

# **The Use of Public Space as Urban Regeneration Tool: A Case Study in Residential Block “1 Maji” in Tirana, Albania**

**Klaud Manehasa**

Phd Candidate, Polytechnic University of Tirana, Faculty of Architecture and  
Urbanism

**Xhesi Çoniku**

Urban planner

## **Abstract**

As the urban regeneration process is mostly focused on upgrading the existing urban spaces by improving their physical qualities in order to be more attractive to people, and to generate more life or community life, the use of the concept of public space in this process is very adequate. At this extend, by noticing the difference between urban and public space, an important issue might be raised: whether public space concept can be used as an effective tool for urban regeneration process of existing residential areas? Elaborating briefly the urban regeneration as a process of improving of the qualities of life of urban space in order to meet the social objectives of the people, this paper focuses on a discussion on the role of public space concept as a tool in this process, arguing that are the public life qualities of urban spaces that matters. Based on this approach, this paper takes as case study the residential area in Tirana, built in the early '50s, experiencing, recently, some loss of urban space qualities because of new buildings and car invasion, keeping still its traditional urban identity. Analyzing the exiting urban spaces by using the criteria of public space it argues that converting urban spaces to public spaces by improving their public qualities, increasing their accessibility to pedestrians, releasing them from car use, introducing services that generate public interaction and cohesion, could be seen as a crucial tool of urban regeneration process, creating more sociable and enjoyable environment, leading to more sustainable or long term solution. The paper concludes that public space concept, in its core, should be seen as an important and effective designing tool for restructuring the urban space in the urban regeneration process.

**Keywords:** Public Space, Urban Regeneration, Residential Urban Space

## **Intruduction**

There has been a wide spread urban phenomenon in Tirana, during last twenty years, regarding to urban space. Many existing residential blocks experienced the intensification process, changing their urban morphology. Yet, many of them have kept their original shape and the most of their urban spaces, but they have lost the presence of community life. Many of the urban spaces in residential areas have lost the public use becoming abandoned areas or randomly occupied cars for parking use.

Can we apply the principles of urban regeneration in connection with public space in order to improve urban areas qualities of life? It is important to clarify the definition of urban regeneration process, regarding to the urban and public spaces highlighting the major elements of which urban regeneration is strongly connected with the qualities of urban public space.

The first part of this paper analyzes urban regeneration process, its elements and their relations of those elements and qualities of urban and public space. Later, it focuses on a selected literature review of positive and negative elements of public space conceptualizing the usage of public space as tool to regenerate urban areas. Finally, the paper presents a case study undertaken in a well-known residential area in Tirana. The study uses a methodology based on analyses the urban spaces of this area evaluated as public spaces trying to find out the connection between qualitative urban spaces and positive and social public spaces as the major principles of urban regeneration process, pointing out some interesting conclusions.

## **Defining Urban Regeneration Process**

Urban regeneration is mostly considered as an ‘aspect of the management and planning of existing urban areas rather than the planning and development of completely new urbanization’ and mostly ‘it is concerned with the regrowth of economic activity where it has been lost; the restoration of social functions where there has been dysfunction or social inclusion where there has been exclusion; and the restoration of environmental quality or ecological balance where it has been lost (Couch, Fraser and Percy, 2003).

At this extend, Merriam-Webster (online, 2003), refer to the Urban regeneration, also called urban revitalization, as the field of public policy that addresses such urban issues as economic decline, environmental decay, community dereliction, growing unemployment and some social problems caused by these urban issues. Considering the urban areas as vivid organisms and urban spaces as their crucial integrated parts, regeneration process can be seen as ‘the re-growth of lost or injured tissue, or the restoration of a system to its initial state (Merriam-Webster online, 2003).

In other words, urban regeneration is a comprehensive and integrated vision and action which leads to the resolution of urban problems and which seeks to bring about a lasting improvement in the economic, physical, social and environmental of an area that has been subject to change” (Roberts & Sykes, 2000: 17).

All these concepts of urban revitalization seems to be 'focused more on the people who live in the cities, rather than only on problems of a decaying physical fabric or decaying environment, or on the relationships between economic regeneration on the one hand and social and physical rehabilitation on the other (Rosenthal, 1980).

In these circumstances, the 'Revitalization has to meet the social objectives of the people by improving their quality of life and enhancing the image of the city (Mir, 1986).

### **Urban Public Space and Urban Regeneration**

The key of successful regeneration is to analyze, to understand the potential of existing urban areas, and to take in consideration all aspects, which can be buildings, land and sites, urban spaces, open spaces and water, square, streets, parks, transportation and environmental quality. All those elements are part of urban spaces, which in the other hand is part of public spaces in a city (Carmona.el.al), or urban public spaces. Its importance become crucial as, the quality of the public spaces in the cities reflect the quality of whole urban life of the city (Ragaisyte, 2014).

This approach is very important to understand the role of public space in urban regeneration process as, primarily, (the) 'urban revitalization targets rebuilding the cities in which people work and live, while other issues such as urban environmental qualities, cultural facilities and recreational amenities, and the social objectives of the people, i.e. their quality of life, were not a primary concern (Raco, M., 2003)'.

Different studies have explored the impact of urban regeneration in different contexts.

Boussaa (2017) studies the urban regeneration of Msheireb in old Doha, Qatar. The paper focuses on the physical aspects of urban identity rather than its social dimensions. Natividade Et al (2019) introduces an integrated methodology to support the planning and management of urban regeneration interventions. The study proposes a flexible baseline that can be adapted to urban regeneration projects of different contexts and dimensions.

Sdino et al (2020) analyses the role of the economic evaluation in urban regeneration interventions through the analysis of a case study in the city of Genoa. Manganelli et al. (2020) set out a real case for a possible process of urban regeneration, of a residential neighborhood located in the city of Matera, through demolition of existing buildings and then their reconstruction in the same volume size or, eventually, increased in relation to the premiums of volume required by current regulations.

Albanese et al. (2021) estimates the local effects of urban regeneration policies by using evidence from interventions that took place in small and medium-sized cities in the Centre and North of Italy over the period 2008–12. Ruá et al (2019) present some strategies of urban regeneration in the area Castalia-La Guinea in Castellón de la Plana (East Spain). The analyzed area presents an old urban fabric with high immigration

levels and heterogeneous characteristics, and constitutes an urban environment to be regenerated in a broader context.

The process of urban regeneration comes from strong economic, environmental and social analyzes of existing urban areas which leads to new neighborhood strategies, training and education, economic development, environmental and physical improvements of urban spaces. As it (the urban space) is an important visible sign of commitment to changes and improvements, urban regeneration (Jeffrey and Pounder, 2000), mostly, achieves its objectives through upgrading the environmental and physical qualities of existing urban spaces. At this concern, the literature reveals that creating public open space has been used as a tool to improve the urban environment, to enhance urban images and to improve the quality of life of urban residents. Public open space construction has become an indispensable part of many of the successful urban regeneration policies of many cities (Li, 2003), turning thus, the public space into an effective tool of urban regeneration process.

### **'Urban' Public Space Qualities**

#### **Public Spaces**

As 'urban spaces' refer to an exact location in a city, whereas it is functional or not, 'public space' relates to all those parts of the built and natural environment, public and private, internal and external,..., where the public have free, although not necessarily unrestricted, access. It encompasses all the streets, squares and other rights of way;... the open spaces and parks; the 'public/private' spaces ... where public access is welcomed (Carmona et. al., 2003, 141). Wang, (2002: 3) also defined as 'the space exists among buildings in urban area, it should be accessible to the public.

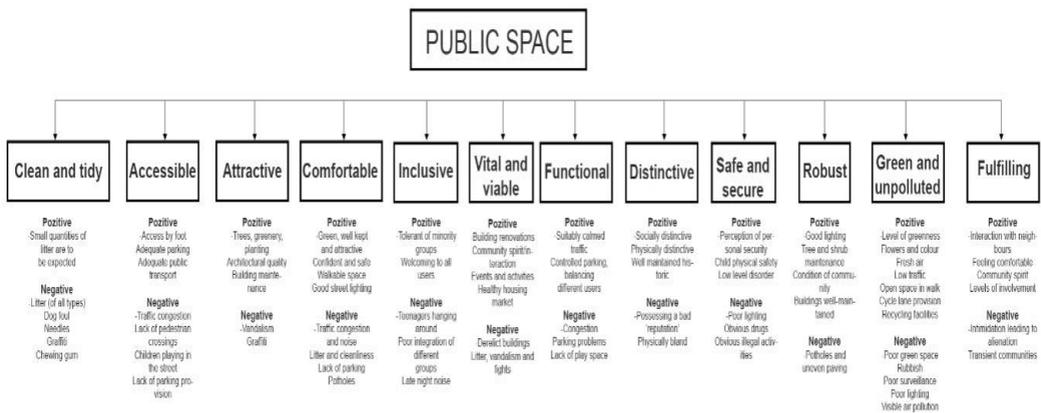
Public space is the stage upon which the drama of communal life unfolds (Carr, Francis, Rivlin, and Stone, 1992). Following this concept, Wang (2002: 3) provided a new definition of urban public space as 'the space exists among buildings in urban area, it should be accessible to the public. The space should be the place for urban residents to meet and talk with others, and for human being to stay in the natural environment. It is also the symbol of urban image, thus being called as the living room or window of the city. It is multifunctional space in urban area. Urban public space is dynamic, which is essential for the sustainable development of the city'. The details of urban regeneration policies have one thing in common, that is they involved the use of urban public space in urban planning (Li, 2003).

Public spaces are an important asset to our cities. They provide people many opportunities to come together and engage with the community. Referring to Li, (2003), the importance of public space has been widely recognized, mainly from the perspective of improving quality of life through comfortable environment and abundant public life; enhancing urban image through urban vitality; and impelling economic development through investment which is attracted by good image.

## The Qualities of Public Space

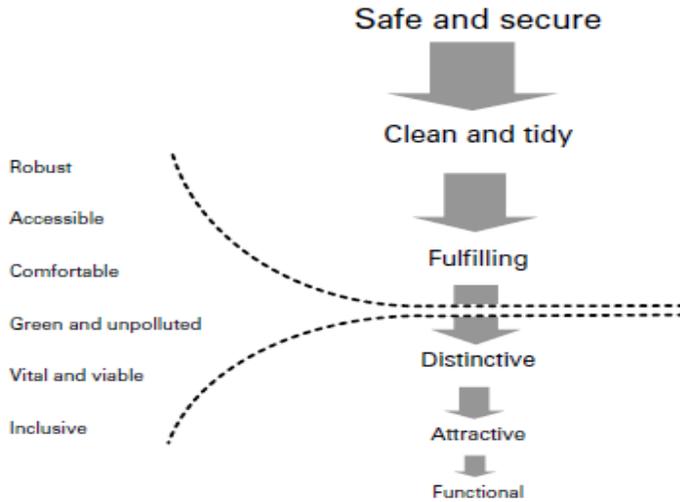
Darin-Drabkin (1977) argued that a good living environment requires public spaces. Some architects and urban planners have argued that the quality of a city’s public spaces has much to do with whether a city succeeds or fails as a place to live or do business (Carr et al., 1992; Jacobs, 1961; Vernez, 1987; Whyte, 1988).

Numerous physical prescriptions have also been established for what makes a good space, but referring to Carmona, et.al., (2008), if public spaces are successful they are inclusive of the diversity of groups, present in our cities and create a social space for everyone in the society to participate in. Furthermore, through conceptualizing the public space and its management, Carmona, et. al., (2003, 2008) provides a concept of twelve qualities of the public space, which affect its performance.



**Figure 1.** Categorization of public space qualities (Source: Authors).

Despite this, focusing on the qualities singled out in the focus groups as either more or less important, with other qualities sitting somewhere in between, a hierarchy of qualities can be constructed in which the most important factor for a positive public space seems to be safe and secure, and last important to be functional.



**Figure 2.** A hierarchy of universal positive qualities for public space (Source: Carmona et. al., 2008).

### **Case Study and Methodology**

As urban regeneration process is mainly based on physical upgrade, toward social aspects, of urban spaces, the literature review shown above, has repetitively emphasized the application of the public space concepts and criteria inn upgrading urban spaces. Ragaisyte, (2014) have used it to convert urban spaces into public spaces, according opportunities and place potential.

The reason for focusing on the case study is to evaluate some urban places of a residential area in Tirana, Albania, using the criteria of the qualities of public space aiming to find out connections between physical qualities of urban spaces and positive public spaces.

### **The Site**



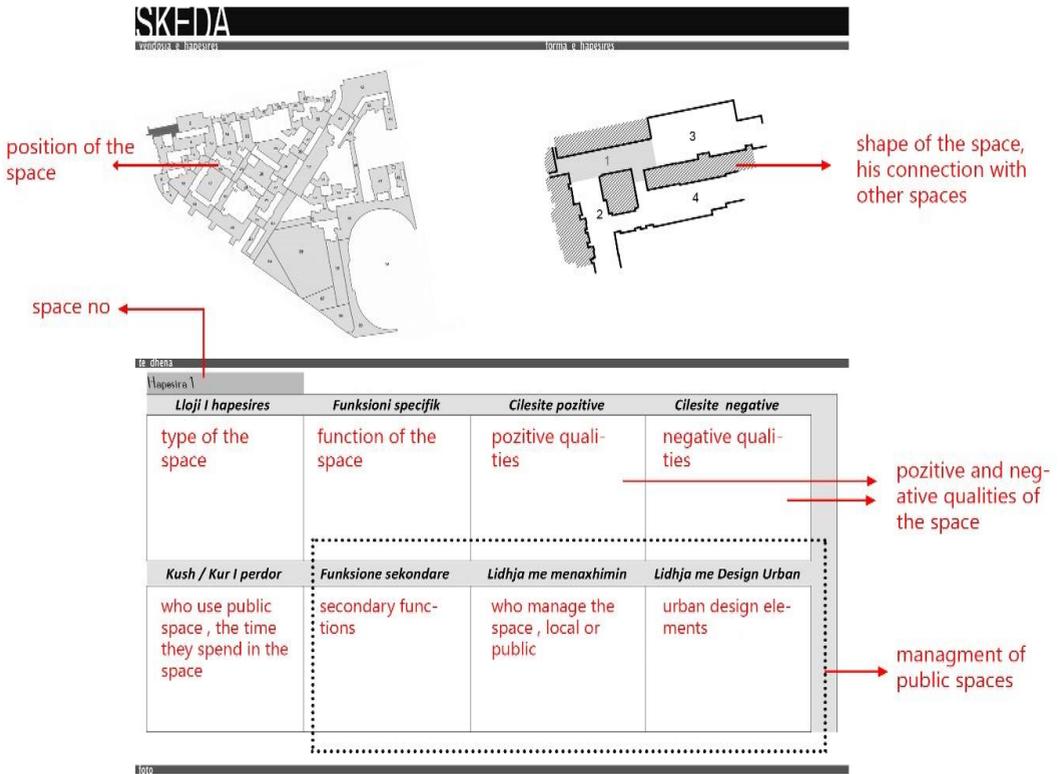
**Figure 3.** Location plan of the study area (Source: Google map).

The study is conducted in one of the remaining residential blocks "1 Maj" constructed in the early 50s with an area 15 ha. (fig 3) Over the years, this urban area has changed its urban morphology and functional use but has not lost its original shape. These changes occurred over the years regarding urban spaces have affected their quality and their public usage potentials. Thus considering them as public spaces today the entire urban space of the area consists as a variety of public spaces that do not depend on one another but on the constituent elements of a public space.

## **Methodology**

As most of published research, even this study consists of a qualitative study using data from secondary sources such personal observation, supplemented by source such as photography. Based on the theoretical approach above, this paper considers the urban space made of a chain of small public spaces. For that, direct and indirect observation are conducted, firstly to create a whole map of urban (public) spaces of the area, and secondly to investigate their use patterns. The study consists in dividing the urban space into small areas of public spaces that have a similar physical configuration based on the following these criteria: 1. Paths (channels along which the observer customarily, occasionally, or potentially moves). 2. Visual Focus (when the observer changes direction). 3. Morphological shape of the urban space. 4. Perceptual distance (surveying, hearing of the space). 5. Function of the space.

The result consists into 63 areas, to be evaluated as public spaces. As public spaces, each of them, has its positive and negative performance related to twelve qualities and it is important for the study to find the connections between the qualities of public space its management, function, who use those spaces, and the physical condition, in order to realize the problem and why it is caused. For that, the use of the qualities and priorities charts (fig. 1&2) is used as a guiding framework of analyses of the urban space, evaluating their performance as public spaces. Their evaluation process is taken according to an informative schedule (fig . 4).



**Figure 4.**Example of informative schedule for each space (Source: Authors)

The third part consists of analyzing the data collected through a direct visual survey. Observations are made for a period of three months for all 63 spaces. Every urban space is evaluated based on empirical observation using qualities on the chart according to the informative schedule (fig . 4) of qualities of public space. The information were analysed and the results were placed graphically in a maps. The drawn map shows a classification of urban spaces as public spaces, from very positive to very negative public spaces . (fig 5).



*Figure 5. Map of the area of study showing the evaluation of the quality of public spaces: Authors)*

Then all urban spaces are classified based on time of intervention and at the end, based on direct observation and photos, necessary data about the physical quality of urban spaces were collected.

### **Findings**

The study showed clearly that there is a strong connection between physical qualities of urban spaces and the positive public spaces. Well-designed urban spaces with even minor public facilities, like sits and benches, were more used by residents, then other urban places, even with public facilities like shops, or small bars, but with poor or no design. It showed also that if no design for residential and community use, like benches and small green spaces etc., is done, these urban areas tend to turn to neutral or negative public spaces. Most of the times they are use as trash sites or, at their best, as scattered, ugly and dangerous parking places helping in the deterioration of the living qualities of residential areas.

In reference to the period of time of intervention on urban places, the study showed that there is no connection between time of intervention and physical qualities of urban places. It also showed that well-designed urban places, even long time ago, having kept safe the public amenities, have resulted as more positive as recent urban spaces. The last ones, although they are enriched with kind of services, in all the cases

they have lacked good physical design on facilities for public and residential uses, they have resulted to turn on neutral and ins same rare cases in negative public spaces.

## **Conclusions and Discussions**

The literature review elaborated the concept that urban spaces are mostly seen as physical amenities of residential areas, whereas public spaces are even social life amenities and, in some ways, responsible for everyday life quality of residents. This gives to public space a very crucial and dominant role to the process of urban regeneration itself which, as argued previously in this article, is mostly focused on improving the life quality of the urban areas.

The case study showed the fragility of public spaces regarding to their quality criteria. Urban spaces can perform differently when they are evaluated as public spaces. Thus, some adjacent parts of urban space can perform differently regarding to public space quality. Even next to each other, one of them could perform as negative or neutral public space and the next one as positive just because of the presence and absence of some specific qualities.

On the other hand, the study showed that, almost all of positive public spaces were urban spaces well-designed since the beginning or upgraded recently, with public oriented facilities. They appear to be more safety and secure spaces and are cleaner and tidier, attracting, visually observed, more residents. The neutral and negative public spaces were always in left aside and poorly-designed urban spaces. The study, also showed that even some urban spaces were well designed, they behave more as neutral public spaces as they lack some scale of accessibility, sitting and community service facilities.

The case study makes clear that upgrading physically urban spaces by improving their public qualities, using the public spaces criteria by increasing their accessibility to pedestrians, releasing them from car use, introducing services that generate public interaction and cohesion, could help in creating more sociable and enjoyable environment, leading to more sustainable or long-term solution.

Thus, converting urban spaces to public spaces and the use of the concept of planned public places, instead of just urban spaces, in order to provide positive public urban spaces could be considered as a sustainable strategy for successful urban area regeneration, and public space itself as a crucial tool for the urban regeneration process.

## **References**

- [1] Carmona, M., T. Heath, T. Oc, and S. Tiesdell, 2003. *Public Places, Urban Spaces: The Dimensions of Urban Design*, Oxford, Architectural Press.
- [2] Carmona, M. de Magalhaes, C. Hammond, L. 2008. *Public space The management dimension*, London, Routledge

- [3] Roberts, P and Sykes, H, 2000. Urban Regeneration a Handbook.
- [4] Darin-Drabkin, H., 1977, Land Policy and Urban Growth, Oxford: Pergamon Press
- [5] Gehl, J, 2010. Cities for people, washinton, island press.
- [6] Gehl, J, 2011. Life between buildings, whashinton, island press
- [7] Rosenthal, D. B., 1980, Introduction, in Rosenthal, D. B., ed, Urban Revitalization, London: SAGEPublication Ltd, pp 9-26
- [8] Mir, E. R., 1986, Urban Revitalization in Barcelona, in Christopher K. Howes, ed, 1986, Innovations inUrban Revitalization, Papers Presented to the World Congress on Land Policy, London: LincolnInstitute of Land Policy, pp17-30.
- [9] Jeffrey, P., and Pounder, J., 2000, Physical and Environmental Aspects, in Robers, P., and Sykes, H., eds., Urban Regeneration: A Handbook, London: SAGE, pp86-108
- [10] Raco, M., 2003, Assessing the Discourses and Practices of Urban Regeneration in a Growing Region,Geoforum, 34: 37-55
- [11] Ragaisyte, R., 2014, [https://issuu.com/justinaragaiyte/docs/urban\\_spaces\\_converted\\_to\\_public\\_pl](https://issuu.com/justinaragaiyte/docs/urban_spaces_converted_to_public_pl)
- [12] Carr, S., Francis, M., Rivlin, L. g., and Stone, A. M., 1992, Public Space, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- [13] Li, M. (2003) [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228607104\\_Urban\\_Regeneration\\_Through\\_Public\\_Space\\_A\\_Case\\_Study\\_in\\_Squares\\_in\\_Dalian\\_China](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228607104_Urban_Regeneration_Through_Public_Space_A_Case_Study_in_Squares_in_Dalian_China)
- [14] Couch, C., Fraser, C., and Percy, S., (eds.), 2003, Urban Regeneration in Europe, Oxford: Blackwell Pulishing
- [15] Wang, P., 2002, Systematic Construction of Urban Public Space, Nanjing: Southeast University Press
- [16] Merriam-Webster (online, 2003) Merriam-Webster Online, m-w.com
- [17] Boussaa, D. (2017). Urban regeneration and the search for identity in historic cities. Sustainability (Switzerland), 10(1).
- [18] Natividade-Jesus, E., Almeida, A., Sousa, N., & Coutinho-Rodrigues, J. (2019). A case study driven integrated methodology to support sustainable urban regeneration planning and management. Sustainability (Switzerland), 11(15).

- [19] Sdino, L., Rosasco, P., & Lombardini, G. (2020). The evaluation of urban regeneration processes. In *Research for Development* (pp. 47–57).
- [20] Manganelli, B., Tataranna, S., & Pontrandolfi, P. (2020). A model to support the decision-making in urban regeneration. *Land Use Policy*, 99.
- [21] Albanese, G., Ciani, E., & de Blasio, G. (2021). Anything new in town? The local effects of urban regeneration policies in Italy. *Regional Science and Urban Economics*, 86.
- [22] Ruá, M. J., Huedo, P., Cordani, L., Cabeza, M., Saez, B., & Agost-Felip, R. (2019). Strategies of urban regeneration in vulnerable areas: A case study in Castellón, Spain. *WIT Transactions on Ecology and the Environment*, 238, 481–492.