



From camaraderie to detachment: The effect of changing built environment forms on neighborhood relations in a post-communist context



Dorina Pojani ^{a,*}, Migena Buka ^b

^a School of Geography, Planning and Environmental Management, The University of Queensland, Australia

^b Department of Psychology and Pedagogy, The University of Tirana, Albania

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 25 November 2014

Received in revised form 20 July 2015

Accepted 22 July 2015

Available online 31 July 2015

Keywords:

Community relationships

Social cohesion

Neighborhoods

Densification

High-rise buildings

Post-communist transition

Eastern Europe

Tirana

Albania

ABSTRACT

Through population surveys and interviews, this article examines how relationships among neighbors in Tirana, capital of Albania, have evolved after the demise of communism, in conjunction with transformations in the city's built environment. The transformations that took place in Albania in the post-communist period were among the most extensive in Eastern Europe. This study found that the density and height increases in Tirana have had negative impacts in terms of social cohesion. Combined with economic polarization, internal and international migration, and the introduction of western lifestyles and aspirations (such as individualism and economic success), built environment transformations have led to the weakening and contracting of localized networks. However, this study does not support the notion that social isolation or alienation has plagued contemporary urban residents. Many urbanites still preserve some of the spirit of the smaller traditional communities, especially in older, more consolidated neighborhoods created during communism and in lower condominium buildings.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Neighborliness, social trust, and neighborhood attachment are important for individuals, families, and societies. They play a role in shaping individual outcomes and helping people adjust to their environment (Meegan & Mitchell, 2001). Also, they help strengthen civic engagement, create stability, increase the performance of social institutions, and consolidate democracy (Putnam, 1995). The latter outcomes are critical in post-socialist Eastern European countries, in which participation in public life is lower than in the West due to the still vivid memory of totalitarianism (Dekker & van Kempen, 2008).

In North American and Western European contexts, studies have determined that both demographic and physical environment factors affect neighborliness and neighborhood satisfaction. Neighborhood networks tend to be denser among the higher educated and among families with children but stronger among the less educated. Socially homogeneous neighborhoods tend to be

more cohesive. Women and homeowners are more attached to their neighborhood. The effect of the duration of stay on neighborhood satisfaction is unclear (Dekker, de Vos, Musterd, & van Kempen, 2011; Guest & Wierzbicki, 1999). A small city size, as well as the location, quality, access, amenities (shops, schools, public transport), safety, and design of a neighborhood, enable (although not necessarily determine) social interaction and cohesion at neighborhood level and affect neighborhood satisfaction. Neighborhood satisfaction and housing satisfaction (which depends mainly on dwelling size) are closely related (see Dekker et al., 2011; Filipovic, 2008; Gutman, 1976; Talen, 1999).

In contemporary western cities, localized social cohesion is undermined and hollowed out by several factors including the movement of women into the labor force, an increase in residential mobility, and family transformations such as fewer marriages, more divorces, and fewer children (Putnam, 1995). Moreover, convergent processes of globalization and the advent of the Internet have led to the formation of non-localized "communities of interest" and "virtual communities" (Castells, 2010; Forrest & Kearns, 2001).

Due to a dearth of recent studies, it is unclear whether these findings and observations also apply to contemporary Eastern

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: d.pojani@uq.edu.au (D. Pojani), migena.buka@unitir.edu.al (M. Buka).

European cities, and if so, to what extent. Here, the social, economic, and planning issues posed by the dramatic post-socialist transition add a layer of complications to the study of neighborhood relations. (The countries comprised in Eastern Europe are listed in Note 1¹.)

This article examines how relationships among neighbors in Tirana, capital of Albania, have evolved after the demise of socialism, in conjunction with transformations in the city's built environment. The authors aim to shed light on a little-known and more impoverished part of Europe which has rarely been the subject of academic inquiry.

Located in the Balkan Peninsula, Albania represents an interesting cultural mix. Many social and political forces have left their mark in the country, including its inclusion in the Ottoman Empire for five centuries (14th–19th century), an exceptionally repressive and isolationist Soviet- and Maoist-style socialist regime (1945–1990), and contemporary democratization, commercialization, and economic liberalization policies. Therefore, Tirana is a cross between an Eastern European and a Northern Mediterranean city. A new city by European standards, it had only 60,000 inhabitants before socialism and 300,000 inhabitants at the end of socialism. Visually it is very different from grand imperial cities such as Budapest or Prague. But the socialist legacy is a definite presence in its built environment.

The transformations that took place in Albania in the post-socialist period were among the most extensive in Eastern Europe. Between 1990 and the present, Tirana more than doubled in population (from 300,000 to well over 700,000), its urbanized area expanded more than fourfold, and the existing inner city residential neighborhoods substantially densified, diversified (in terms of built typologies and land uses), and grew in height. For the first time in Albanian history, urban residents experienced living in crowded neighborhoods with condominium buildings of more than five levels, elevators, and enclosed staircases (Fig. 1). The new buildings were typically 10–12 stories and included between 20 and 80 units. Massive migration from the countryside and smaller towns into the capital created a social mix in urban housing. At the same time, the urban economy strengthened and diversified, aided by massive remittances from the large Albanian diaspora.

Several scholars and democratic activists have suggested that in the post-socialist era the concept of community based on physical proximity, which had been fostered before and during socialism, has eroded due a multitude of factors. These include: (1) the influence of Western aspirations and lifestyles among urbanites, (2) higher levels of residential mobility, (3) the sheer numbers of people now living in inner city neighborhoods, (4) the loss of neighborhood common spaces to new housing construction, and (5) the design of the new high-rise buildings, which is not conducive to socialization (see Dekker et al., 2011; Hlebec, Hrast, & Kogovsek, 2010). Some of these factors are present in the West as well (see Dekker et al., 2011; Putnam, 1995). However, little attempt has been made recently to empirically validate these theories in Eastern Europe. The broader literature on post-socialist Eastern European cities does not contain much discussion of these issues either.

The present study is one of a few to directly investigate the relationship between neighborliness and the built environment in a transitional Eastern European post-socialist context. It focuses on the inner city (there are few middle-class suburbs in Tirana). The study is based on surveys and interviews conducted in selected

neighborhoods with diverse physical settings and housing typologies. To provide a broader perspective, the authors discuss the historical, ideological, cultural, and physical planning contexts (both Eastern European and Albanian) in which individuals and communities are embedded.

Within Europe, Tirana represents a case of “deferred development”: developments and trends, such as rapid urbanization, social diversification, and high-rise housing, which appeared elsewhere in Western and Eastern Europe decades ago, are a relatively new phenomenon. Therefore, it is important to examine whether these developments brought about the same problems as elsewhere, or whether the fact that they took place within a post-socialist context and a traditional, family-oriented culture made a difference in terms of neighborliness. Knowledge of the impact of built form on neighborliness would help local planners (as well as planners in cities elsewhere which are at a similar stage of development) in formulating interventions. At the very least, it would increase awareness of the impact of physical interventions on the psychological well-being of residents.

The first part of the article discusses the transformations in the social and physical spaces of residential neighborhoods in Eastern European post-socialist cities. The second part deals with the Tirana case study. It provides an overview of its physical and social transformations in the last quarter century, drawing comparisons with Eastern European counterparts, and presents the methodology and findings of this study.

2. Neighborhood social and physical spaces in post-socialist Eastern European cities

An understanding of the socialist city and society is necessary to place post-socialist developments in perspective. Under socialism, the individual, the community, and the collective assumed a very different form in Eastern Europe compared to the rest of the continent. In Marxist ideology, the individual consciousness, self, and identity must be subjugated to the collective. Socialism destroyed the plurality and uniqueness of existing communities, prohibited cultural alternatives, and homogenized, anonymized, and rendered the society apathetic (Marková, 1997).

Social engineering and urban planning tools included the pursuit of a “classless city” dominated by public spaces and uses, the creation of faceless, standardized and often massive neighborhoods with prefabricated buildings (see Turkington, van Kempen, & Wassenberg, 2004), and the promotion of fear, distrust, and paranoia among residents. These tools were used to coerce all citizens to fit into the model of a conformist, obedient, and infantilized society (Marková, 1997). Socialist cities were marked by a clear urban edge framed by the huge towers of vast mass-housing complexes erected between the 1960s and the 1980s, which housed very large segments of the urban populations. Low-density, spread-out suburbs were very limited (Hirt, 2013). The government assigned housing units to residents, assuming that good relations among neighbors could be molded by regulating and diversifying the social composition of neighborhoods (Völker & Flap, 1997).

The secret police were active in all residential neighborhoods and played a crucial role by not only actively persecuting undesirable individuals but also fostering the impression that everything and everybody was under control and observation. This taught people to limit discussions with neighbors to only the most neutral topics (Marková, 1997; Völker & Flap, 1997). On the other hand, the economic shortages forced neighbors to create and maintain instrumental localized networks that could provide them with access to a variety of scarce goods and services (Völker & Flap, 1997). Some commentators have argued that this dualism led to

¹ The term “Eastern Europe” refers to the following 20 countries: Albania, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Kosovo, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Ukraine.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1008227>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1008227>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)