Tirana as an Open Lab:
A Pilot for an Integrated Research Tourism Vision Pre-/Post-Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The event we are facing at a global scale, the COVID-19 pandemic, can be considered a real death blow to the real markets, in general, as well as to a local heritage-based tourism market, in particular. The closing of both near and distant "borders," due to the imposed social-spatial limitations—as an early answer to the pandemic—has hugely affected the micro, small, and medium businesses within their local contexts. This article aims to identify how and if an alternative tourism offer might take/give a kind of advantage of the urban features and cultural layers of Tirana by positioning it as safe tourism in the current long wave of post-pandemic. Tirana is proposed as an experimental open lab. The adopted survey methodology was based on both traditional urban analyses as well as on an e-survey aimed to catch the overall common inclination in the city's vocation for an unconventional tourism offer. The paper is mostly focused on the survey as the base material from which to get further information to be used in subsequent co-planning and co-designing phases.

KEYWORDS

Co-Planning, COVID-19 Pandemic, Digital Acceleration, E-Survey, Hybrid Survey, Integrated Relational Tourism, Multi-Layered Cities, Research Tourism, Tirana Open-Lab, Urban Tourism

INTRODUCTION

The stress we have faced on a global scale for almost two years, the COVID-19 pandemic, can be considered a real death blow to many aspects of our old-normal lives. This research stage is focused in highlight those aspects that strained the local real-markets, as well as the ones that affected the local tourism market in the demand/offer increasing metamorphoses in the post-pandemic. The closing of both next and remote physical boundaries, indeed, together with the list of health provisions due to the inflicted set of social-spatial-economic limitations -as the new answers given to the issue (vaccination, green pass, etc.)- have hugely affected -and are hugely affecting- the micro, small and medium businesses' fabric, within their normal local contexts, as well as conventional living habits and behaviours, due to updated dwellings' needs.

This article, which tells about the early results of still-ongoing research -Tirana Next Pilot project (TNP)- as updated in the post-pandemic, in the drafted "Path C: Sustainable Urban Tourism offer

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for an Integrated Relational Tourism next-vision" aims to identify how and if a form of alternative tourism offer might take advantage from the various urban features, and to release benefits to the cultural layers of the city, mainly in the current long-wave of post-pandemic uncertain and mutable scenarios and new wishes.

The acceleration in the digital dimension practices at the daily-scale in working, studying, and living, the boosting in searching of "suitable, cosy locations" benefitting from micro-accommodations local networks within more-free-of-rules places (OECD, 2020), and the rise of new mixed real-virtual direct relations between insider/outsider places' actors, indeed, they seem they are encouraging a safer and opener individual answer fully respecting of social-distancing and self-isolation (new connections), in scattering the grouping into both indoor/outdoor spaces (new denseness), and in claiming new short-radius physical flows network (new proximities).

The conducted e-surveys overall aim, in 2019, was initially started to catch the overall common feeling and awareness by internal and external users on Tirana's possible vocations (Claeys-Kulik & Jørgensen, 2019), as well as on the richness of its cultural/physical multi-layered structure, to be addressed to an unconventional integrated relational tourism offer (Gulotta et al., 2004) driven from an unconventional City's peculiarities and perspicuity. Later on, a subsidiary goal was added in early 2020 in the attempt of understanding both the quality and quantity of an alternative growing demand, so as begotten by the impact of the pandemic event and its consequent reflexes. In the post-pandemic, Albania was one of those regions that became a middle-long period destination for a new flow of moving towards less-regulated and low-cost, but comfortable countries; precisely thanks to that digital speeding up in practices such as e-working, e-relationships, and e-services.

The main question we would like to give an answer belonging to the "Path C" of the said TNP project -as updated in the post-pandemic- is, does this city with all these overlapped layers of physical and socio-cultural facts provides appropriate services and rich enough spatial and social diversity for visitors?

The present paper intends then to tell us a tale, voluntarily leaving out other results and proposals within the overall Pilot, on the conduction and on the early results of that mixed survey, as a means from which to get further evidence and participated visions on the matter. Both are useful materials to highlight the new role of e-planning and e-designing processes in drafting renewed development strategies human-sized, also for many other developing areas, even trying to register what kind of advantages -or disadvantages- may raise for both the local market and the small dimension of urban economics.

THE CURRENT PANDEMIC SCENARIO

In current times many natural events, political issues and outbreaks of diseases have deeply affected the worldwide trends in the traditional tourism market by bringing down to minimize its contribution to national GDP (Abbas et al., 2021). As well as, they are conditioning those emerging alternative tourism forms, more beneficial in local development, and so also impacting the local businesses fabric mainly within urban contexts. Earthquakes, tsunamis, epidemics, and political instabilities have acted as a whip shot in this decreasing process within many countries and places, showing dramatic effects, especially in the weaker ones. This is due to one of the most rooted characteristics of the tourism market that is the instability of both demand and offer, because of its influential link to and from the territory's trust and its internal dynamics.

The current event we are still facing on a global scale since early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic, might be considered a real death blow to this specific real market, often affecting both the big and the micro and small businesses (the less protected ones at the local scale). On the other hand, it is making greater and greater the global mega-companies (Shafi, Liu & Ren, 2020).

The current pandemic clearly stated we are experiencing an epochal challenge reflected in the extraordinary transformation in both physical, digital, and virtual connections, so as in the

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