Coloured Urban Landmarks in Tirana: Impact on Life Quality and Socioeconomic Costs

Srimitha Divya

PhD Candidate in the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism, Polytechnic University of Tirana, Tirana, Albania
srimitha_di@yahoo.com
srimitha_di@fau.edu.al

Abstract: *As many post-communist cities, Tirana presents its visitors with soviet style buildings/concrete - apartment blocks. These buildings were a solution for the housing problem in the city. This paper aims to analyse the relationship between these blocks, their inhabitants, and the city. Multi-storey buildings are a form of identity loss for their inhabitants but in meantime it has opened a new window of opportunity in the real estate market in Albania. Once again, architecture, even on the slightest side of it connects people immensely with their everyday affairs.*

Keywords: urban identity, soviet style architecture, social memory, concrete, housing

1. Introduction

In the beginning of the XXI, Tirana underwent some changes which developed a new identity for the city, bearing in mind the past of the building, represented a period in history, which was detrimental to the city itself. It is also a tell for how social class, and how a full society lived, based on a rule of equality which of course did not match its ideal.

Many buildings in Tirana were part of a movements which somehow defined the whole era, and it affected the location or space semantically to the core.

2. Research Problem, Objective, Research Questions, and Hypothesis

The question at hand is the possibility of a changing future in the real estate area in the zones where facades are touched and recreated.

Tirana has been exposed to endless constructions over the years and it always seems there's place to build something new.

In the buildings whose facades underwent a visual change we notice a sudden change of interest as far as it goes to rent and live in an area where you can have anything nearby due to its evolution.

Nowadays Tirana is a shapeshifting urban reality, always evolving and changing and these blocks are a stronghold of built memory. If we analyse their identity, it has three main characteristics:
a) Historical identity – because it represents a specific period, the communist regime, and the memory of the life during those years.
b) Technology – the prefabricated concrete panels are in the same time structure, facade wall and finished volume.
c) Geometry – the clean volumes and rectangular shapes of the buildings and open spaces between them contradict the vernacular pattern of the ottoman city.

So, we have a specific period, building technology and urban geometry. Their identity is reinforced also by the scale of the 2 interventions. Differently from other communist cities in Tirana we have small buildings of five stores and blocks of 8-10 buildings. In Tirana we do not find a prefab concrete landscape but the forced insertion of these blocks in the traditional urban pattern.

The inhabitants also developed a different kind of identity within the social structure of the city. Their homes were so different from other people in the city but at the same time so alike. This personal conflict evolved in the need for personal identity towards the city and was expressed in architectonic changes of the facades and neighbourhood urban space.

Experiments on colour perception have divided it into an important debate of an epistemological nature, about how colour helps build visual identity in people who 'use' colour and in those who perceive it.

This aspect will serve to develop this theme which touches on the nature of colour and visual appeal by residents. The surveys conducted will highlight more clearly the direct impact and importance that colour has on the way residents think of urban space.

Architecture further plays a vital role in how it affects the psychology of the inhabitants; in the way it affects the attraction and how this place changes or creates a typical experience for them.

In city planning, aesthetics is not given as much importance as the functionality of residential buildings, which brings a problem which does not belong to everyday life, but to the creation of a self-portrait of the city.

The issue I have undertaken in this study is clearly also of a philosophical nature. The discussion lies in the idea of how architecturally it is possible to represent or create a liveable and peaceful environment for residents. Facade painting has often come as a civic, political, social action and much less often for what it really should be: aesthetic intervention.

On the aesthetic plane, thoughts about beauty and not beauty are dominant, and philosophy has had a variety of attitudes about this conception. From Aristotle to Croce and Eco we find concepts of beauty that question dimensions, symmetry, and appearance. In terms of appearance and beauty, Aristotle in Poetics states that beauty lies in the way the elements intertwine with each other.

Figure 1: A common building of the soviet style in Tirana

The case of the figures above shows the change that happened to the buildings in Tirana in the period 2000-2004. This aesthetic intervention changed the appearance of the facades by stripping them of the historical feature they contained and turning them into markers of a new period.

3. A risky operation with the future at stake

The colour of the facades in Tirana cannot be clearly defined in time or present the style of a period as the gentrification of the city has come in mass and the mass selections have been the colours with which they have been painted.

We face ignorance and a lack of willing fullness on how the colours of buildings are determined. There are two main currents of acting with colours in the buildings of Tirana.

The first stream of reactors or the way professionals and constructors act is by creating an atmosphere and using colours as if to resemble street-art elements like the case of the Palace of the Arrows (fig.2). In this case the colours, shapes and dimensions also give the name to the physical space.

The second stream belongs to technical colouring, that is, the colours are placed in a seemingly arbitrary way, as they do not correspond aesthetically or in shades with the surrounding objects. Of course, this panoramic colouring also brings what can be called visual cacophony.

Even though the city was flourishing in new styles and using colours, such a simple, cheap and easy way to change the view was used as a weapon not only in a creative way but also, to make a leadership statement that the city can change as long as we look at it in a profitable way.

The cost change of the apartments in Tirana have increased massively due to the expansion of the city, population growth, new business opportunities, new in mass apartments chains and complexes are being developed and in many ways the prices have gone up.

In a way, the prettier the building the higher the cost of the apartments. This is of course an understatement. While looking at all the indexes of growth in Tirana, we see as necessary to open a conversation about how this chirurgical move on the city helped to higher up the numbers for the costs of living in the city.

Figure 2: Pallati me shigjeta (Arrow Building), Tiranë

In this paper, will be shown some statistics developed by the author after an extensive round of interviewing and asking people who have and are living in Tirana, how to they feel the prices of the city have changed.

Colour is one of the defining elements of the built environment and directly affects the quality of life. For this reason, there should be a sustainable colour strategy for the city which will define a colour scheme for each part of it. When man characterizes space according to his visual perception, a relationship is created between him and the built environment. This relationship defines the visual space, and this space is one of the main focuses of this study.

Painting the walls new, does not have only an impact on the eye, in the visual level. Colour touches and triggers all the senses in a psychological and empathic way, but also it lightens up aesthetic, sets the tone for artistic movements, builds up identity and memorability, but also shifts the social and economic perception on how people value their surroundings.

Colour being an integral element of the structure of light, is also, therefore, an integral part of the structure of the visual space. The languages of space and light are in a dynamic, permanent relationship. The relationship between light and design is inseparable. Light reveals shape, space, structure, and colour - these are all basic architectural considerations.

On a more important note, the risky adventures of making the city look like a whole new place has put it in a midst of an identity crisis, because in Tirana even though anyone can find themselves due to the immense range of styles and mixed patterns, it does not pertain a whole identity kit by which Tirana can be known from afar. Or at least have a unique set of palette and structure which can be easily recognizable.

In the end, colour made the social part of Tirana look smother and more open to be interpreted. In the case of the artistic relevancy, the work of Anri Sala, tends to explain the

intricate and problematic way colours have been perceived as a constant try in Tirana to handle things from far and not from the inside.

Even though no one would expect to have a true meaning and impact how the residents saw Tirana.

4. How does changing the facades affect the cost living?

This was an investment influenced by the need to change and make the city the canvas for inspiration and lightning up the view. The costs are hard to define but there wasn't any substantial change in the structure of the buildings in a way the city could reflect the changes on the prices.

Everywhere the exterior walls are part of the public identity and in a way show how life can be inside the windows. Offer a peak of observation of how apartments can be from the inside. These artsy movements in Tirana, at some point did nothing but hide the imperfections of the grey and mere brownish façade of the soviet style. The apartments inside of course are modelled to be the same as everyone else's so it did not affect properly the inside in a collective level.

Many reconstructions and remodelling have been performed during the years making it feel like the houses can have their own scent and perspective. To go away from the model of the passed regime.

The other point of discussion is that even though colour and facades seem to be sometimes the luxurious sides or the not important parts of the building, one should understand that the shell and structure including everything the building shows from the outside, it is part of 25-30% of the total costs of the building taking under consideration the costs of the projects, the materials, and the labour.

The façade is also the largest thermal barrier in the building, defining how air moves in and out and driving spending on heating and cooling. It plays a major role in the environment.

Close coordination across the project team throughout the process is essential. Making sure all team members agree on project goals—quality of life for tenants, environmental performance, and affordability—keeps the team unified as issues and pressures emerge. Collaboration also sets the stage for sharing best practices on new construction techniques, materials, and systems.

The image of a city from the point of view of colours is built in time and influenced by the environmental setting. (Lenclos, 1990) conducting some research on colour in different states visited many spaces, the aim was to show the architectural harmony with the surrounding environment and with the inhabitants of each country. His method was to include a detailed analysis of important materials.

Samples collected in material form lie in the collection of colours on walls, floors, doors, roofs etc. and other non-permanent elements such as vegetation, rocks, and soil. Later in his workshops he analysed the space and context in

which he conducted the observations considering all the elements for study. He summarized all the coloured elements of the built spaces in some designed cards that show the dominant palette of colours and materials used.

All the coloured elements of the building are then assembled into design colour cards - the result of merging the whole into a rural or urban context and the more specific facade elements.

After an extensive search, questionnaire, and data collection, we asked citizens firstly on how they felt the change of the facades affected them.

Most of the answers signalled toward an apathic reaction nowadays due to building being just places of orientation and have gathered around or to put it another way, these buildings are biospheres of new structural living in Tirana, being new centres of orientation and guidance for everyone in Tirana.

Reflecting on colours forces every researcher to go through a historical ordeal, as colours are an essential part of the human worldview and on the other hand have crumbled down to the smallest nuances of the whole spectrum and it is difficult to think of colours that are already invented.

Also, the way we call colours has no logical connection or that consists of real material. The name is arbitrary, but there is a palette or plurality of palettes that help create the desired atmosphere in terms of tone, setting or message that should or can be conveyed.

Of course, the strategy to build palettes that are combinable should be adapted to the style of construction, what to communicate and creating an atmosphere which does not affect or violate the aesthetic eye.

But it has major impact on price of the apartments especially to people who rent in Tirana.

Second to the research done during several years from 2008 to 2019 the prices have only gone up.

If one rented an apartment in 2008 and it was in one of the building with the painted facades, of course it had a higher price than renting it in peripheric residencies. Also, in play were new building build after the Democratic Revolution which had another set of standards, more modernized which were in a league of their own compared to these old building of the '70.

In our research participated 150 people of different ages, statuses, jobs, hobbies and of course living style. Some of them shared the rent with other members of the house, some of them were living in these buildings with their families.

In the first table of results is going to be shown the exponential growth of the rent in Tirana second to our responses of the research and statistical evidence:

Year	Rent of the apartments in the painted buildings in Tirana
2008	200 euro
2010	250 euro
2015	300 euro
2017	350-400 euro
2019	450-600 euro

Responders' status on the questionnaire	Percentage
Students	42.6%
Professionals/People who have one job	20.9%
People working on two jobs	25.3%
People who live/d with their families	18.7%
No Job	1.2%
Retires	8%

The correlation between the responder's status with the amount of money the pay the rent in Tirana has been in proportion with the quantity of people moving here in Tirana during these last 10 years but also the increasing of the prizes of other more luxurious apartments.

Many factors have deranged the pricing system in Albania at least relating to the apartments and the numbers are always going high up.

We should keep in mind that the people asked in this questionnaire live in buildings who underwent the change during 2000-2004. It is of the importance to notice that the change of course affected immediately the way these buildings and apartments were perceived but this change helped a lot to make some serious investments around these area in a way they are now valuable areas in the cities which are hard to catch and rent.

Considering the data collected in 2019, we can assume that most of the people who rent these apartments in these buildings nowadays are students. Students tend to share the price making it mostly the cost around per person circa 170 euro per month only on house expenses.

The question is, did really colouring these building made the prices go higher? Not directly.

There were a series of events which affected the area by making it more valuable and compatible in the market of apartments to rent or buy in Tirana.

5. Conclusions

After developing serious research in urban areas in Tirana where most of the change has been set most of the people who live nowadays in these buildings are students and working people who live alone or with fewer members of their family.

The cities take on changing the facades of the building was not a move which caused unnecessary costs, but with a tight budget made it happen to turn Tirana in a more modern city where developments can really grow.

Colours are perceived differently and affect people in many certain and specific ways but always have an impact on everyone.

Second to our study with people who live and rent these building most of them declare is hard to keep up with the everchanging prices of the rent nearly each year to keep up with more expensive apartments in Tirana.

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