



# Greenification of Dense Neighborhoods Through Pocket Parks—Inspiring Small Spaces to Transform Cities: The Case Study of Tirana, Albania

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## Abstract

Continuous development and densification are occurring as a result of dense population in cities, which, according to the United Nations, will increase to 68% by 2050, causing serious problems such as environmental stress, unhealthy living, and densification without planning policies and strategies. As a result, there are an ever-increasing need and demand for environmentally oriented urban development concepts (of any scale or size), particularly in areas of cities that are experiencing significant densification. Pocket parks are a form of the notion that can help cities and neighborhoods become more green and inclusive. Tirane, Albania's capital, is used as a case study to shed light on the development of public spaces and pocket parks within the city, as well as initiatives undertaken by the municipality of Tirane MoT and non-governmental organizations in collaboration with residents. The paper emphasizes the significant potential of urban pocket parks to improve community interaction, maintain a healthy environment, and encourage people to walk and cycle through neighborhoods rather than driving. Furthermore, transforming these underutilized and neglected areas into new green spaces can meet the WHO requirements that users walk no more than 5–10 min to reach them.

## Keywords

Pocket parks · Communal spaces · Green initiative · Community engagement · Inclusive neighborhoods · Public realm

## 1 Introduction

Public space is an integral component of city spatial structure. It connects developed neighborhoods and serves as a transit hub for people who reside, work, or just hang out in the city. As a result, protecting and restoring existing public green spaces are an important component of sustainable urban growth. However, in large cities where high-density housing development predominates, the issue of maintaining enough supply of green spaces arises. In addition, the increase in mass development and the uncertainty of land ownership have led to a decrease in public space (UN Habitat, 2016).

Densification projects in vital cities are facing a growing demand for communal green spaces that are not necessarily spaces for high-budget development. They can be, and often are, most effective when they occur in unused urban gaps that already exist in the neighborhood. These spaces have the potential to become “pocket spaces”, a type of community space that has been successfully implemented in several countries and has had a major impact on increasing the liveability of their neighborhoods. Furthermore, the transformation of these unloved and abandoned areas into new green spaces can effectively meet the requirements of the World Health Organization, WHO, which states that residents should not walk more than 5–10 min to reach neighboring public spaces. In addition to achieving the goals of the New Urban Agenda, is important to engage and invite cities and local governments to adopt a transdisciplinary approach to create public spaces that are inclusive, safe, and accessible for all. It means working with a wide range of stakeholders and organizations, including civil society, academia, and the private sector. The promotion of socially inclusive, integrated, connected, accessible, gender-equitable, environmentally sustainable, and safe public spaces is fundamental to the implementation of the New Urban Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals. It states that the Government is committed to ensuring universal access to safe, inclusive, and accessible green and public

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spaces, especially for women and children, the elderly, and people with disabilities by 2030 as part of SDG Sustainable Development Goal 11.7. Rules and laws ensure that public spaces exist and are accessible, while urban planning and design ensure an adequate supply of quality public spaces. However, in many cities, weak legal frameworks combined with inadequate policy and political attention will have led to insufficient public land, private actors taking advantage of it, and conflict between communities and government over the use of public space (UN Habitat, *City-Wide Public Space Strategies: A Compendium of Inspiring Practices*, 2019). This was also reflected in Tirana, Albania's capital, where rapid growth has taken place over the years, either intentionally or unintentionally consuming open space. Although Tirana has a large green area (the Great Park of Tirana), it does not cover the entire city's population's demand for green space. Furthermore, the needs of people living in densely populated areas in the city cannot be met. While there is no hierarchy between these green areas (particularly in the city center) and the city's existing public spaces, they cannot work together to form a functional green system that addresses the city's lack of small parks.

Following the fall of the Communist regime, public spaces underwent a major transformation, as evidenced by their neglect, invasion by cars, and land privatization. As a result, the research aims to determine the viability of transforming and rehabilitating Tirana's pocket parks. The current state of these micro-spaces between buildings is being investigated to gain a better understanding of them. The research also focuses on identifying and analyzing potential pocket spaces in Tirana neighborhoods, which are referred to as the "light at the end of the tunnel", implying that there is still hope to find and transform such spaces for the city's and residents' benefit. Finally, it finishes with some recommendations and possible concepts for establishing how to set up such spaces in the given context to increase social interactions.

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## 2 The Problem Statement

Demographic estimates indicate that 68% of the world's population will live in cities by 2050 (United Nations, 2018). This is due to the rapid growth of existing urban settlements and the development of new ones, as well as the increased density and use of urban areas. This focuses on urban development such as road and transportation infrastructure, but also the planning and use of open and green spaces.

Existing open and green spaces in cities are frequently threatened with privatization or the loss of their original functions and identities, particularly in rapidly developing cities. This is exemplified by the case study of Tirana,

Albania, which still has small spaces, neglected and forgotten between buildings. These spaces, on the one hand, are a point of conflict and debate among the inhabitants living in the same building over who will own the space, while on the other hand, they neglect management, mainly by the residents but also by the building's administrators.

If the Municipality, responsible sectors, Non-Governmental Organizations NGOs, and residents themselves gave these spaces the proper attention, they would not only improve the image of the neighborhood by providing small green spaces, but they would also generate a wide array of environmental benefits and encourage community interaction as well.

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## 3 The Aim

This research aims to bring to the attention of the public and the government the existence of potential pocket spaces in the city as spaces that could revive the city's image and its neighborhoods economically, socially, and environmentally, while at the same time promoting resiliency for the future.

A pocket park, depending on its purpose, can complement a larger park and meet the need for people to feel close to nature (Peschardt et al., 2014). They also meet a variety of needs and functions including small event spaces, play areas for children, spaces for relaxing or meeting friends, taking lunch breaks, and so on (Blake, n.d).

At first glance, these spaces appear unimportant or even unnecessary in bringing positive changes to a city and its neighborhoods, but when successfully implemented and transformed, they have the power to accidentally change the lives of citizens. Whether large or small, forgotten spaces can be transformed into green spaces that can transform the lives of tens of thousands if recreated properly.

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## 4 Methodology and Data Collection

Considering the purpose of this research and the interdisciplinary nature of such spaces, a mixed approach will be adopted. Based on the findings of this study, the following methods have been used:

- A literature review was conducted to promote the creation and study of pocket parks, including their definition, characteristics, funding, and administration.
- An exploratory approach based on the selection and investigation of Tirana's pocket parks and the initiatives done so far is discussed to improve their implementation.
- Finally, an analytical method was used to evaluate the current state of these spaces, applying SWOT analysis to

identify the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats that exist within them.

The article concludes with some recommendations and lessons learned from the Tirana case to address the current challenges of urban development and densification.

Considering that the goal of this research methodology is not to provide answers, but rather to look at the present situation of this kind of space in Tirana from a qualitative perspective to identify some “lessons to be learned” as valuable results.

## 5 Pocket Park Concept

A pocket is a small patch, so we can put our hands on it to experience warmth, security, and privacy (Pescharadt et al., 2014). According to Hajime (1988), a pocket park is a “hand-made warm space” that creates a tiny respite for people, while Gollwitzer (1968) defines pocket parks as small spaces in congested urban settings enclosed by multi-story buildings and only open on one side.

The concept of small-scale spaces as restorative “pockets” in densely populated areas originated in a 1963 presentation entitled *New Parks for New York*, in which Robert Zion suggested the idea of a network of pocket parks across New York. Thus, Paley Park in New York, established in 1967, served as a template for other pocket parks throughout the world (Frankel & Johnson, 1991). An example like this perfectly depicts the idea of a micro-space and the concept of place-making, which has been promoted and developed by the New York-based organization Project for Public Spaces (PPS).

Pocket parks, as the name implies, are a type of public space that falls under the larger category of “parks”. They are known by various names in the literature, including mini-parks, vest-pocket parks, and neighborhood parks. Pocket parks are urban open spaces on a small scale (Seymour, 1969). A pocket park is commonly thought to be a space between a square and a park. They can take the form of park characteristics when green elements are abundant, but they can also take the form of urban open space that does not always include greenery.

They are described as small, intimate public spaces in urban environments. They are typically only a few acres and they aim to provide respite from busy, noisy city life. These parks can be designed for many different activities such as walking, picnicking, sports, or meditation. A pocket park is often created through the use of existing urban design techniques or it may be a new design. Pocket parks are created with the intent to offer city dwellers of all ages

an area of nature in an otherwise chaotic environment. The idea came about due to the growing popularity of suburbia where fewer people live near green space and there is more “nature deficit”.

### 5.1 Characteristics

Pocket parks in the scientific sense are the result of a bustling ecosystem. These little gems can be found throughout our planet and they provide an oasis for both wildlife and humans alike. From the dense jungles of fast-developed cities and neighborhoods, it is fair to say that wherever you go, there is always a pocket park waiting for you!

According to the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA), successful pocket parks have four key qualities:

- They are accessible.
- They let users engage in activities.
- They are comfortable spaces with a good image.
- They are sociable places where people meet each other and take visitors.

What can be gathered from the literature review is that pocket parks fall into the category of public spaces. Therefore, this research reckons that characteristics and benefits of public spaces can be correctly applied to pocket parks within their given context.

### 5.2 Benefits

Pocket parks can provide a variety of ecological, social, and health benefits. Pocket parks can inspire neighbors to meet and create ties on a social scale. When neighbors use public areas more frequently, it can contribute to a sense of community liveliness and investment in public spaces. The existence of actively used public places has also been linked to greater safety and crime reduction. In terms of health benefits, pocket parks encourage people to get outdoors, encourage physical activity, can help with stress reduction, and can improve mental health. From an ecological point of view, pocket parks support the goal and objectives of climate resilience insofar as they relate to increasing ecological and social resilience. Being more natural and permeable surfaces, they can reduce rainfall runoff and increase water infiltration; vegetation can create habitats for local species, especially birds; tree canopies can be used to shade and cool park visitors while blocking carbon dioxide (Metropolitan Area Planning Council, 2019).

### 5.3 Funding and Management

A pocket park is an excellent option for communities wanting to revitalize a neglected little space. These spaces are frequently funded by a combination of public and private donors where a signed agreement is reached by both parties. The private sector may not want to donate cash and is willing to donate materials such as urban furniture as long as the logo of the investor is on it. The municipality could double the funding already collected by NGOs and the investors if the locals themselves maintain the park as a partner in the investment process. If the developer wants to invest in a pocket park, the municipality must submit an annual financial report where the reimbursement of development costs must be based on actual costs and should not exceed the estimated costs agreed upon. Those responsible for applying for funding should be one or two people from the neighborhood committee. This way, good planning will increase the chances of getting a grant while ensuring that people get as much input and help as possible, including land acquisition, fences, gates, benches, plants, information, etc. Each individual and family who uses the park shall be responsible for maintaining it. Consequently, once a pocket park has been established, the local community is responsible for the maintenance costs; this means that they should set up a maintenance schedule and assign specific tasks to the local community. Typically, a town council or community association is involved in the pocket park process. Accordingly, they usually allocate some funds to cover these costs, if street vendors want to rent the park for some time before it is established as a permanent location (Co-PLAN I., 2012).

## 6 Introduction to Tirana

In densely populated areas of Tirana, with limited amenities and the inability to build large parks, developing pocket parks as a stand-alone network may be a beneficial alternative for improving outdoor spaces and recreation opportunities for residents. Similarly, densely populated low-income neighborhoods, with a high demand for open space, could benefit the most from increased amenities in open spaces (Metropolitan Area Planning Council, 2019).

Accounting for a third of the country's total population, Tirana is unsurprisingly marked by intense densification of existing neighborhoods along with the creation of self-built informal housing patterns in its previously rural periphery. Despite being compact, it is also densely populated, especially in the city center where people live in 8- to 10-story high apartment houses (Spaan, 2017). The current municipal attempts to embed greenery in the smaller neighborhood scale will be explored and critiqued. Further, a positive

example of a pocket park in this city will be discussed as well as reflections on further potentials for these parks to exist and improve the socio-ecological reality of the two cities.

### 6.1 A General Overview

Tirana is the capital of Albania, a small country of 28,748 km<sup>2</sup> (Geography of Albania, 2021) in the Southeast of Europe. Albania shares borders with Greece, North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Montenegro, and roughly half of its perimeter forms a coastline along the Adriatic and Ionian Seas (part of the Mediterranean Sea) (Fig. 1). Tirana is conveniently positioned in central Albania, only 30 km east of the Adriatic Sea. Tirana's origins date back to the seventeenth century while Albania was under Ottoman rule, but its story as a capital is a fairly new one, only being established in 1920. At that time, it had just 15,000 inhabitants while the rest of the country was still largely rural. Today, Tirana is the political and economic capital of Albania and a bustling city with 850,000 inhabitants (Table 1).

In the late 1990s, Albania emerged from one of the most brutal authoritarian regimes of the Cold War period and began a process of radical change. Consequently, there has been a 30-year transition to a market economy, unrestrained capitalism, and large-scale migrations to cities and abroad since then. Due to this growth, Tirana continues to absorb a steady influx of newcomers from all over Albania (Les Ateliers, 2021).



**Fig. 1** Map of Albania and surrounding countries. *Source* (Biberaj & Pifti, 2019)

**Table 1** Population, density, and surface of Albania

	Albania	Tirana
Population	2,845,955 inhabitants (2020)—0.6% drop from 2019	842,019 inhabitants (2020) + 1.64% growth from 2018
Surface	28,748 km <sup>2</sup>	1110 km <sup>2</sup>
Density	104.6 inhabitants/km <sup>2</sup> (2018)	Habitants/km <sup>2</sup> (2019)

Source INSTAT (2021) and Municipality of Tirana (2017)

During the fall of the communist regime, the right of movement made a large number of people migrate to the capital in search of better possibilities for employment and living conditions. This migration led to a massive formal and informal surge of construction in the city and its surroundings.

## 6.2 Development of Tirana's Public Spaces

Tirana is a city in which rapid growth has occurred in the last few years, either involving free spaces intentionally or not. Although the city has a large green space area (Tirana's Grand Park), the park is not reachable for the citizens of the whole city. Furthermore, the requirements of people (transportation, services, and infrastructure) in high-density neighborhoods cannot be met. While there is no hierarchy with the other existing public spaces in the city, the pocket parks cannot be linked to building a functional green system to overcome the absence of small parks. In addition, in both theory and practice, there is no connection with existing parks as a network of green corridors, sidewalks, street trees, and waterways. Apart from these, the concept of pocket parks appears to be a decisive factor for better living conditions, air quality improvement, particle absorption in air, and the degradation of public spaces.

One of the significant changes the government took in 2015 in the implementation and management of public spaces was the establishment of the Parks and Recreation Agency APR. This shift marks a transition from traditional governance, where its control is fully centralized in the public sector (in this case, the Municipality), to managerial governance, where regulations and control functions are institutionalized and given to management agencies (Zamanifard et al., 2018). However, the division of responsibilities within these public authorities remains unclear due to the variety of public space types. The APR is the regulatory authority for all forests and natural parks and, in addition, for recreational areas such as playgrounds for children and sports fields within the municipal jurisdiction. Other categories of open public spaces (such as squares and promenades) are managed and administered by the Municipality's planning departments.

### 6.2.1 Law 107/2014

Law 107/2014 "On Territorial Planning and Development" (NTPA, 2014) governs all laws, conditions, and processes governing the use and management of public spaces. The minimum green public space ratio per capita is then expressed on Tirana's General Local Plan TR030 (Boeri, UNLAB, & IND, 2017):

- Inside the development unit of at least 2.5 m<sup>2</sup>, including children's playground.
- At least 4 m<sup>2</sup> of consistent greenery per capita in mass inside parks.
- Greenery in road infrastructure, promenades, and squares of at least 2.5 m<sup>2</sup> per capita.

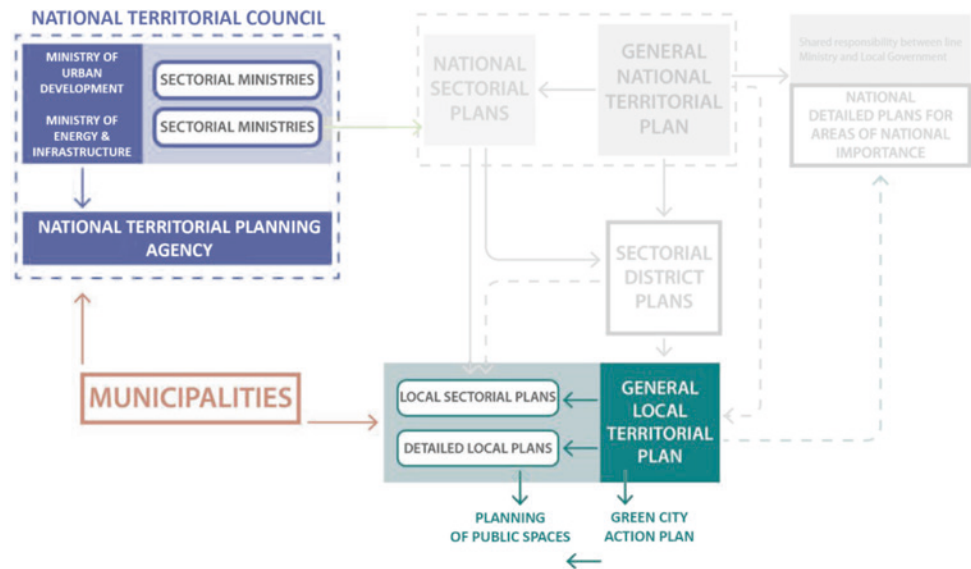
As a result, every individual should have access to a minimum of 9 m<sup>2</sup> of green space. Additionally, every neighborhood block in a radius of 400 m should have a minimum of 2.5 m<sup>2</sup> of green space.

### 6.2.2 Plans and Policies

By the legislation, as shown in Fig. 2, the principal governing bodies issue regulatory plans. Detailed Local Plans (DLPs) can also be prepared locally with guidance from the Tirana General Local Plan (TGLP), based on privately operated initiatives. A DLP is a legal document that describes numerous instruments that can be used to establish public spaces, along with the roles and benefits during the implementation process. It is also possible to generate public spaces based only on GLP. Some of these instruments stated in the Co-PLAN Technical Manual (2015a) generate financial support for public space developments:

- Expropriation of public sector services.
- Intensity of building with conditions.
- The transfer of development rights.
- The fair distribution among stakeholders of costs and profits.
- Public servitude and preferential rights.
- Programs like Business Improvement District (BID), Tax Increment Financing (TIF), or Special Assessment District (SAD).

**Fig. 2** Governing bodies issuing regulating plans. *Source* Bufi (2019) based on Papa and Dhiamanti (2017)



The most recent General Local Plan for Tirana (TR030) proposes to create a Sectoral Plan for the management of public spaces proposed by the approved DLPs. On a city scale, the GLP only envisages a growth per capita of green space ratio through two strategies—the Orbital Forest and two Green Belts, resulting in an additional 60.04 ha of green space. On a block scale, this proposal does not tackle greening initiatives.

### 6.2.3 The Green City Action Plan (GCAP)

The Albanian government undertook a significant territorial reform in 2014–2015, rezoning how cities and municipalities were organized. The reform expanded Tirana’s surface territory by approximately 25 times, including more regional territory. This was the trigger for the implementation of the Tirana Council’s ambitious plan to become a prosperous and desirable European destination for people to live, work, and travel. The GCAP was an expansion of the GLP to prevent and solve through sustainable development the increasing challenges of urban stress and climate change. Access to clean water, greening the city to enhance air quality, citizens’ well-being, energy usage, and green infrastructure are some of the primary concerns of this plan. Creating urban microclimates to tackle not only greenhouse gas emissions but also mitigate the impacts of climate change is key to this plan.

The GCAP is part of the Green Cities Program established by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). In 2015, the EBRD and the Municipality of Tirana MoT signed a Memorandum of Understanding on collaboration in areas such as urban transport, road infrastructure, water and wastewater systems, solid waste management, street lighting, and overall energy efficiency improvements. The GCAP is sponsored

by the Federal Ministry of Finance of Austria under the DRIVE Fund of the Western Balkans.

Following public consultation and discussion with other countries, the top priorities have been chosen:

- Land Use.
- Transport
- Solid Waste.
- Water Supply and Wastewater Treatment.
- Energy.
- Buildings.
- Climate Change Resilience and Adaptation.

One of the most impressive aspects of GCAP is the time for execution. It took less than a year to develop and authorize. Some projects were already initiated even before the strategy was completed, including tree planting and cycling promotion. One of their first projects was the local commitment of citizens and businesses to plant 2 million trees in Tirana by 2030. It was a positive activity for residents to get involved and learn more about the GCAP in detail. This demonstrates that the plan adopts a performing planning approach that triggers strategic development and community building instead of a simple implementation plan.

In addition, the GCAP also involves the development of greenery on a community scale, in the form of pocket parks, promising a 20% rise in green spaces. GCAP aims to build five new pocket parks between 500 and 10,000 m<sup>2</sup> by 2030. Finally, both GLP TR030 and GCAP do not specify whether and how they intend to achieve the required per capita area of green space (9 m<sup>2</sup>/capita). GLP TR030 only discusses an additional number of 2 million trees in the city, although GCAP does not estimate to what extent will the proposals comply with the legal requirements.

### 6.2.4 The Role of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The SDGs were at the core of the GLP General Local Plan—Tirana 2030. It highlights various goals, measures, and plans for implementation, including community development and access to natural resources and services for all residents.

The GCAP is based on the Green Cities Program, established by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development EBRD, methodology, and frameworks.

The role of the SDGs in the plan is to serve as a guide to promote the ongoing development of the plan. For Tirana and Albania, SDGs are very important as they seek to become sustainable leaders in Europe and worldwide. For the country, learning from others and tracking progress through the SDG measurement framework are important orientations for their development.

### 6.3 Public Green Space Actual Situation

Tirana has been facing rapid population growth over the last 28 years and urban development has thus evolved faster than the necessary infrastructure to support its growth (Table 2). The population of Tirana rose from 280,000 in 1989 to 842,000 today. The urban expansion did not follow sustainable living standards; however, it created a wrong philosophy in which the only important things were housing and construction, and all the rest were diminished, such as green or public space, which meant that the distribution of green space versus buildings was notable unequally (Sustainable Cities Platform, 2017).

The Tirana studies indicate that the proportion of open green space for 100,000 inhabitants is only 4.6 m<sup>2</sup>. Compared to other cities in the world, this number is pretty low according to the standard rate for the green space

coefficient which is 7m<sup>2</sup>/inhabitant) (EBRD Green Cities, 2018). Two surveillance stations in the city of Tirana have also demonstrated that since 2013 air pollution is at a very high level. The situation worsened when the territorial reform of the MoT increased the city's area from 42 to 110 km<sup>2</sup> in 2015.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), *residents of urban areas should have access to green space of at least 0.5–1 hectare at a distance of 300 linear meters (5-min walk) from their homes.*

Given this fact, starting from a central area (mixed land use) of Tirana to reach the green areas outside of the city, citizens who use cars must travel for a minimum of 15 min and a maximum of 30 min depending on the traffic situation. Figure 3 demonstrates the time distance between each ring, for example, traveling by car from one ring to another takes 10–15 min, traveling by bicycle takes 15 min, and so on.

Today, the city faces the mistakes of the past, caused by the transformation of the socio-economic system, by the collapse of the economy, society, and culture, and also by repeatedly building as an individual sporadic initiative without permission.

Due to uncontrolled economic and demographic growth, water and green networks have become severely damaged and ecology has been neglected. As a result of Albania's inefficient transport system which is influenced by a car culture that views the car as a status symbol, severe traffic gridlock occurs, which has negative economic, ecological, and health effects. Consequently, the importance of preserving the built environment was not appreciated, which caused a massive loss of public space for social interactions (Les Ateliers, 2021).

Thus, there is a complete lack of open green spaces in the residential areas, especially once you leave the city center. As a result, the proportion between concrete and green space is at alarming levels. Over the past decades, green and recreational spaces within residential blocks, known as Urban Pockets or Pocket Parks, have been present in almost every area of Tirana. Their disappearance came as a consequence of their alienation into private spaces, usually with fragmented ownership, primarily restaurants and private car parking (Fig. 4).

According to Co-PLAN Institute for Habitat Development (2015b), based on the Tirana development strategy, public spaces are in decline, or their creation is affected as a result of:

- The mechanism of privatization through the acquisition of property and the provision of compensation.

The continuous development of multi-story buildings is based on the “development rights granted to the first investor” model. In this model, each property is built to its

**Table 2** Urbanization–public space ratio

Tirana city area	40,000,000 m <sup>2</sup>
Green subdivisions of the city	Existing surface
Park area	100,000 m <sup>2</sup>
Sport terrain area	100,000 m <sup>2</sup>
Leisure area approximately	100,000 m <sup>2</sup>
Project (design) area	700,000 m <sup>2</sup>
Forest area	1,000,000 m <sup>2</sup>
<i>Urbanization–public space ratios</i>	
Public space–urban space ratio	1.3% (Tirana, city)
Green space–urban space ratio	0.5% (Tirana, city)
Public space–urban space ratio	5.2% (Tirana, including forest)

Source Guri (2015)

**Fig. 3** Actual distance radius to reach green Spaces of Tirana. *Source:* Co-PLAN Institute for Habitat Development (Co-PLAN, 2015b)



maximum capacity, while the adjacent land, whose owner has not yet applied for the building permit, would generate the public space (Fig. 5). In conclusion, the development conditions for the area (building intensity, building distances, and land use coefficient) are met without creating any public space, while the remaining properties remain empty and are not capable of achieving the right level of development.

- Confusion over ownership of public spaces in multi-story buildings due to private investments. Under a contractual arrangement between the landowner and the developer, these areas are owned by the land developer. Nevertheless, due to the requirements outlined in the building permit, these spaces are naturally used by the public, or at least semi-publicly by the residents. Hence, under the Building Co-ownership Act, these areas are not subjected to tenants' maintenance unless previously

indicated in a signed agreement. Therefore, the management of these spaces remains the responsibility of the developer, who is generally not involved in doing so.

This explains the reasons for the deterioration of courtyards in multi-story buildings. Nevertheless, the Territorial Planning and Development Act, which came into force in July 2015, stipulated that, for the first time, these public spaces created on privately built residential blocks could be transferred under public ownership (Dita, 2015).

### 6.4 Pocket Parks of Tirana

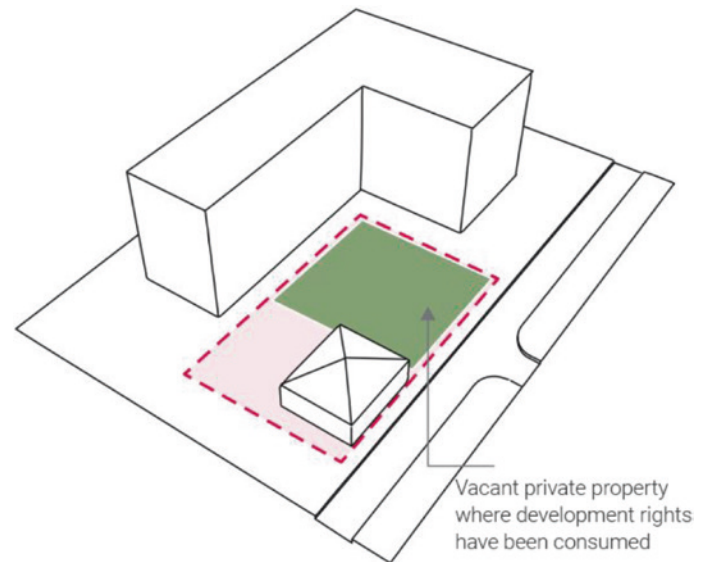
The MoT currently implements projects for the creation of micro-spaces in public land only (focusing again at the center of the city) and not yet in those common spaces with common ownership between the buildings (Fig. 6).



**Fig. 4** Lifecycle of a public space in Tirana. *Source* Author



**Fig. 5** Example for building on an undeveloped private property. 2015b Source Co-PLAN Institute for Habitat Development ()



These projects have envisaged three typologies of intervention in public spaces.

- Interim public spaces.
- Retrofitting existing spaces.
- Open spaces between buildings or otherwise called urban pocket parks. Some of these pocket parks which have been completed today have had a positive impact on the affected neighborhoods and their inhabitants.

As a result, the outskirts of the city are still being ignored when it comes to providing the inhabitants with more open green spaces. The full potential of these spaces was never fully realized as a means of addressing certain

environmental issues. This means not only bringing them back to the people but also bringing a change to their communities as a whole.

For this reason, most of these spaces are common spaces (used without restrictions by residents), but the problem lies in their ownership, maintenance, and management by the citizens and municipality, unclear location and identity, not appropriate design features, degraded environmental situation as well as private car occupation as illegal/informal parking.

As discussed above, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), *residents of urban areas should have access to green space of at least 0.5–1 hectare at a distance of 300 linear meters (5-min walk) from their homes.*

**Fig. 6** Proposed pocket parks located mainly in the city center. Source Municipality of Tirana MoT



Therefore, reclaiming and transforming pocket parks in the city, whether they are green or not, proximity and accessibility would not be an issue for residents to reach open spaces. The proximity is a European Common Indicator of local public open areas which does not measure the achievement of targets and objectives and is not specifically focused on green space, but is based on a similar metric—the percentage of citizens living within 300 m from a public open area of minimum size 0.5 hectares (Ambiente Italia Research Institute, 2003). Pocket parks, as a result, are important walking destinations and settings in neighborhoods, and various aspects of pocket parks can influence walking. Their proximity to residents is an important urban design issue that should be considered when distributing such resources within neighborhoods, and it is worthwhile to investigate how pocket park proximity may influence residents to walk. The nature of these spaces varies depending on their functions, use, presence of greenery, and so on. Table 3's comparing scheme reflects some of these similarities and differences:

## 6.5 SWOT Analysis of Pocket Parks of Tirana

Understanding Tirana's pockets requires knowledge of their current situation. As a result, a SWOT analysis is carried out as a strategic method based on literature standards for assessing the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats in these spaces.

The advantages of pocket parks apply to the dimensions that are considered critical components of the method/analysis discussed below. Weaknesses refer to perceived dimensions that these spaces fall short of. Concerning opportunities, they seek to open a dialog on potential changes or new approaches to keeping these spaces enticing. Park threats include both future and current challenges that may jeopardize the viability of neighborhood and city assets.

### + Strengths

Most of the strengths of these tiny spaces which contribute as an added value to their future development are described:

- Tirana has gained experience through other urban development initiatives and with the sharing of perspectives, mainly expressed in recent urban initiatives.
- There is a gender and age group distribution in the use of the city's public spaces, thus promoting social exchange and inclusion (Lekaj et al. 2018).
- Such pockets are also found in some neighborhoods in a form of vacant lands (Fig. 7), easily accessible from the local's homes within a radius of 300 m of linear distance, about 5 min' walk (according to the WHO).

### – Weaknesses

Based on a variety of academic and professional study analyses as well as previous readings, experiences, and dialogues, the weaknesses identified in these spaces include:

- The municipality has not yet put pocket parks as a priority, especially beyond the downtown area and outskirts.
- Private owners consider the revitalization of pocket parks unimportant, and without understanding, how these types of spaces will improve the value of their land.
- The lack of maintenance and cleanliness is followed by the neglect and abandonment of public spaces and, in the majority of cases, by the transformation into another category of land use.
- Some of these types of spaces are used as informal parking lots (Fig. 8) or for commercial uses, such as bars.
- The remaining spaces lack lighting and urban furniture.
- The abandonment of these spaces has resulted in an uncontrolled, chaotic development, and a lack of space for pedestrians.
- Clarification on ownership status is pending.

**Table 3** Similarities and differences between the proposed spaces

Similarities	Differences
Illegal/informal parking	Different area surfaces varying from 100 to 700 m <sup>2</sup>
Lack of greenery	Mismanagement and maintenance
Surrounded space is not well organized	Environmental situation
Design features (lighting, plants, benches, shades, structures, playground, etc.)	Various age group users of these pockets
Inappropriate road infrastructure	Morphology: terrain, orientation (sun/shadow)
Users	Ownership

Source Author



**Fig. 7** The potential presence of greenery and the lack of maintenance of a pocket park in Tirana. *Source* Author

### O Opportunities

- There are municipal programs and policies in some neighborhoods close to the city center that reflect the shift of pocket parks from informally occupied spaces to public open spaces.
- They make neighborhoods attractive to reinvest.
- Can contribute to economic growth, indicating more open space, more community spaces, and more small businesses around.
- Tackle traffic issues and find best practices for cycling and walking.
- Improving connections and increasing social interaction among residents.
- They can initiate more Public–Private Partnerships as the city has been familiar with this concept over the past few years in different types of projects.
- Fostering private sector, government, and civil society partnerships.

- Make the outskirts of the city attractive and improve living conditions for all strata of population and newcomers.
- Create some connection between the central area, nearby green spaces, and the neighborhoods around it.
- Improving living standards and rising land value in the ignored areas.

### X Threats

- Growth of the population and urban development does not always strive to meet future needs and requirements.
- A weak planning structure and inappropriate strategies do not result in planning results adequately and sustainably.
- The lack of participation of citizens in the planning process will make them be against any projects by ignoring their needs and opinions.



**Fig. 8** Pocket park sidewalk used as informal parking. *Source* Author



**Fig. 9** Pocket park transformation. *Source* Co-PLAN Institute for Habitat Development

- Private investors do not have sufficient incentives to invest in these spaces and are also uncertain about their future benefits.

## 6.6 Initiatives

Aside from the ineffective practices of public officials, there is little evidence of grassroots initiatives by citizens to get involved in their neighborhoods. Explanations for lack of community involvement include citizens' lack of trust in the effectiveness of participation, low confidence in public institutions to make proposals, etc. (Pojani and Maci, 2015). The lack of interest in providing adequate knowledge, combined with the passivity of the community, results in a relatively low level of public involvement (Theodori et al., 1995). Nonetheless, recently the local population seems inclined and eager to engage in the development of public spaces in the vicinity of their residential blocks.

On the bright side, between September 2014 and January 2015, the development of public places with community participation in mind has been achieved successfully in Tirana through the transformation of a pocket space close to the “Pallati me Shigjeta” neighborhood (Figs. 9 and 10). The pocket is surrounded by high buildings looking down on it facilitating the sense of community and a potentially higher interest in maintaining it. The path is very narrow but located near a high-traffic street that could be used for marketing. The success of the park stems from the neighborhood's maintenance of the pocket as well as being surrounded by small businesses that serve the residents as well as visitors of various ages and categories, including students from a nearby high school.



**Fig. 10** “Pallati me Shigjeta” pocket park today. *Source* Author

In 2015 Co-PLAN Institute for Habitat Development in Tirana carried out an initiative to transform a left unused space in a neighborhood far from the city center of Tirana. This initiative was brought off in cooperation with POLIS University and Tirana Municipality as part of their “Urban Activisms for Civic Democracy” program, sponsored by the US Embassy in Tirana, Deutsche Zentrum, and the Balkan Art Angle. The project's purpose is to increase community participation in processes that identify and address issues of collective concern in city-making processes and to assume responsibility for decisions affecting the city. Through urban activism and the participation of residents, the project focused on the greening of these areas and an improvement of the division of public spaces. Several meetings and collaborations with local community members were required to redesign the space. Field experts worked together with local stakeholders to accomplish this. A two-stage project addressing community-identified problems was developed and agreed on jointly throughout the project, providing an excellent example of participatory planning and citizen involvement in decision-making. This two-stage initiative addresses problems identified by the community in a way that has been developed jointly (Co-PLAN, 2015b).

A recent similar initiative that took place in the city center was the implementation of the #PublicMicroSpaces project launched by the MoT (Fig. 11), with a total value of 83,706,530.00 €. It aims at creating and reconceptualizing existing public spaces.

The main goal of the public micro-space project is to create and rethink the existing public spaces, no matter how large or small they are, they have the power to strengthen the created poles and to create or strengthen the identity of these poles. The MoT's public interventions (Skenderbej Square, the New Bazaar, the Grand Lake Park, the New Boulevard) prove an immediate absorption into those areas

by the city's inhabitants while at the same time revealing how much they have missed green spaces over the years and a strong desire to have as many as possible in the city (Fig. 12). The city is experienced intensively, the value of the properties around has increased, and the offer for tourists increased significantly. These investments are concentrated primarily in the city's central area as an immediate need. The first phase of the project begins with 11 public spaces in poles that have already been created, visible, and with immediate impact, where the project can continue in an exponential form in the future by expanding it into the neighborhoods and suburbs.

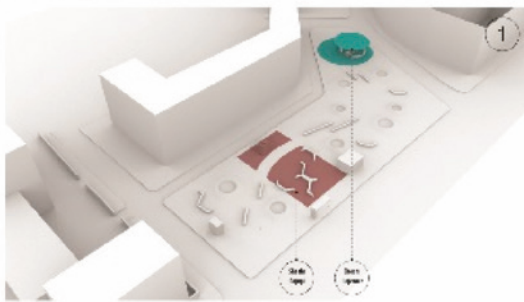
There are three typologies of intervention in public micro-spaces as also a location in Fig. 13 which are:

- Intermediate public spaces: Intermediate public spaces transform traffic areas that are overused and unnecessary into public spaces. These spaces redesign unsafe or abandoned intersections, transforming them into landmarks of the city and impacting surrounding neighborhoods. In this project, there are six intermediate public spaces Cafe Fora, Street Kont Urani, Selvia, Medreseja, Dinamo Stadium, and Blloku Partizani.

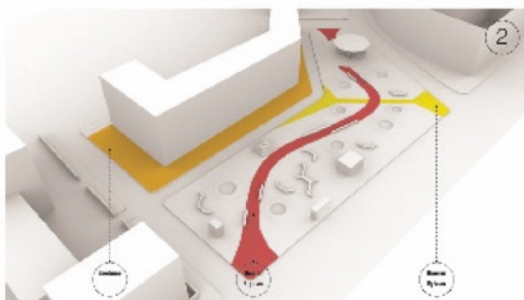


**Fig. 11** Micro-space transformation from the MoT initiative. *Source* Author

Descriptive Diagram



Visualisation



**Fig. 12** Re-treatment of existing urban park micro-space. *Source* MoT (2018)

**Fig. 13** Location of proposed projects. *Source* MoT (2018)



- Re-treatment of existing spaces in this project are Kashari Square, Çajupi Garden, and 5 May Street.
- Public spaces between buildings: in this project are Lapraka and Selita residential block and headquarters.

The novelty of this project is related to the fact that it has a design strategy on how to transform these spaces. Spaces such as these are designed to be distinct from one another, promote new functions, and be public spaces that have distinct identities.

Each of the spaces has a specific element designed particularly for that space. The forms utilized are primitive and make the public space functional but at the same time artistic, serving as fundamental functions for sitting or shading.

They also provide sub-functions such as auditoriums, shadows, reflections, landmarks, urban games, to create a separate network of sensory public spaces.

Unfortunately, there is a lack of community engagement and participation in this project's decision-making. Consistent information and transparency, both in terms of legislation, urban planning, and design, would be the basis for raising awareness of the community's role. As long as residents are unaware of their basic civil rights concerning their urban living environment, it is useless to engage them. Awareness that public space directly affects users can only promote their active participation with information in the urban planning of their neighborhoods or define their will.

True community leaders could enhance community engagement in this regard.

The government appears to accept (at least theoretically) the residents' role in the development of public places as well as their indirect responsibility in their maintenance. The establishment of a building administrator is regarded as a positive step toward community activation, but it is a role that needs to be fostered and not only exist formally. If APR claims that each project is preceded by "informing" or even "consultation" and "involvement", the residents are still predominantly not aware of these processes. If these practices are indeed taking place, then more outreach and showcasing are needed. In any case, there was not any indication of efforts for introducing any participatory approaches into a legal framework, apart from the existing law on public informing. On the other side, the Co-PLAN project proves that the local community seems inclined and willing to participate in the creation of public spaces close to their residential blocks if such a possibility is given.

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## 7 Conclusions

Cities today have the responsibility not only to conserve natural resources, but also to create ecological centers in the concrete jungles which we have created, bringing back the color green, and handling various requirements such as population growth, economic development, and so on. Pocket parks are social places that offer layers of services including mitigating climate change, maintaining a living ecosystem in urban settings, improving safety, promoting social inclusion, and providing an attractive medium for economic establishment and urban food production. Infusing such concepts in the micro-urban context facilitates socio-ecological integration, making urban sustainability more approachable and materialized in our daily lives (Elmqvist et al., 2013).

Pocket parks are downsized community parks that appear due to the need for accessible public spaces in dense cities which typically lack developable land for public recreational areas. They work on the hidden potentials of leftover urban spaces. They do not concern themselves with grand sizes, but rather purpose. They work on the intimate neighborhood level to create a democratic place of knowledge exchange and build a sense of community in an act of community activism (Banerjee, 2001). By targeting specific groups of people who use and maintain their space, they encourage new social connections through a variety of activities. The activities appropriate for pocket parks are whatever activities that satisfy the community's needs. Such functional flexibility and intimacy turn them into urban social living rooms, differentiating them from typical parks and their associated recreational activities.

Pocket parks' most significant challenge lies in their maintenance. Even though they are easy to build, they can quickly deteriorate without practical design, community support, usage, and maintenance (Blake, n.d.). A critical point to the success of pocket parks is the ability of the community to self-organize their volunteering individuals. Case studies of successful pocket parks around the world indicate that design flexibility and user involvement are necessary for pocket parks to succeed, so that they can evolve along with ever-changing cities and changing communities. Bottom-up participation of users who are familiar with these spaces allows them to build objects and activities that they think can benefit the community; thus, designing a gradual process of place-making in their open-air social living room. Instead of resting, socializing, and recreation, pocket parks are adapted for learning, cooking, childcare, gardening, beekeeping, maintenance, tending to animals, and every other thing that people would like to do; transforming dormant urban vacuums into something more sustainable.

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## 8 Outlook

In the Tirana case study, claiming the land for private or public pocket parks is strongly linked to finding a car solution. In a society, in which the car remains the quickest way to travel from one point to another inside the city, the idea of switching the car park to pocket parks will not happen without inconsistencies. In this regard, local governments need to develop an efficient and trustworthy public transport system. It may take less time to provide a reliable alternative to cars than waiting to change people's mindsets.

On the other hand, the possibility of overcrowded green areas decreases if pocket parks and community gardens are built on a network with the green infrastructure of the city. For a large number of residents to be adequately accommodated, the municipality needs to figure out how to best incorporate these existing spaces.

It may be more suitable to create multifunctional small spaces in crowded neighborhoods with sitting and shading elements and some vegetation, offering more possibilities at less cost than what would have been involved in constructing a large park. For instance, parking areas or vacant lots have great potential for rapid and highly efficient conversion.

Schoolyards, the gardens of governmental institutions should also be publicly accessible. Furthermore, cyclists and pedestrians need space where they can commute around comfortably with enough distance between them. Many cities deal with these problems. For example, Brussels just launched a new traffic concept for its inner-city, and Munich has introduced pop-up trails.

More measures can be implemented by individuals, alongside the idea of pocket parks, such as green roofs and walls that contribute to providing economic, ecological, and social benefits, which of these measures works best has to be decided on a case-by-case basis.

The living conditions of people are dissimilar and so are their problems, which call for numerous solutions. Those of us who live in small apartments with no balconies or gardens are going to be more challenged than those who live in big outdoor homes. It is important to take into account these sorts of social aspects.

## 9 Lessons to Be Learned

The idea of pocket park creation seems to be completely sound and valid and might be one of the concepts if the goal of a sustainable city is to be achieved. However, it appears that more attention should be paid to the political and administration aspect (a range of politics and strategies).

The paper investigated how pocket parks can adapt to and answer the range of contextual needs in dense mixed-use residential neighborhoods. The aim and purpose of creating pocket parks in Tirana (previously and recently) are to make residents aware of the value of these spaces as strategies and activities for sustainable development. To this extent, it is entirely feasible for the municipality and government to increase their number spread in the city by communicating and coordinating meetings with the citizens of a specific area about pocket parks and public space projects. More participatory planning of smaller neighborhood projects should also be implemented to adapt the function and design of public spaces to people's needs and to allow the transformation of neglected public spaces into attractive areas that reflect the population's needs.

That being said, a possible solution to increase the number of such spaces in Tirana is to close some unnecessary roads for cars, start organizing parking areas more efficiently, and engage residents in activities in these newly freed spaces. Furthermore, housing should be built with public space in mind.

The main concepts will appear to be solutions-based for this research:

- The bottom-up approach is a concept that emphasizes the participation of the local community in development initiatives and also ensures community ownership, and commitment in these common spaces (Kaiser, 2012). With the support of established incentives, the partnership process (Municipality-Residents-NGO-Private Entities) may begin either from the bottom (community) or from the top (local government) to establish pocket

parks (for example utilizing the Community Fund). Practices such as structured partnerships, building capacity, and co-design might be as fully potential applicable models.

- Public-Private Partnerships as cooperative arrangements between two or more public and private sectors, typically of a long-term nature. In other words, it involves government and businesses that work together to complete a project and/or provide services to the population (United Nations, 2015).
- Placemaking as a multi-faceted approach to the planning, design, and management of public spaces. It capitalizes on a local community's assets, inspiration, and potential, to create public spaces that promote people's health, happiness, and well-being (Jalkh, 2017).
- Enhancing the goal of SDG 11 (sustainable cities and communities) in line with the long-term goal that livable cities must be green-blue infrastructure, which not only benefits climate change adaptation and mitigation (SDG 13) but also gives us space for leisure and recreation, and ultimately contributes to human health and well-being (SDG 3).

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