientific approach. In the meantime, cities change and tourism changes along with them, in parallel and a continuous advancement process. New terms and concepts referring to great modifications in the tourism discipline are becoming more and more popular, such as new tourist enjoyment modalities or alternative routes (Romero & Ortuno, 1998). The continuous metamorphosis of cities has made it possible for urban places to become a very appealing option, as its vast spectrum of openings, and dynamics can respond to different changes in tourism demand and management. Nowadays, the tourist easily feels like an actor among others and thanks to the new technologies and the virtual connections he can establish before, during and after the journey, a participatory relationship for the place’s safeguard and progress. The rising awareness and knowledge of the destination led toward new opportunities in self-managing travel in all its steps deeply, by establishing a real interaction among insiders and outsiders (Naselli, 2015).

However, urban tourism is not only affected by urban and tourist transformations. There is also a direct connection with political, climatic, and economic variation in a global perspective that deeply influences tourism into cities, in both developed and undeveloped countries. According to Dwyer, Edwards, Mistilis, Roman and Scott (2003), cities all over the world - both big cities or small towns - are in constant competition to attract the attention of new tourists, offering different options that motivate the visitor to stay longer than in any other place and to come back many times. The effects of the city’s various characteristics such as physical structures, people and activities, social and cultural events as well as economics have a direct impact on the life of a city as a destination (Pearce, 2001).

INTEGRATED RELATIONAL TOURISM AND NEW TRENDS IN POST-PANDEMIC

Tourism, as a supranational cultural, social, spatial, and economic phenomenon, has many aspects to bargain with. It is usually recognized as a meaningful element in combining new cultural and lifestyle contaminations among the involved actors (visitors and locals) as well as among engaged places and spaces; also, it represents a further economic dragging-market for several stakeholders, as well as for several local businesses, within one of the largest market sectors in the world. Finally, if managed in the more appropriate ways -by the offer-market actors instead than by the demand-markets ones- it may represent a real and strong tool to enhance the local development (Ruisi, 2004; Purpura, Naselli & Ruggieri, 2007; Naselli, 2012).

Indeed, what is crucial is the controversial relationship between the tourism exterior market and the local market; precisely, between the demand market and the offer market, a binomial which, if well applied and managed, can bring benefits to both parties. On the opposite, leaving the demand market all the chances in managing the whole process -so as in the traditional market happens by the international Tour Operators- it can become of high risk for the local market, as well as for the destination places, where a set of induced transformations, addressed merely to the satisfaction of the first market, might easily contribute to deleting real resources and flattening the differences, considered out-of-market, so as in many international destinations already happened. (Gulotta, et al., 2004).

The imposition of external models -demand-market oriented- has led to the subsequent neglecting of certain traditional and cultural values (local identities) in many regions of the world, just because out of that market and focused interests. The loss of local values, practices and customs has also generated the abandonment of built volumes, scattered or concentrated, some of which are of undeniable historical and architectural value (places' historical legacies), addressing those transformations in direction of a needed uniformity or standardization of the touristic offers, worldwide (Naselli, 2015).

Nowadays, scholars are fully aware these diverse cultural heritages, if protected and enhanced, can lead to the development of new types of tourism, useful for the places' development, through the re-launch of their authenticity, diversity, and local identity into the alternative tourism market.

The studies developed on the Integrated Relational Tourism are based on a set of three main concepts to build a tourism development model in favour of weak, marginal, or inner areas: the value of stressing physical, virtual and digital relationships; the instance of integrating among local and outside people, places, resources and products; and the need to reshaping the tourism offer market management starting "from" the place (Ruisi, 2004; Gulotta, et al., 2004; Purpura, Naselli & Ruggieri, 2007; Naselli, 2012; Naselli, 2015).

Today's tourists reveal a need to establish human "real" relationships to counterbalance the isolation of the anonymity of big cities and to experience true relations with people and places. In this way, in the silence of the "vast territory in the interior" human relationships between residing population and travellers are assuming, if adequately driven, an increasingly important role in tourism. Today's tourists prefer "to be" rather than "to have", and therefore they want to become part of the daily life of the places they visit and want their journey to be a source of knowledge and leisure. Contemporary tourist reclaims the past function of the journey, he intends on widening their knowledge of the surrounding territory while respecting the social and cultural equality of other populations (Urbani, 2003). Moreover, the new tourist seems less interested in the traditional sites of mass tourism, which shows damaged and false local identities.

So Integrated Relational Tourism can be settled as a form of "holistic" tourism, based on respect for the places, resources, and people who live there; locals that have in the place very ancient ancestors and legacies that bring us back to "human-sized" cultures, in which interpersonal relationships with the traveller were of fundamental importance.

In a nutshell, according to Urbani and Naselli (2004), Integrated Relational Tourism goes beyond the traditional concept of tourist supply and demand, favouring interpersonal and environmental relationships and stimulating historical and cultural sensitivity, in the dialogue between the host and the guest. Through the integration between the production sectors of the micro and medium-size, with the help of advanced technologies, it pursues and encourages sustainable development self-managed from the place (Gulotta, et al., 2004).

Nowadays, because of the current changes due to both the post-pandemic different behaviours and the speeding on of virtual/digital opportunities, a new trend of wanderlust is raising on, detached from the physical geography' needs: the digital nomadism is a growing reality, since the reopening of the borders between the countries. Alex Chatzieleftheriou, CEO of Blueground, said about "Flexibility, exploration and the freedom to choose how and where you spend your time is the essence of Blueground." (Kelly, 2021).

A phenomenon not entirely new but which is taking more rooms in the present. Digital nomads work from anywhere, mainly considering the quality, the attainability, the comfort, and the low costs of the new "temporary" destinations. The switch to daily practices in smart-working, smart-studying, and smart-living, liberating any links from fixed locations, boosted the searching of "alternative locations to stay" benefitting from the micro-accommodations local network within more-free-of-rules places, and the rise of new mixed real-virtual direct relations between insider/outsider places' actors. A practice that seems to be encouraging a safer and opener individual virtual answer fully respecting social-distancing and self-isolation (new connections), in scattering the grouping into

wider indoor/outdoor spaces (new denseness), and in claiming new short-radius physical flows network (new proximities).

During the outbreak, there has been a fast-emerging trend of smart workers taking houses in other countries, as digital nomads. People have taken to doing their jobs at the beach or near ski slopes. Some decided to relocate to lower-cost locations within the United States to save money while still receiving the same pay. Adventurous types travelled to other countries, wrote Keates on The Wall Street Journal (Dec 2020).

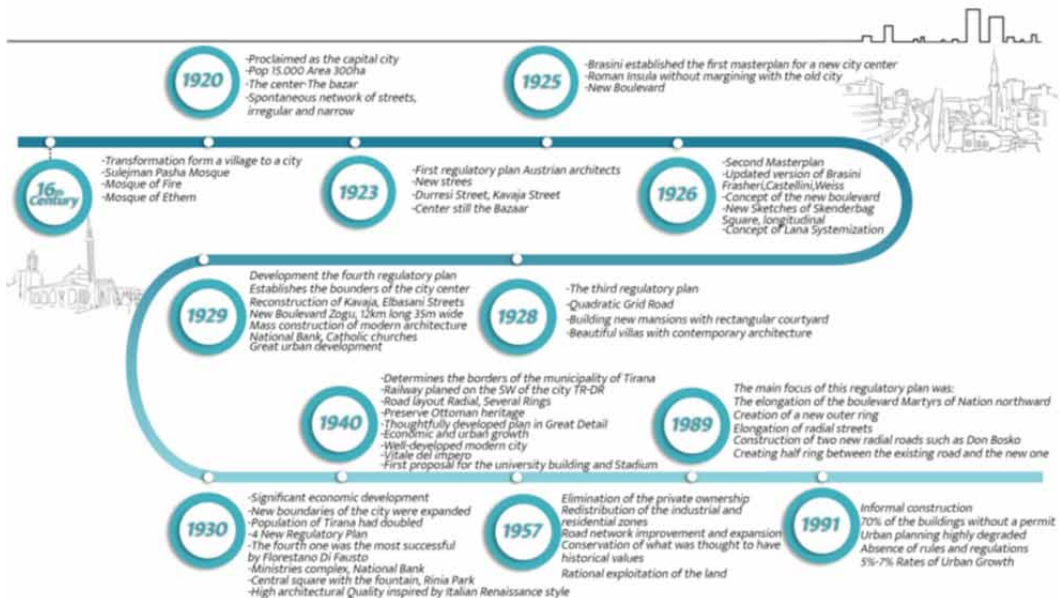
It is not a large phenomenon yet, but it promises to become a possible new global trend to take into consideration by observing its evolution in the coming times. Covid-19 ushers in a New Era of Full-Time Travelling, so as widespread remote work is poised to remake up the “digital nomad”: fewer backpackers in hostels, more middle-aged workers with a global hotel subscription (Keates, 2020).

The e-surveys added aim post- 2020, was exactly held in the attempt of understanding both quality and quantity of this alternative growing demand, so as begotten by the impact of the pandemic event. In the development of this new trend, indeed, Albania -and then Tirana as a main “attractor” while a capital city- became one of those regions chosen for middle-long period destinations; due to its few rules and limitations, its flexible style of living, its feasibility in terms of costs, and because it is, despite all, a very comfortable and innovative place where to stay.

THE CASE STUDY: MULTI-LAYERED TIRANA AS AN OPEN LAB

Tirana may represent, in this context, an interesting and evolving place to research, because of its rich and mixed built environment, its welcoming character, its richness in cultural values, its cheapness, and, last but not least, its light implementation of restrictive rules.

Figure 1. Understanding the Multi-Layered Tirana (Source: the authors, 2020)



After decades of lockdown, Albania has achieved new outlines as an attraction for alternative travel's purposes linked to the untouched natural environments and the beauty of its coastal areas.

At the same time, tourism to its capital city has risen and is rising more and more, thanks to a set of courageous choices taken from both political and administrative levels. Choices do not exempt from mistakes but which, among merits and demerits, are carrying Tirana to compete and to propose itself in the international arena as the newest European capital city (Naselli, 2021).

Since the fall of the socialist era (in Albania from 1992), Tirana has experienced a large informal urbanization process, after years of a stop in free private initiatives. Together with the informal buildings and urban fabrics from the post-socialist era and the formal development of the last decade, it has generated a creative chaotic atmosphere, cluttered but vibrant, which has given origin to an unexpected and extraordinary “enrichment in values” of both the traditional informal fabrics and the “formalized” neighbourhoods (Naselli and Jazaj, 2020). Furthermore, political, social, and economic adjustments in the late ‘90s, have inducted a major impact on Tirana’s architecture and urban character.

Although the said effects of this transition have left the city in an -apparently- disordered atmosphere, Tirana is becoming more and more attractive for visitors during the last decade, exactly because of its unique character, based on the plurality and diversity of its layers.

Figure 2. Tirana's centre in 1980 (Source: “TR030-Raporti i Vlerësimit Teknik”, Bashkia Tiranë”, UNLAB, IND, Stefano Boeri Architetti)



Figure 3. Tirana's centre in 2020 (Source: photo from the web, June 2020)



Since the fall of socialism, Tirana has endured a considerable urbanization process, still ongoing, only partially guided and planned; hence giving origin to a neglectful but exciting atmosphere, as well as a deep transformation of the existing urban form through several micro progressive spontaneous and informal adaptations, on one hand; or by new planned axes and rings with high-rise building

implementations around its city' centre core, on the other hand. Furthermore, political, and economic adjustments in the early '90s have caused a significant impact, still affecting Tirana's architecture and urban features (Naselli and Jazaj, 2020). Although those effects of political changes have left the city in a disordered atmosphere, Tirana is becoming more attractive for visitors properly because of the richness of this historical-cultural heritage, the value of physical-social informal but creative adaptations, the contemporary big architectures, and the current city-forming process, which have shaped the multilayered city we cope today.

The first traces of Tirana as a city can be found at the beginning of the past century (after the fall of ottoman domination in 1912) which nowadays presents itself as one of the most dynamic and young capitals in Europe. Definitively different from the origins, its growing process has been very complex and, in most ways, bottom managed and spontaneous. From just two decades the whole city is experiencing a real physical, social, and cultural transformation, which may see it today as the avant-garde of an interesting and - in many ways - a paradigmatic process of deep (sometimes drastic) urban changes. It appears as a sort of "new deal", carried on under the guidance of a soft democratic authoritarianism, but capable of driving the city (with advantages and disadvantages) towards a deep and complicated transition to the contemporary city (Naselli and Jazaj, 2020). A clear strategic vision-oriented and focused on the representative city developed within the formal city, over the network of main axes and rings; into the main green and open spaces, with some green-oriented mega-projects and onto regeneration of massive grey, blue, and green infrastructures. From a critical point of view, we could draft an uncovered idea of western models' emulation implementing through that acceptable current vision of development, which seems aimed at transforming Tirana into an "ordinary" contemporary city.

What we want to stress are rough out risks in persecuting this strategy of modernization, which could reach a full universal standardization as an undesirable output, in both the isolated projects and the existing urban fabrics transformations, and parallelly, to erase and to miss that large richness in cultural, social, microeconomic, and historical heritage.

Alternative kind of tourism, in our aim, could be the way to emphasize the importance of preserving and enhancing the complex urban materials by giving them the right value in an emerging new market; strongly tailoring the offer to the real-life and living neighbourhoods.

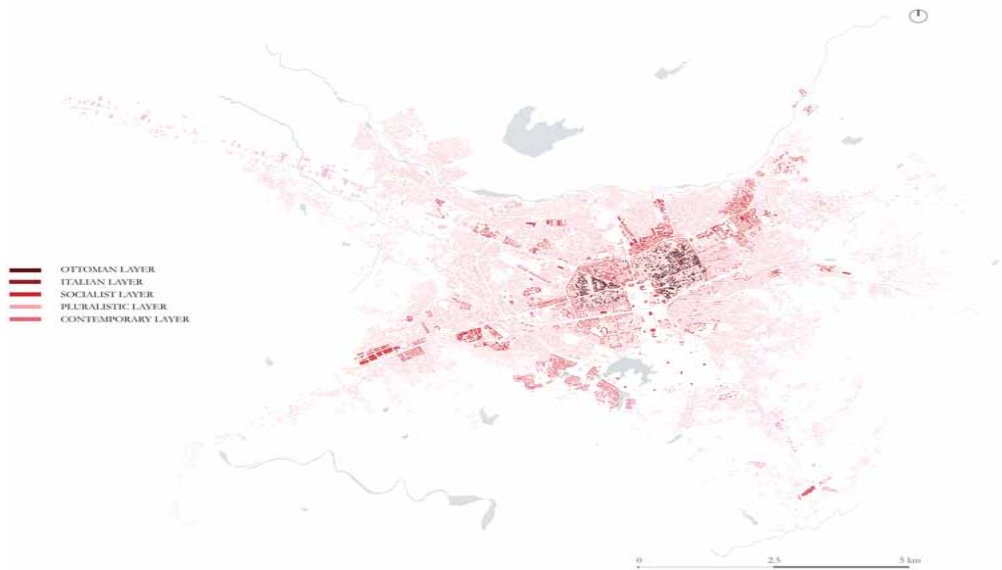
In the past decades, the city of Tirana was never characterized to be a touristic city, it had more of a commercial identity since its origins, also given the geographical position, and a political-administrative new addiction after it was nominated Albanian capital (1920). With the collapse of Communism, began a new era of contemporary architecture, even though it was ended by a crisis of the architectural identity of the city (Nepravishta, 2016). Local architects, deeply influenced also by European architectures, were finally free to experiment and bring a breath of modernization into the city. Elements like orientation, ventilation and greenery were considered and implemented in various residential buildings, affecting the newest European capital city in both its urban structure and the aesthetic aspects of city. The construction industry was one of the first sectors developed in that period, complicating the increased demand for housing during the democratic and pluralistic period, which somehow took in a way a preeminent economic function. After the fall of the dictatorship, Albanians aspired to transfer into the capital city in search of greater opportunities and better living conditions; meanwhile, for foreigners, it became interesting to visit the city, to follow the rapid growth and the transition from a closed and controlled city into a modern one, in less than three decades. Furthermore, the city branding approach supported as well in the process of transforming Tirana from an introverted city to an extrovert and a dynamic one.

In Figure 4 it is shown the expansion of the city, through overlapped maps, from the Ottoman period, before 1920; during the Italian period, from 1920 to 1940; the socialist age, from 1940 to 1990; and following then the pluralistic period of the last 30 years. The latter is divided into two split phases, the first two decades after the fall of Communism, from 1990 to 2010, proceeding with the

current period of the last decade, after 2010. As a result of the complex phases, a spread number of traces and witnesses of these overlapped layers are easy to be found nowadays in the contemporary city.

A multi-layered nature, with overlapped formal and informal shapes and styles within a living and dynamic city environment, has all the requirements to be attractive in terms of discoveries and practices in an urban tourism approach, as well as it is raising its role as an alternative place to stay for a while.

Figure 4. Map of Tirana in overlapped layers (Source: the authors, 2020)



The survey conducted was aimed to recognize these matters, by considering the city as an open lab wherein to discover, test or invent both current and innovative concepts and theories in some fields of territorial and human sciences.

TNP PROJECT: E-SURVEY AS A “NEW-NORMAL” TOOL FOR E-PLANNING PROGRESS

There are many studies in various fields that have been conducted with a specific focus on Tirana, especially being a city by approximately a century, as the capital city of Albania. However, that diverse range of studies has also some gaps in both data collection and basic knowledge. One of the voids to fill, regarding the various interactions within the city, marks the need for having a clear knowledge of the different socio-cultural breaths present in the city. So as they are expressed and readable through the current architectural multi-languages and the formal-informal articulations of the urban structure and fabric, such as become the generators of all urban transformations and adaptations which have shaped the current attractive vibrant dynamism into the city.

The Tirana Next Pilot project's (TNP) overall aim is to identify what could be the supplementary urban development strategies and actions for Tirana Capital City of Albania city-forming progress. The research project TNP intends to draft and develop new and subsidiary strategies and actions to the current ones, which are missing some of the most crucial subjects for this vibrant city and its

quick advancement toward a suitable contemporaneity. Corrective and subsidiary co-Actions are needed, indeed.

Research started in 2018 and today is going implemented due to the global stress challenges affecting our “old-normal life”.

The Project framework is framed in six Paths, according to the formulated crucial topics, as per below.

- Path A: Suppletive Planning Strategies for the informal urban fabrics within the superblocks' articulation.
- Path B: Suppletive Planning Strategies for the historical urban fabrics within the superblocks' articulation.
- Path C: Sustainable Urban Tourism offer for an Integrated Relational Tourism next vision.
- Path D: Improved bottom-up e Co planning and e-Governance processes through “big data management” implementation.
- Path E: Alternative mobility and open circulations in a “15 minutes city”.
- Path F: Stimulate a more suitable urban metabolism into the 5 cycles (waters, waste, soil, energy, greenery).

TNP goals and expected achievement have been identified as split into two main categories of users, in favour of public and private expectations. In a nutshell, they can be synthesized in the below-listed ones.

For the public party (city managers):

- provide alternative and subsidiary strategies in improving the in force current ones (Master Plan, Urban Designs, Strategic Plan, etc.).
- raise the quality of the Master Plan implementation by mattering the new critical issues (legacies, informality, cycles, mobility, etc.).
- joint more the public actions to the dwellers' real needs and wishes (open participation, urban tactics, co-planning, etc.).
- turn back the development aims from the private big interests to the public common city (citizens' dimension).

For the private party (stakeholders and city users):

- provide a shared and informed vision of the city's real values to protect and to enhance (historic heritage, collective identity, overall awareness, etc.).
- raise the quality of daily life in the city's next advancement by adding grassroots wishes and needs (social interactions, health & safety, micro-businesses, circulation, etc.).
- participating in public actions and co-designs to answer to real needs and wishes (open participation, bottom-up urban tactics, co-planning, etc.).
- strengthen collective's development aiming so to prioritize the public interests above the private ones (common city).

The project's adopted methodology is co-plan oriented throughout four steps in which any of the six Paths are divided:

- A. co-understanding the city as a whole, in its current structure/s, dynamics and aspirations (both official and unofficial).

- B. co-building of an appropriate knowledge framework on the current real condition (both formal and informal).
- C. involving the urban users in co-planning visions and urban tactics at both the proximity and the city scales (through workshops, focus groups, active socials and shared groups/pages)
- D. co-drafting of a co-vision framed in urban strategies and local tactics (between policies and real needs).

In particular, both points A and B are concerned with the knowledge of the case study data, while point A is literature and observation-based; point B is data-based. Below is how it has been split into sub-actions.

- B.1) conventional urban analysis tools, conducted on both the historical, social, economic, and cultural real resources and the physical-environmental components (mapping-out).
- B.2) hybrid survey (virtual and face-to-face questionnaires and interviews).
- B.3) e-survey, through the interpretation of the common feelings via the “sentiment analysis” (big data management).

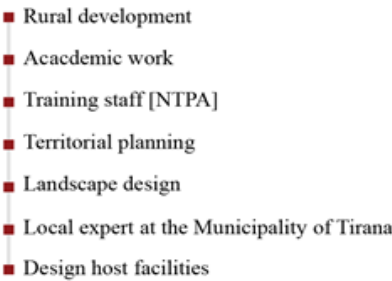
The research step B ultimately tries to identify, through a three points hybrid survey, how and if alternative tourism offers might take/release advantages of the various urban features of Tirana so as per emerging prospects of the e-survey in pre-and post-pandemic stakeholder perception. The most complex objective of this study was being to map out the extraordinary complexity of the city’s environmental/behavioural patterns, focused on the physical/human layers present in the city and the interconnection between humans and physical elements. In such a way, helping to identify the unique features of both the different periods and actors, as well as to achieve some suggestions on the ways how to develop a sustainable and supportive kind of urban tourism for Tirana on the path of IRT notions.

With computer network access, nearly ubiquitous in much of the world, alternative means of data collection are being made available to researchers. Recent studies have explored various computer-based techniques (e.g., electronic mail and Internet surveys). Of course, the exploitation of these techniques requires careful consideration of conceptual and methodological issues associated with their use (Jansen, Corley, Jansen, 2007). Indeed, any kind of conventional “e-survey” techniques present strengths and weaknesses to the reliability, validity, and generalizability of these approaches. There are reflections to consider in emerging issues of security, privacy, and ethics, as well as reliability of the data collection associated with the direct and indirect contaminations from a traditional e-survey methodology.

A second part of the implemented methodology, rather than the traditional urban analysis implemented as the point B.1) (mapping-out), was held as per point B.2) in a hybrid manner through questionnaires delivered both in f2f and virtually, focusing on urban tourism potentials and the values of the city. The questionnaire, composed of 14 questions is divided into 3 sections; the first 5 questions build the background of the interviewees, a very important section that associated the target group with the topic. Following the section related to the multi-layered nature of the city, proceed then with questions relevant to the recognized touristic aspects of Tirana. More than 100 interviewees were asked to fill the questionnaire, professionals and experts who are residents in Tirana, or that have lived in the city for a short time; thus, they know the multilayer structure of the city very well. The participant group was composed of architects, urban planners, lecturers, researchers, and civil engineers, with different academic backgrounds, from junior architects to senior scholars. Another crucial feature of the selected target group is the variation of age, from 25 years to 65 years old professionals, which contributed with different points of view on this research study.

Relevant was also the relation of the interviewees' work background with tourism, and the input/s they could put out in developing sustainable urban tourism, as shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Inputs from professionals in tourism development



The type of public has been selected because it is directly related to the city's features of knowledge, to understand better than anyone the main phenomenon which characterizes the city's peculiarities: the mixed nature of the overlapped layers of the city. That group was of different educational backgrounds and different relationships with the city; 85% of them were permanent residents and 15% temporary, but all of them were certainly familiar with the city's environment. In terms of works completed in or for Tirana, 65% of them have been involved in different projects regarding the city. Their responses also suggested an implementation of the whole structure in the analysis of the different layers currently present in the city.

Following out the survey of the features and potentials of each layer existing within the city, the response of the professionals reinforces our idea on the concept of the pluralistic city. Professionals have been asked what types of actions could be taken to improve the tourism sector sustainably and 35% of them said that infrastructure needed more improvements having a direct impact on tourism. Furthermore, 32% of them chose public spaces as an important feature to contribute to developing tourism. The 21% chose transportation; followed then by 10% who chose events and by 2% suggested marketing the city as a brand. All the above-mentioned actions would have an immediate effect on tourism development.

However, 66% of the interviewees acknowledge the city as a real pluralistic urban environment; with a multi-layered nature and overlapped urban and architectural characteristics of different historical periods and social-cultural events, as illustrated in Figure 6.

"The concept of pluralism implies that a city may hold a certain majesty and prominence; thus, achieving the status of an extraordinary and distinguished city, in some very important ways. This distinction can be encapsulated in attributes that can be projected across the world. The characteristics can vary from military capacity to cultural assets, to commercial prowess, to the transcendent propositions of philosophy and religion" (Braha, 2019).

Figure 6. Features that make Tirana a pluralistic city



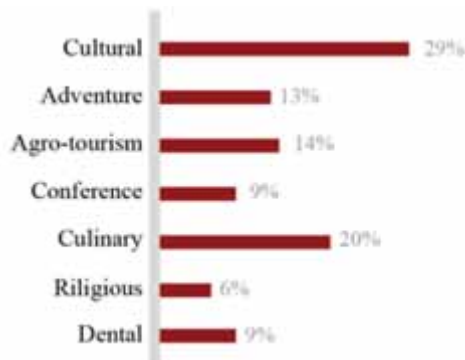
Furthermore, a series of city's characteristics are listed as they were specified in the questionnaire by the interviewees. They give a useful view of the city's dynamic environment, with potential for qualitative public spaces and strong components to have a great tourism offer.

The development of tourism, through its living activities and enhancement of present elements of the city, directly affects the city's atmosphere and economy. When asked if the above-mentioned characteristics have the potential to improve the city's quality of life, 70% of the interviewees agreed on the fact.

Considering the mixed and rich nature of the urban structure of Tirana, taking into consideration its urban characteristics, architectural features, social and cultural dimension as well as services and activities that could take place in each different layer of the city; it is inevitable to consider the great potential of the city in terms of the tourism offer. According to the Technical Assessment Report by TR030 Plan (2016), there are seven categories of tourism recognized for the city of Tirana: cultural, adventure, agricultural, conference, culinary, religious, and dental tourism.

When the interviewed were asked which of the above-mentioned categories had greater potential to affect the city's development, 29% of them chose cultural tourism as the first resource of development, followed by 20% who chose culinary tourism and 14% with agro-tourism. The division is shown below in Figure 7.

Figure 7. Categories of tourism in the city

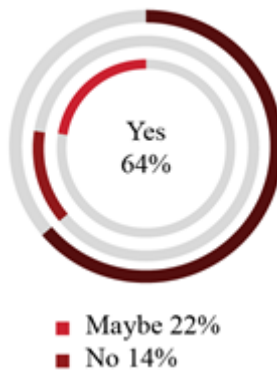


Furthermore, over the last years, it has been denoted a significant interest in the mixed nature of the city from the academics, researchers, and students. Many scholars have chosen Tirana as a suitable area to study the phenomenon of the urban sprawl and the overlapped city layers; considering the whole of Tirana as a laboratory on a 1:1 scale. Previous studies confirm that this concept of city-laboratory of architecture is not entirely new, as A.B. Menghini alleges "the city of Tirana today confirms the nature of a "laboratory" assumed since the second half of the 1920s, constituting a field of experimentation for contemporary urban design" (Menghini, et al., 2012).

Different research groups have shown interest in Tirana, groups of students or academics have put on activities aimed to discover and draft real answers to that subject; such as SpaRe.Life, an international summer school with the main objective to study the inner part within a pilot super-block in Tirana; Urban Carpet, researchers from Wien who studied the relation between young people and public spaces of the city; TAW, international workshop of Tirana architecture week; Architecture in context, researchers from Netherland who studied architecture and identity of the capital city; SCS, social-cultural centre, volunteers from Belgium who studied the context and implemented a project with focus the social dimension, etc.

Given the numbers of such kinds of interests, it was asked also if the phenomenon of the city as an open laboratory could be considered a characteristic of the city, 64% of interviewers agreed whereas 22% of them was in doubt, as illustrated in Figure 8.

Figure 8. Could Tirana be considered a 'laboratory city' for research?



The development of digital technologies applied to urban planning is contributing to modifying the governance processes of urbanized territories: it is possible to realize new forecasts and to acquire a more democratic and participatory (inclusive) dimension of Governance, thanks to new digital technologies by exploring the general unconscious “feeling” of people, through anonymous data collection from Socials and similar platforms and without any direct or indirect interference with it (Bellone, Naselli, Andreassi, 2021). The third point, the B.3), followed this way of e-survey, through the interpretation of the common feelings via the “sentiment analysis” (big data management).

The Sentiment Analysis can “define automatic tools able to extract subjective information from texts in natural languages, such as opinions and sentiments, to create structured and actionable knowledge to be used by either a decision-support system or a decision-maker. In practice, to analyze the sentiment present on the web, you can use various types of algorithms. In input, we have a corpus of documents of any format (Pdf, HTML, XML, Word, etc.,). The documents of this corpus are converted into text and are pre-treated through the use of linguistic tools. At this point, we can move on to the main component of the system, which is the document analysis module, which uses linguistic resources to indicate sentimental annotations. The annotations can be attached to the complete document, to a single sentence or a single aspect. These data can be reprocessed in output for the SA end-user and can be displayed in various ways, through graphs, tables, diagrams, etc. It is easy to understand how this system can provide an effective and innovative application methodology, able in supporting the process of participation in spatial planning and territorial governance. Even contributing to reshaping the hierarchies—and sometimes the quality itself—of any strategy drafted for the city-forming process.

This is an ongoing stage of the survey yet, but the first results can be extracted from this exploration of data. To give an early example, by comparing the same question as delivered in virtual or f2f ways (B.2) and through big data management (B.3): “What types of actions could be taken to improve the tourism sector?”; both percentages and priorities have radically changed. So as you can see in the below scheme.

From B.2 process (before pandemic):

-35% of interviewed said urban infrastructure

- 32% of them chose public spaces as an important feature to contribute to developing tourism
- 21% chose transportation and mobility
- 10% chose events
- 2% suggested branding the city

Form B.3 process (after pandemic):

- 45% of interviewed chose public spaces as an important feature to contribute to developing tourism
- 22% of them said urban infrastructure
- 21% chose transportation and mobility
- 10% chose public events
- 2% suggested branding the city

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

As one of the early results of the e-survey generated by this study and merging the different feedbacks taken on from the hybrid survey, it is suggested to add another category of tourism, the Research Tourism. Even though directly connected with other categories of tourism, which includes scholars of different backgrounds to undertake research trips in cities where they are not residents, according to the guidance of the World Tourism Organization (Rodriguez, et al., 2013) and marring the IRT principles, as said above in this text. As well as recognized as a meaningful and crucial topic to be considered as a scientific research subject in itself. Being different from other types of tourism, yet with a direct linking to the other categories, it can be considered as a type of tourism that encourages tourist researchers to get the full experience of many of the aspects of the city.

Indeed, Tirana is building a “personal” brand and it is already well known to be a vibrant city in continuous growth and subject to change. Otherwise, through the conducted survey, which acted also as a tool to indirectly raise awareness on the city materials, this research contributed straightforwardly to highlight that urban tourism plays a very important role even in the improvement of the city’s economy. It provides furthermore some suggestions for the locals on the need to preserve historical and cultural legacies and on how to take advantage of the potentials of their city starting from the scale of the neighbourhood, improve weaknesses to develop adequate physical and social infrastructure, to increase such kinds of sustainable offer and benefit from it.

Conclusively, to one of the main questions of this research study: “Does this city, with all these overlapped layers of time, provide appropriate structures and rich spatial diversity for visitors?” it is concluded that Tirana has all the appropriate features to use urban tourism as a tool to develop the city’s economy, considering as well the results of the analysis and the sentiments from the digital data. The overlapped layers of the city are an added value, naming a few examples, the close co-existence of buildings representing different religious cults, traditional housing mixed with the contemporary architecture, the contrast between plain and colourful facades, give to the fabric of the city a typical dynamism. These are all important features of the city which increase the tourists’ curiosity and attract more visitors each year. So, an early answer to the main research question: how and if a form of alternative tourism offer might take advantage of the various urban features, and release benefits to the cultural layers of the city, mainly in the current long wave of post-pandemic uncertain and mutable scenarios and new wishes, seems to get the first answer.

Considering, furthermore, that there is a noticeable lack of research studies on tourism in Albania, and specifically on the sub-topic of urban tourism; this study could play a very important role in the improvement of the cities’ transition toward a modern city, but taking care of their unique values.

In the meantime, this study aims to give a further contribution to the general subject of Urban Tourism in the acquired meaning of research tourism.

Finally, the topic that raises in the last year, the pandemic effects on the city-life, pushed us in adding new arguments to this research. What we are experiencing nowadays, in terms of relationships, is to struggle into our daily urban life for a new equilibrium in between proximity and enlargement. From one side the urban social and spatial contractions within the real physical dimension as derived from the new imposed “medical” limitations: while from the other, the sudden and unexpected expansion of both individual relationships and virtual spaces through the digitalization acceleration in many of the life-fields. None doubt that such an uncontrollable disaster generates fear psychosis among guests and hosts, particularly international travellers who reach tourism destinations after taking a lot of risks and spending a huge amount of money just for the sake of feeling “a change”, which is still the main reason behind tourism aims, nowadays is connected to the new way of living and working, as explained in a previous paragraph: Leaving Big Cities, going to different Exotic Places.

The work-anywhere-in-the-world or digital-nomad movement will continue to accelerate with remote work becoming commonplace. During the pandemic, we’ve seen people flee big cities for the suburbs, for the countryside, or even jet off to exotic locations. Several countries are directly or indirectly encouraging foreigners to migrate there with open arms. Since tourism was down due to the Covid-19 and their economies were hurting, they opened their doors inviting Nomads to come, work, pay taxes and contribute to the local economy. As we said it is a phenomenon already started in Albania and Tirana that deserves to be observed in its ongoing stage.

These will be topics and dynamics we aim to explore further in the following research.

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