



URBAN PLANNING EDUCATION IN A DEMOCRACY WITH A MARKET ECONOMY: LEARNING ECONOMIC, POLITICAL AND SOCIAL SKILLS

Dorina Pojani

Epoka University, Albania.

As Albania goes through a political, economic, and social revolution, and a population explosion in the capital region, its urban areas are going through drastic transformations. Urban and planning issues have come to the forefront as cities have to figure out how to provide adequate infrastructure, direct and control private development, meet transportation needs, respond to automobile traffic, and protect the environment in a market economy. This paper discusses the progress of university-level education in urban planning in Albania. Through interviews of students and practicing planners and direct observations, the author investigates the extent to which planning schools are training Albanian students to operate in the new post-communist context.

Keywords: Albania, Urban planning education, Market economy, Post-communist transition.

Introduction

As Albania goes through a political, economic, and social revolution, its urban areas are going through drastic transformations. Tirana, the capital, has tripled in size due to internal migration. Other desirable cities in the coastal region have also experienced a population boom. Urban and planning issues have come to the forefront as cities have to figure out how to provide adequate infrastructure, direct and control private development, meet transportation needs, respond to automobile traffic, and protect the environment in a market economy. These are central (and universal) issues that have a substantial impact on the quality of life of urban dwellers.

Traditionally, urban planning in Albania was seen as a problem for architects to solve. Urban planning consisted of making “general plan” maps or blueprints, which showed where roads would go and where each of the fundamental use types (residential, commercial, and industrial) would be permitted and of making more specific maps of smaller areas. These urban planning tasks were seen as “scientific” and traditionally urban planning was thought of as a “science”. Communist-era planners operated in a context free of public input and were guided by a science that was considered beyond the comprehension of ordinary people. Often they had great skills in creating beautiful drawings, a strong sense of geometry, and/or strong visions about how the world should work, but little experience or interest in understanding the practical outcomes and actual human impacts of the environments that they designed.

This paper discusses the progress of university-level education in urban planning in Albania. Through interviews of graduating students and professionals and direct observations, the author

investigates the extent to which planning schools are training Albanian students to operate in the new post-communist context.

Globalization of Planning Education

The transformation in Albania's urban scheme has been paralleled by a need to transform urban planning into a broad field instead of one that has been historically based in architecture. In order to place the issues related to teaching urban planning in Albania in perspective these international trends are briefly mentioned here.

In 1992 Rachelle Alterman conducted a widely cited comparative study on planning education and professional practice in Europe and North America. Her study found a great deal of variation among the different countries. Distinct professional training in planning had a long-standing, well-established tradition in the Anglo-Saxon world, whereas in most of continental Europe, specialized professional planning education was at the time non-existent (Alterman 1992). Now many Western cities are focusing on encouraging rather than controlling new development and on renewal rather than expansion; planning in those cities encompasses wide perspectives of economic and social well-being.

However, in West Europe the transformation has been less than complete. In Finland, for example, the planning profession does not have a very high degree of professionalization and the educational background of most practicing urban planners is in architecture. Professional Finnish architect-planners surveyed by Kangasoja et al. (2010) deemed this type of training incomplete because, while learning the "architect's way of thinking" (i.e. creativity), they had not acquired sufficient skills in communication, argumentation, negotiation, and legislation, which had turned out to be crucial in their professional life.

Other studies conducted in the course of the last two decades in other parts of the world have generally found that planning education has not sufficiently evolved from its technical stage. For example, in post-colonial Hong Kong and Sub-Saharan Africa the urban planning profession and education have grown out of the colonial mold, although the development context in these places is very different from West Europe. A study in Hong Kong a decade ago found that, due to upward GDP and urban expansionist trends, influenced by large infrastructure projects and mass housing production, the types of skills and knowledge needed by the planning profession were primarily those related directly to physical development (Cook 1999).

In much of Africa, a developing area, planning is carried out as a techno-bureaucratic exercise concerned with plan production and control instruments while in reality many large urban sections remain "ungoverned" and are faced with problems for which there is little useful precedent from the West. These circumstances call for urban development and management, as well as communication and facilitation skills in a context ridden with deep ethnic, income, and other divisions. Case studies of Tanzania, Ghana, and South Africa in early 2000s showed that planning schools were slowly starting to respond to these new curriculum demands (Diaw et al. 2002).

Apart from the transformation in urban planning education, connected with the incorporation of its social and economic aspects, planning education is in a state of transformation in many other parts of the world, due to advances in communication technologies such as the Internet, low-cost air travel, globalization, and the widespread use of the English language. Academic globalization, including franchising of foreign academic programs, has enabled the transfer and flow of knowledge originating in one place to different national and international contexts.

Research networks are now organized based on convergence of interests and ideas rather than on proximity (Oner et al. 2010).

For example, Oner et al. (2010) found that almost half of the articles on globalization research in urban studies and planning published in the second half of the last decade resulted from national and international collaboration efforts. Since 2000, there has been a significant increase in international co-authorships in the field. Associations such as the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning in the USA, the Association of European Schools of Planning, and the Asian Planning Schools Association, as well as scholarship programs like the American Fulbright and the European Erasmus, increasingly facilitate contacts between researchers from different countries. Much spontaneous collaboration has evolved into structured relationships (Oner et al. 2010).

In addition to collaborative research among professors, many planning schools are restructuring their curricula to reflect a rapidly globalizing context and are increasingly organizing joint planning exercises, workshops, or full-fledged programs involving students from more than one country. Yigitcanlar et al. (2009) present the outcomes of such a collaborative regional workshop, in which students from Queensland University of Technology in Australia and the International Islamic University of Malaysia participated. The authors reported that the workshop was so successful in terms of trans-cultural engagement that, as a result, many students came to ask for the incorporation of international planning components in their planning programs. However, in some cases, approaches to internationalizing planning education serve merely as a marketing strategy for a university that aspires to attract foreign students and staff (Yigitcanlar et al. 2009).

Another important shift in planning education is the introduction of environmental planning knowledge and skills in many university curricula, which has been encouraged by a number of influential charters and declarations since the 1970s, including the Tbilisi Declaration of 1977, the Belgrade Charter of 1975, and the Tallories Declaration of 1990. Many planners see this as a crucial step given the projected implications of climate change for human settlements and nature.

Hurliman (2009) and White and Mayo (2005) have reviewed environmental education in planning programs in Australia and the USA respectively through surveys of planning professionals and planning educators. Their research found that in both countries there is fragmentation and a lack of common ground within environmental planning pedagogy, which may be rooted in the fact that this field is quite diverse and includes plural ideologies. While in the USA an overwhelming majority of graduate planning programs offer environmental planning as an area of specialization, in Australia environmental education has not been widely facilitated, despite initiatives such as the creation of the National Environmental Education Council. In the case of environmental planning, educators and practicing planners recognize the need to train students more rather than less in applied physical planning skills such as GIS and site planning since most graduates enter the profession in a primarily technical capacity and only later develop the need for more advanced political skills.

Changing Context of Planning Practice in Albania

In the Albanian context the third dimension of the transition, apart from urban population explosion and the globalization of planning concepts, was the transformation from a socialist to a capitalist economy, operating in a democracy. During communism, urban planning was thought of as the “science” of designing cities, with no role for public input, rather than the art of regulating private development, with consideration of public input. A leading textbook of the

socialist era defines planning as: “The science, art, and technology of building cities and other human settlements according to a specific plan... (Faja and Alimehmeti 1983)”. Accordingly, planners received little training about the practical outcomes and actual human impacts of the environments that they designed. Based on that tradition, Albanian cities still continue to spend years formulating general plans.

However, within the new post-communist framework, with a rapid pace of urbanization and a large amount of illegal construction, urban planners need to act primarily as regulators and economists, rather than designers. In market economies, central objectives of urban planning typically include stimulating development that will increase municipal revenues, “taxing” profits from private development in order fund the need for additional infrastructure caused by the development, protecting the environment, and meeting the objective of “sustainability”. These are concepts that Albanian planners are only beginning to grapple with. One text by Allmendinger (2000) is apropos:

“People are flocking to the towns and cities in many poorer countries today. Much of the new development is ‘spontaneous’ as people occupy vacant land and begin to build rudimentary dwellings. In such circumstances there is little value in trying to produce a very detailed plan - it would take too long and soon be out of date. Instead planners can produce a general strategy for the settlement, identifying areas where essential services such as water, sewers and electricity will be provided, and creating basic layouts of roads and building plots that will allow adequate space for circulation (Allmendinger et al. 2000).”

While the planning laws of Albania and other former socialist states may not look much different from the laws of West Europe and the U.S., from a political perspective there are great differences in planning processes. In the U.S. and in West Europe, citizens, especially those from affected neighborhoods, commonly exercise an intense political interest in the physical development of their surroundings, which they see as a central determinant of the value of their real property. Some Western commentators note that politics, conflict, and dispute might well be at the centre of land use planning; indeed, the explicit function of planning processes is to ensure that the wide variety of interests at stake are considered and that outcomes are in the general public interest (Cullingworth and Nadin 2002). In Albania’s new democratic context, urban planning has also become largely a political process, but of a different type, dominated by the planners and political parties with little public concern.

While urban planning policy and decision making may be political, it should be noted that the legitimacy of planning systems depends on their enforcement, through planning bureaucracies, the judiciary, and citizenry acts, which are well established in West Europe. In Albania, on the other hand, rampant corruption has characterized the whole development sector in the last two decades. These characteristics reflect contempt for authority and a lack of public concern for the common good, which are reactions to the repression and forced volunteerism under the former communist regime and the poverty and political chaos experienced in the 1990s. Under these circumstances, planners need intensive education and skills in conflict resolution, negotiation, and mediation.

As a part of the transition process, the following types of issues have emerged:

In West Europe in the past few decades, environmental protection has become central to the urban planning process, as noted earlier. Virtually every nation has adopted an extensive set of environmental standards which every development project must meet. Furthermore, the EU has adopted extensive environmental standards which member states must comply with. A layer of

EU laws, directives, and economic incentives regarding the environment, sustainability, and planning has been installed on top of West European national laws. In Albania, compliance with these standards is central to the EU accession process and, therefore, has become very relevant. However, planners receive minimal training about environmental protection, a field which is considered the domain of environmental engineers. (But this field is new in Albania, too.)

In the past decade, “sustainability” has emerged as a central planning concept. In Western Europe much of the sustainability discussion has focused on the adverse effects of wide-scale suburbanization and sprawl and the need for compact cities. In Albania, peri-urban sprawl is now evident in the peripheries of larger and more desirable cities located in the center and on the coast. Due to the informal (and irregular) nature of development in peripheral settlements, which involves lack of infrastructure and requires the resolution of property ownership issues, West European models for dealing with sprawl cannot be easily adopted to the local context. Therefore the Albanian planning sector has had to come up with innovative devices to deal with this situation.

In recent decades in West Europe development fees and exactions have assumed a major role in the planning process. Even in the U.S. which is considered as a homeland for the free market, in areas with high demand and substantial competition for land, considerable development fees are standard. In the Albanian capital, development pressures have been very strong in the last two decades, especially in the more central urban area, and development has been particularly profitable. However, developers have been charged relatively low fees, equal to only two percent of the development cost. Debates are ongoing over whether development fees discourage development. Often planners, untrained in economic concepts, are unable to respond to developers’ claims that fees higher than two percent would make development economically unfeasible.

In recent decades in West European nations, citizen participation and transparency have become major issues in urban planning, based on the recognition that planners have limited vision which needs to be supplemented by the knowledge of the people about their cities and their neighborhoods and the workings of urban life. Adequate notice to the public, opportunities for citizen participation, and freedom of information have become central to the legitimacy of the urban planning process. Participation has become part of the process for reviewing individual permit applications as well as being a part of the formulation of general plans and planning laws. The E.U. has adopted extensive directives regarding access to planning and environmental information, which Albania is slowly complying with, while awaiting candidacy status. However, often in Albania only parties that have an “interest” in a project may have a right to information regarding an application or the right to participate in the hearing process and/or the right to petition for judicial review. In recent years there has been some increasing pressure to open up the planning process to the general public. With more public participation, planners will increasingly find themselves in the role of “servants” of the public, rather than distant technicians; therefore, planning schools need to adopt this perspective.

With the adoption of a new national planning law in Albania, one debate has been over whether accompanying regulations must be flexible and therefore leave space for subjectivity or consist of very specific standards. The argument for flexibility is that enables local governments to respond rationally to the unique character of each proposal and the unique set of issues associated with each location. The obvious drawback of flexibility is that it opens avenues to corruption and politicization of each planning decision. Planners need to be versed about such policy and legal issues in order to provide input on these discussions.

Another major contemporary issue in Albania is the degree to which planning is centralized or decentralized. Encouraged by international organizations, a decentralization reform has begun since the early 1990s as an antidote to the extreme centralization of the communist era. However, decentralization or the lack thereof has been dominated by political power struggles arising from differences between which parties control the national and local governments. On the one hand decentralization is a tool for the empowerment of citizens over their local environments and a movement away from the rigidities of national rules and the blindness of distant bureaucracies. On the other hand, decentralization is used by localities to advance their local interest (public and that of particular officials) at the expense of regional and national needs. Planners have little background and experience for considering these issues. (See also Baar and Pojani 2004).

Transformation of Planning Education in Albania

In Albania, professional training in architecture was first offered in the 1960s at the Polytechnic University of Tirana (PUT). At the time, architecture was treated as a sub-specialization of civil engineering. In the 1970s, the Department of Architecture became independent within PUT, offering a five-year program. In the 1980s, an urban planning profile was added in the last two years of the curriculum. In 2011, PUT started its first five-year program in urban planning, which will replace the urban planning profile. (The profile will be terminated within 2015.)

Starting in 2005, a number of private universities opened in Albania. Two of them offer planning degrees or specializations, including Polis University which offers a five-year program in urban planning, and Epoka University, which offers a planning profile in the last two years of a five-year integrated (Bachelor + Master) architecture program. The tables below sets forth the curricula of the three schools.

Polis University

Professional Degree in Urban Planning and Management – 300 ECTS credits	
Starting year: 2008	
<u>I Year:</u> 1. Urban Design and Architecture History I+II 2. Space Philosophy and Planning Systems 3. Planning Thought Evolution 4. Planning Policy and Administration in Albania and the EU 5. Earth Sciences 6. Urban Technology and Infrastructure I+II 7. Graphic Design Studio 8. Urban Housing Systems 9. Mathematics 10. Foreign Languages and Academic Writing	<u>II Year:</u> 1. Research Methods and Statistics 2. Topography & GIS 3. Economics (Micro-Macro) 4. Introduction to Planning and Environmental Law 5. Introduction to Management 6. Studio: Housing and Public Services 7. Territorial and Settlement Analysis I+II 8. Public Procurement in the EU 9. Studio: Planning Strategic & Practice
<u>III Year:</u> 1. Studio & Theory: Urban and Regional Planning 2. Urban Sociology 3. Urban Economy 4. Environmental Science & Landscape Design 5. Graphic Representation in Urban Planning and Design 6. Management Principles II 7. Institutional and Project Evaluation 8. Urban Environmental Management 9. Studio: Sustainable Environmental Planning	<u>IV Year:</u> 1. Urban Management I+II 2. Real Estate Appraisal 3. Transportation and Infrastructure Planning I+II 4. European Space Planning / ESPON Network 5. Project Cycles / Preparation of Project Proposals 6. Integrated Studio: Urban Design and Planning I+II 7. Modern Planning Instruments and Trends 8. Elective

V Year:	
1. Final Thesis Preparation	9. Post Petroleum Planning / Future of Cities
2. Development Policy	10. Urban Marketing
3. Integrated Studio: Planning & Landscape III	
4. Professional Ethics	
5. Conflict Resolution & Mediation	
6. Non-Technical Elective	
7. Professional Internship	
8. Diploma Thesis / Project	
Master programs in Urban Planning and Management - 3 specializations	
Starting year: 2011	
a. Spatial Planning and GIS Application 2 years part-time 72 - 90 ECTS	
b. Social Urban Development and Human Resources 2 years part-time 72 - 90 ECTS	
c. Housing and Land Development 2 years part-time 72 - 90 ECTS	

Epoka University

Profile in Urban Planning and Design (the last two years of a five-year Professional Degree in Architecture) – 120 ECTS credits. Starting year: 2011	
Core Courses	Elective Courses
1. Integrated Design Studio	1. Planning Theory
2. Introduction to Urban Planning	2. Historic Preservation
3. Housing Systems	3. Transportation Planning
4. Planning Law	4. Urban Anthropology
5. Thesis Preparation I+II	5. Statistics and GIS Applications for Planners
	6. Environmental Planning
	7. Environmental Psychology
	8. Economic Development Planning

Polytechnic University

Profile in Urban Planning and Design (the last two years of a 5-year Professional Degree in Architecture) – 120 ECTS credits	
Starting year: 1980s, to be terminated within 2015	
IV Year	V Year
1. Introduction to Urban Planning	1. Landscape Architecture
2. Environmental Design I+II	2. Urban Design III (Revitalization)
3. Urban Planning History	3. Urban Management
4. Urban Design I + II	4. Housing Policy
5. Planning Legislation	5. C.A.D. and G.I.S.
6. Urban Geography	6. Underground Infrastructure Network
7. Urban Transport and Road Infrastructure	7. Diploma Project
8. Introduction to Urban Economics	
9. Elective: Urban Sociology / Professional Ethics	
10. Professional Internship	

In order to find out how urban planning is conceived by students and how well urban planning training has satisfied student needs, this author surveyed 39 planning and architecture students from Epoka University, the Polytechnic University, and Polis University, who were in their final year. Although small in absolute terms, this sample constitutes a substantial portion of the graduating students in architecture and planning in the three schools. The number of male and female respondents was about equal.

The survey responses reflected the urban design and physical planning focus, which still dominates Albanian planning curricula. Respondents were asked to provide a definition of “urban planning”. Across the three schools, a typical answer to this question was: “Urban planning is the science that deals with the organization of urban space.” Many students conceived of planning as “large-scale architecture”. Others equated urban planning with “urban

studies” or “environmental psychology”. Few students said that urban planning also deals with the social, economic, and political aspects of urban management. In addition, among the students who responded that urban planning was their main professional interest (about half the sample), most still preferred to work on urban design-related tasks such as zoning maps and site planning rather than transport planning, planning enforcement, strategic planning, legal planning aspects, housing, environmental planning, or public administration.

When asked about the most positive aspects of their studies, several students mentioned the strength of their design training. They also liked that fact that they had often been encouraged to work in groups, as they felt teamwork is crucial in urban planning. Regarding negative aspects, respondents most frequently mentioned theory overload and a lack of practical training, which would prepare them for real world settings and challenges.

About half of the students in the sample aspired to work in private design studios. Among students who were interested in urban planning careers most also expressed a preference for the private sector, although urban planning is largely seen as a public service profession. This attitude may reflect the fact that the wages offered by the private sector are higher for this profession, public sector jobs are limited in number, and are commonly secured through personal connections and nepotism practices.

Students were also asked to express their thoughts about the urban planning profession in Albania. Most felt that good planning practices are crucial now that the country is going through drastic and multifaceted transformations in most spheres of life. However, many felt that the development of this profession is inadequate and that planners are held in low esteem by politicians and even the general public, especially when compared with architects and civil engineers. Some felt that now much of the urban land in Albania has been filled up with construction by corrupt developers and through the informal self-help efforts of individuals thus limiting the future role of professional planners. However, several were hopeful that in the near future a renaissance of the planning profession will come about as people will focus on urban space quality once their basic housing needs are fulfilled.

In addition to interviewing students, the author conducted an online survey of 15 architecture and planning professionals in November 2011. Respondents were recruited through the mailing list of the Association of Albanian Architects and through direct email invitations to professionals known to the author. Participation was voluntary and anonymous and the survey contained mostly qualitative questions. The sample size is small; however, this is a predominantly exploratory study, which does not seek to make statements that indicate representativeness of the opinions of all planners in Albania. (The total number of planning professionals in Albania is unknown due to lack of professional licensing requirements and systematic surveying. Also, there is no Albanian Planning Association.)

Survey respondents had worked an average of eleven years in their current occupation. Seven respondents worked in urban planning, primarily in a physical planner capacity (while the others worked as architects and civil engineers). A few had started their career as architects and later had switched to planning.

When asked on advantages and disadvantages of their academic training, respondents pointed to strengths in design training and weaknesses in legal and administrative training and practical experience. The more senior planners felt that the training that they received during communism has little relevance to the current context and they have had to “learn as they go” about the new ways that the planning profession is now conceived.

Like the students, planning practitioners were discouraged with the low level of respect that this profession enjoys in Albanian society, which in their opinion has made urban planning an unpopular major for young people who enter university. Comments included:

“In Albania, urban development pressures have been strong and planning practice has often favored the interests of a few powerful land owners or government officials.”

“Urban planning requires teamwork and cannot be the product of individuals, however well-trained. Lawyers and economists must be included in planning processes.”

“Much planning and decision-making in Albania is still strongly affected by the communist legacy. At the same time, universities are increasingly making efforts to train students in modern planning concepts and tools, thus creating schisms between the various generations of graduates. Planning employees in public sector institutions would benefit from continuing education courses.”

“It is important for practicing planners to be trained in the new ‘sustainable development’ paradigm.”

Conclusions

The new urban context is beset by problems with which the planning profession had no prior experience. Now planning requires a host of economic, legal, social, technical, and political skills. Planners must become the interface between private development and public planning and act primarily as regulators and economists, rather than technicians who produce drawings. “Design” in modern urban planning must consist of the allocation of resources for the development of the infrastructure and design of the road and public transit systems, which play a major in determining the course of private development. Individual projects must be evaluated not just in terms of aesthetics but also based on the revenues they will generate and amenities and how much they will cost for the urban machines to service.

Planning is a relatively new professional education field in Albania. The background of many practicing planners is in architecture or urban design. The key question in this small-scale study was how the Albanian higher education system prepares urban planners for their work and how planners perceive the strengths and weaknesses of their education in the changing post-communist context. The survey responses indicate that planning schools need to provide more education about strategic planning, negotiation, conflict management, legislation drafting and legal enforcement, and environmental protection.

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