

Random Individual Facades, Informal Buildings and Aesthetic Chaos: How Can Urban Architecture Help - The Case of Tirana, Albania

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Abstract

In recent years, the situation of informal buildings in our country it is getting serious. There is ample evidence proving that many informal buildings have been constructed in sites decided by the entrepreneurs/ owners of the land not following any urban planning logic/ analyses, supposedly as something like that does not formally exists yet. There seem to be a correlation and causation relationship between this phenomenon and encroachment on the urban space and the loss of the archetype. Informal building has taken many definitions in Albanian context from extensions of floors and or interventions on facades to the extreme but significant cases of the occupation of public spaces. The spontaneity of the process has led to the creation of an urban chaos as far as the relationships of the citizen with urban architecture leading to a chaotic urban aesthetics. Tirana is one of developing cities that has had a "constructions boom." The benefits as far as employment and services that "the construction boom" brought about were welcomed with such a high enthusiasm that the implications of having, in certain cases, entire areas with informal buildings have been much neglected. This unchecked phenomenon is putting in danger the heritage values of the city and their identity/archetype. The diversity has not led to any certain aesthetics, with facades lacking the minimum of basic composition and design criteria of urban architecture principles, therefore causing an irregularity on the urban areas. This is a point to raise the hypotheses: Can Urban Architecture still help with minimal cost and damage? Is there still possibility for making things right? Will time and Budgetary issues become an issue? Does political will has to be taken into account? Should Citizen Participation in decision making in Urban Architectural Improvements have a role to play and what will the instruments for this Citizen Participation be? This research paper does represent a work in progress. It analyzes these interventions and look at the impact that they have on urban context and its aesthetics and provide tentative suggestions on how to improve the current situation. The case referred to in the paper is more than an exercise to help us to reflect and to propose novel approaches.

Keywords: Facade, informal buildings, urban aesthetics, buildings, public space

Introduction

This paper will analyze the impact of informal buildings facades on urban aesthetics. There are examples to be taken in study that will analyze and will explain the impact of these building on urban site. A historical background of informal buildings in Albania, and the causes that have influenced it are to precede this presentation. The compositional elements of buildings will be analyzed based on the parameters of architectural and urban design form both historical perspective as well as contemporary situation. Many elaborate details and elements have been taken into consideration during the research followed by analyses of the impact of these interventions. Suggestion and the improving tools will follow.

The current situation is a representative of a phenomenon of which, on of the main causes are the frequent changes in legislation. According to the law " No.9482, Date 03.04.2006" For Legalization, Urbanization and Integration of Buildings without Permission", it allows all the construction of these informal buildings where then legalizes them and equipping with ownership certificates. The latter made it possible to build these informal buildings anywhere and regardless of the urban context. (Act, 9482,2006 and Act. 9482 updated 2017). The phenomenon resulted in a different urban aesthetics. This leads one to put forward research questions one of which is: *which are the elements that affect urban aesthetics, and secondly what the instruments to minimize and improve this phenomenon are feasible?*

Literature Review

The literature considered and reviewed in this study is carefully selected in order to analyze every compositional element that we must keep in mind when designing to preserve and achieve the so-called urban aesthetics. Examples and cases of developed countries have been considered where these parameters have been applied where they have created the proper urban designing rules and models.

A historical background of informal buildings has been created to have a more detailed overview of this phenomenon in our country. The selected literature proved helpful in theoritacally comprehending the situation created by current Albanian phenomenon that has directly affected to the urban aesthetics. Moreover, the literature researched helped provide a better understanding in determining and defining-in an Albanian context- what urban aesthetics is and what the elements that define it are. It becomes apparent that informal buildings are a phenomenon that is present in other countries of world. However, significantly different from the Albanian case, in other developed countries the process has been better coordinated and efficiently managed by governmental institutions.

The situation created in Albania and mainly in Tirana has in most cases resulted from the migration of population, thus increasing the need for housing and space. A considerable number of local and foreign researchers have paid academic attention to the phenomenon of informal construction, where informality in construction has

left strong traces creating an unaesthetic appearance and bypassing every compositional element of design, which highlights the chaos created in many parts of our country. A population indomitable for space has made it possible to occupy land and lay the foundations for a building without architectural values, without urban planning, without geological analysis, feasibility, etc., not knowing where they are building and what they did built. As a result, the chaos created has often facilitated and fallen prey to natural phenomena such as floods, landslides, etc. (Evoked Architectural Diptychs, 2016, p.10-11)

The examples taken in this study and the selected literature will help us to analyze more precisely the phenomenon of informal buildings in our country, and the impact of its facades on the aesthetic or urban site. Facade, as the first visual impact plays an essential role in the view of the city. The exercise which is taken in this study will be presented in these elements.

- *Which are the adequate compositional elements that we should follow in order to have an urban aesthetics?*
- *How is the current situation of informal buildings in our country?*
- *How may we improve and minimize this phenomenon applying these compositional elements on informal buildings facades?*

The Hypotheses and Method

To answer this question, we propose the following hypothesis: Is it possible that Urban Architecture principles if put in action can still help with minimal cost and damage?

To precisely tackle this exercise in this study, we will proceed as follows. *Firstly*, in our research we are detailing the hypotheses as following: Can Urban Architecture still help with minimal cost and damage? Is there still possibility for making things, right? Will time and Budgetary issues become an issue? Does political will has to be considered? Should Citizen Participation in decision making in Urban Architectural Improvements have a role to play and what will the instruments for this Citizen Participation be?

We are fully aware that to this treatise is bound to needed. Furthermore, it is beyond doubt that a scientific analysis of an analysis of the current situation of the facades of informal buildings and the impact of these facades on the urban aesthetics must be conducted. An innovative approach to the research topic is considered of the utmost importance taking into account Budgetary Issues and Social Problems. We have ascertained that a thorough understanding and presentation the compositional elements of urban aesthetics in a pre-condition of the utmost importance for this treatise.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

When we design, we have to take in consideration several criteria in order that for our intervention to be sustainable and long-term. The moment we realize an intervention, in addition to accurate design criteria, contemporary standards, we may also consider the aesthetic elements in order that for our intervention to be curated down to the detail.

According to the studies conducted by two professors Kevin Lynch and Gyorgy Kepes, they have presented a genuine study on the visual appearance of a city by creating urban aesthetics. American professor of urban planning Lynch, as a good connoisseur of urban planning, urban form and environmental psychology, he defines the appearance of the city in five essential elements that implicate urban aesthetics. In this book "The image of the city," Lynch highlights five crucial elements in the silhouette that are: paths, districts, edges, landmarks and nodes. (Review Kevin Lynch, 2009) He argues that the city is a powerful symbol of complex society and for any given city, a corresponding set of mental images exist in the minds of the people experiencing that city. Thus, according to him we have some interesting definitions for these five essential elements that have to take into consideration at the time of performing interventions on the urban site:

- *Paths*. Main traffic routes. It has found that the paths provide important points of view for other elements of the city.
- *Districts*. A part of the city that has an ordinary form and activity. Building plays a significant role in producing this image.
- *Edges*. The end of one circle and beginning of another. A stream or path may function as an edge joining two circles. Architecture can clearly articulate an edge.
- *Landmarks*. Prominent physical objects. Landmarks work to orient yourself within the city. They can be viewed from a distance or multiple focus.
- *Nodes*. The main centers or centers of activity. These are benchmarks in the sense that nodes provide orientation. Open activity spaces which are closed by groups of buildings are expression of nodes.

These five elements explain us more clearly and give us a more detailed overview of what we need to consider and create now that we will conduct an urban intervention. According to the research conducted by professors Kevin Lynch and Gyorgy Kapes, they shed new light on understanding of the visual image of the city and laid the foundations for a positive thinking in this area. They hypothesized that the environmental each person builds his own mental image of parts of the city in physical in relations to each other. Also, that the most essential part of an individual's mental image of the city will closely match that of anyone else. These main parts, common to almost everyone, would thus represent the image of the city. This hypothesis was then tested and validated by a series of surveys across the country. Thus, they noticed that the image of the city consisted of these five elements that intertwined with each other

are essential to the image of the city. (Urban aesthetics: Theory and application of physical design control within the urban renewal program, 1961, p.6-8).

The study of Lynch and Kepes is a major contribution to the art of urban aesthetics. It provides the basic emotional framework of the city, without which the city would have no meaning.

Another interesting, detailed perspective is realized by Stephen Jacobs and Barclay Jones in their outstanding book "Urban Design Through Conservation". The theory was put forward the emotional responses that an observer experiences from the city may be grouped into approximately three categories.

- An emotional or psychological response to a physical stimulus
- Emotional response to form
- An emotional intellectual response in which physical stimulus is interpreted in the light of experience

The three principles may be expressed more simply as the evaluation of materials, form and expression. Of course, these emotions will vary within u individually and for this reason we tend to accept the opinion of experts when it comes to placing a value on these responses. Undoubtedly, some object will not fall exclusively into any of the three categories as an object may have some effects on the observer. However, it is not essential that these categories be completely distinct and separate. It is important that these objects are recognized as constituting the essential aesthetic structure of the city.

From what we have stated above, we have some elements that define the urban aesthetics which appear as a superficial, two-dimensional quality that expresses sensory attraction. Some of these essential elements that are of special importance are: texture, color, pattern. etc. The detailed explanation of these essentials elements that define the urban aesthetics according to the study of Lynch and Kepes will help us to understand their role.

To begin with color is one of the most essential elements. Color plays a role that should be in the proper coordinated look within the city. This can be expressed either through contrast or continuity. It has an aesthetic dominance in the first impact of observer environments (as a consequence of instinctive pull), and for this misuse in colors caused by the great colors for the city and its aesthetics. Another element is texture. When we analyze the texture of a surface of a building, we notice that it is composed of several parts, sometimes from different angles and distances it can look like you are guilty, which makes us perceive it as an aesthetic element. There are always a proportion and relation of the size of the texture, the facade and the shape of the building, which is manifested in a dichotomy of them. Jacobs and Jones argued that "the value of large-scale application depends on the probability of being seen." Pattern, throughout history, those involved in city planning have been interested in photography as a basic form or organization - whether in terms of street layout or

land appearance. "Today, the model is a big problem in the city's aesthetic school, with a primary interest in grouping design elements in such an imaginable way that observation is all that is needed to determine these elements." And the last but not the list, rhythm. One of the elements associated with the model is rhythm. Like the model, rhythm is recognized by a number of elements within the field of view, the difference becoming significant for the intervals between them. (Urban aesthetics: Theory and application of physical design control within the urban renewal program, 1961, p.9-11).

Thus, all these elements are closely related to the facade where it is also considered and called "the skin" of a building. A well-designed facade makes possible a city livable and the people who live there are lively. In the contrary it becomes boring and stressful by the disharmony of these essential elements of the urban aesthetics which are presented above.

Having a thorough comprehension of these essential elements of urban aesthetics, we need to analyze the situation of informal buildings in our country and mainly in our case study, in Tirana.

The question that we have risen in this study is: How can the situation in the case under study be defined, analyzed and implemented?

Informal buildings in our country are a factual phenomenon. Like many other countries in the world, informal building in our country has a sharply rise and uncontrolled way. Different from other countries, this phenomenon in our country tended to use durable and costly as far as materials, in order to create permanent structures and non-temporary ones. These informal buildings tended to high structures, and they are often not covered with the prospect of extension or adding more floors, that is becoming higher. These informal interventions have been implemented following a dangerously spontaneous pattern of behavior, no doubt following no design and urban planning criteria.

The phenomenon of informal buildings it is something reflected over the years. In the beginning, it began like a transition of the population where our country went through the process of population migration. The past archetypal situation changed. This phenomenon often brings harm for residents or for existing buildings.

There are of course, some problems connected with the technical elements of designs or of the urban planning. In addition to that, another responsible reason are the interventions in the legal field about the informal building. It appears that these interventions established the popular idea that everything was fine, unaware that this phenomenon would soon become unmanageable in certain instances.

An analysis from the perspective of elements that define urban aesthetics as mentioned above, unfortunately cannot be applied as elements of analyses. This does refer to an even deeper chaos of the created situation, but also a challenge for developing tools of improvement.

Let us analyze a concrete situation in order to realize a summary of this phenomenon and to create a clearer view of the real situation that we face every day.

The selected area is located in Selita, Tirana, around 15 min (by car) from city center and it is part of the informal building phenomenon. The map will help us showing the selected area which is taken in the study.

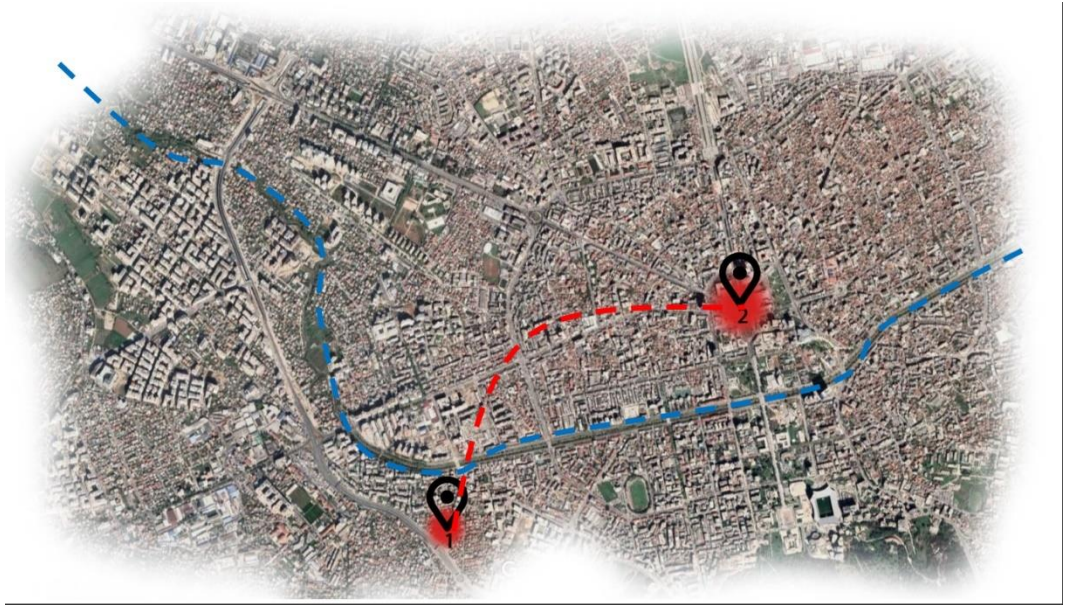


Photo 1 – Map of Tirana (Source Google Map)

Selected zone

Center of Tirana

Lana River

The map shows the distance between the selected area and the center of Tirana. It provides us that the zone has a strategic location at the entrance and exit of the city. It has access to one of the city's attractions, such as Lana River. It is only 5 min away (on foot).

The selected zone is populated by informal building since the '90s. There is different typology of informal buildings where over the years they have adapted and changed their function. Randomly placed without scale or module. We find them mostly in one, two or three floors.

For having a clearer view of the current state, the photo below will show us the actual situation.



a)

b)

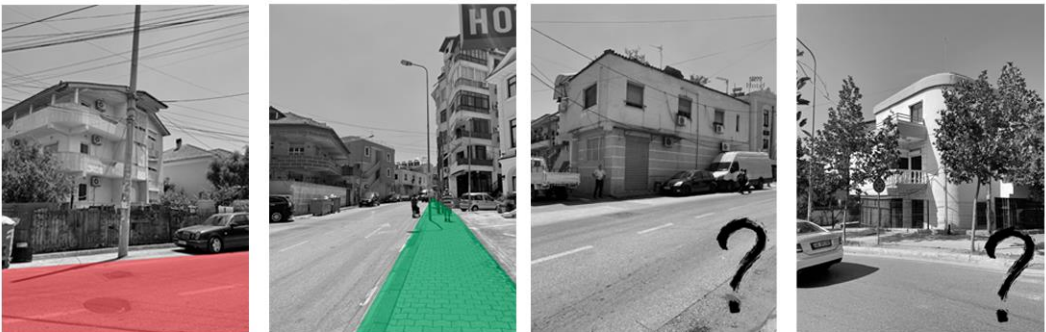
c)

d)

Photo 2 (a, b, c, d) – Current situation (Source, made by K. BIQIKU)

According to the photos above, there are shown all the problematics and the manner of their implementation. There are informal buildings, and this detail is clearly visible from their way of construction, the materials used, their positions, the implementation of urban rules and of course their impact on urban site.

If we take in analyze these photos, we will find lack of all the elements of urban aesthetics and the five essential elements that indicate the silhouette of the urban site for a functional, flexible, and fluid city.



a)

b)

c)

d)

Photo 3 (a, b, c, d) – Analysis of current situation (Source, made by K. BIQIKU)

Road ●

Sidewalk ●

According to the study of Lynch and Kepes, there are five elements such as: paths, districts, edges, landmarks, and nodes. However, the only elements in the selected area are just two, a road and a sidewalk. The latter is available only in one side of road. Elements like edges, landmarks or nodes do not exist in this area, which makes it a place without these necessary urban elements.

The lack of these elements in an informal zone like this, may cause many problems and handicaps in certain times when we have the peak of circulation of vehicles, pedestrians and the traffic jam is one of the most common phenomena. Another consequence is that the area is becoming day by day poor, without vitalization and it is turning into a source of pollution thing that provide a pronounced lack of urban aesthetics and well functioned of the area. It might be stated that this area with informal buildings has a basic composition in the urban site that makes it possible to neglect all the rules and criteria of planning.

After analyzing these five essential elements that define an adequate urban planning, it is more necessary to analyze and define the most principal elements that affect urban aesthetics. Color, texture, pattern, and rhythm are these simple elements that indicate the aesthetics of urban fabric. According to the study and the definition of these elements by two professors Jacobs and Jones, now it is our turn to find out these elements of composition in our selected zone.



Photo 4 (a, b, c, d)– Analysis of facades (Source, made by K. BIQIKU)

Color plays an essential role on urban aesthetics as long as it leaves the first visual impact that we perceive. In the selected area that we have taken in study, in a short view, we may see distinct colors in facade which are not combine to each other. In one place we see blue, a little further we see yellow, red, and so on. The colors used in some cases are pale, dramatic, and lifeless and in some other buildings they are brighter and creating a strong and an unrelated contrast between them. Referring to the study of Jacobs and Jones, the color used in this zone are not coordinated within the city what makes the latter without proper contrast and continuity.

Another essential element which indicates the urban aesthetics is texture. Varied materials, shape, size should be in proportion in order to have an aesthetic view. The materials used in this zone are basic without any treatment or composition. The facades look the same as other informal buildings, and people sometime for having a different facade or for making it “special” they use imitation of the natural material such brick, clearly shown in the photo 4b and c.

Pattern is another fundamental element in urban planning. In those informal buildings that populate our zone it is impossible to find an adequate pattern or a module to be synchronized with other building. The latter is as a result of informal way of building and the thirst to conquer space.

And the last but not the least, rhythm. As a determining element associated with form, rhythm do not appear in those informal buildings. In the above photos 4 (a, b, c, d) there are a lack of this compositional element.

All these informal buildings are designed without these principal elements. The disuse of these elements is associated directly with the urban planning and bringing disorder and chaos. These interventions with the absence of these elements are affecting in urban fabric and create a malfunction of the total area and vice versa like a chain reaction.

Discussion

Apart from all this situation we are faced with this phenomenon and the best way is to find novel approach to minimize and to recover the urban aesthetics from this non-aesthetic situation.

The current situation of informal buildings is spontaneous and very challenging. These buildings are in an already built-up area and this phenomenon may not be changed. All the interventions that we may propose are expressed in cost which is billed to the country. The new perspectives are being considered by many researchers that sometimes they require time to be realized.

It is important to be emphasized that to conduct the appropriate interventions, it should be realized in a gradual transformation of these area. According to the Danish architect and urban design consultant, the gradual transformation in urban redevelopment allows for greater flexibility in the design process in order to be able to adapt people and to experiment the new ways of using city. (Project for Public Spaces, Jan Gehl,2008).

However, what we may propose in this study, according to the examples and the exercise is to find an opportunity solution and having the least economic impact. An immediate solution is to intervene in these facades and to revitalize them relying on the essentials elements that may be considered for reaching an urban aesthetics which is defined these elements. In this way this area will become livable and all people who live it will experience an urban regeneration.

Another crucial step in macro-term is the stopping of new informal buildings in order to prevent the deepening of this phenomenon, where the government support and afford is great. There are many cases where the informal interventions have been stopped in the right moment.

A prolonged process with many difficulties and handicaps which have many perspectives and opportunities to develop these areas and the overall urban

aesthetics. Definitely, the new urban plans, new approaches in urban designs and the immediate intervention in the informal buildings will help the situation and will create a reduction of this phenomenon.

Conclusion

At nutshell, in the end of this study we reach the conclusion that facade of informal buildings had a negative impact on urban aesthetics. Untreated facades, without fundamental elements of design and aesthetics like color, texture, pattern, and rhythm, they are nothing but a negative impact and chaos on urban site. As a consequence, elements like paths, districts, edges, landmarks, and nodes, are not included in these areas. The latter leads to the lack of necessary spaces for pedestrians, car lanes, bicycle lanes, or recreational spaces with park and greenery.

The exercise which we analyze in this study makes possible to understand the criteria of designing a building in order to create livable city. Facade is the most essential element of a buildings as long as it is the first impact that may cause an aesthetics area or not. This is a phenomenon which will take time to recover and improve, but we should be optimist and we should implement immediate solutions for this transitional period until a final solution so that these areas do not turn into a problem for the city. What we should emphasize are all the aforementioned essential elements that paraphrase the urban aesthetics in order to have flexibility, circulation, aesthetics, and a suitable city for all of us which may be in considered by all architects, designers and urban planners for the long-term interventions.

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