

## New kids on the Blokk

By Kerin Hope, Financial Times

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At one time a no-go zone for most residents, the area is becoming one of the city's pivot points, says Kerin Hope.

For nearly 500 years - including four centuries of Ottoman rule, a short stint of Italian-sponsored independence and 45 years of Stalinist isolation - the hub of the Albanian capital, Tirana, has been Skenderbeg Square. From there, the city's streets radiate out past new apartment blocks, home to newcomers from the mountainous north; squatter neighbourhoods that sprang up in the early post-Communist years and eventually developed into full-grown townships; villas built along the airport road with remittances from Albanians working abroad; and on into lush farmland.

Over the past 15 years, however, as Tirana's population has tripled to about 1m, the city centre has become increasingly crowded. At rush hour the square overflows with battered Italian buses and muddy Mercedes cars. The elegant 18th-century mosque, austere socialist opera house and an equestrian statue of Skenderbeg, a mediaeval warrior hero who fought the invading Turks, are all but obscured by a haze of diesel fumes.

To escape, much business and social life has moved south to the Blokk, a 1 sq km neighbourhood of tree-lined roads behind Shetitorja Dëshmoret e Kombit Boulevard, home to the former villas of the Communist elite. Previously off-limits to ordinary Albanians, it is fast filling up with high-end apartment blocks, office buildings, shops and cafés.

The Albanian novelist Ismail Kadare helped set the trend by moving into Sky Tower, one of the Blokk's first multi-storey buildings, immediately after it was completed in 2000. Kadare, who won the Man Booker prize in 2005, divides his time between Tirana and Paris and tells visitors he enjoys having a bird's-eye view of how the city is changing. The tower's roof-top restaurant overlooks a villa complex with a red-tiled roof, white stone façade and broad patio that was built for the late dictator Enver Hoxha and his entourage and is now used by the government for entertaining official guests.

Other villas, some of which have become offices for international donors, survive behind walls overhung with climbing roses and jasmine. But, although a handful may be preserved as historical monuments, most will be torn down to make way for new developments.

Demand is led by members of Albania's new professional elite, who can afford prices of €1,200-€1,500 per sq metre, more than twice the average elsewhere in the city centre. Expatriate Albanians are investing in good-quality property that can be rented to employees of international organisations: rents for a two-bedroom apartment in the Blokk are about €900-€1,200 a month in a newish building, twice the price of other downtown neighbourhoods.

And both ethnic Albanians from Kosovo and Greeks who operate small businesses in Tirana are buying apartments that can also serve as local offices. "The Blokk, in my opinion, is the best business address in Tirana," says Stelios Adamopoulos, a Greek businessman who commutes between Athens and Tirana. "I



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bought a small apartment there because I was fed up with working out of an hotel room. It's noisy but I don't really mind, partly because it's turned into a very good investment."

It takes persistence to find a property to buy, as villa owners prefer to negotiate with developers, while new apartments are sold through privately arranged deals with a contractor. Mimosha, an Albanian living in Italy who didn't want to give her family name, is selling a small apartment above a fashionable Tirana dress shop. "I bought my place from the developer and I've had friends or tenants wanting to buy it ever since," she says. She expects to get about €75,000 for the 60 sq metre property.

In spite of rising prosperity and aspirations to join the European Union, Albania still wrestles with a poor image left over from its short-lived collapse into anarchy 10 years ago. And there are questions about property rights, since the right-of-centre government is under pressure from the international community to complete the restitution of land to pre-Communist owners within the next two years. "You can have a situation where the developer had all the right permits for the building but the ownership of the land it stands on is still unresolved," says Marin le Corre, a partner at Balkimo, a Tirana-based real estate agency.



But "on the other hand, there's a growing momentum to settle these kinds of dispute because they're holding back growth," adds Marin le Corre.

Diplomats and other foreign residents say they feel safe in Tirana and developers are improving building standards. Elsewhere around the Blok, traditional walk-up Communist-era apartment blocks are being modernised, with owners investing in new plumbing and heating systems. Units consist of two or three small square rooms with low ceilings and a modest balcony and sellers are asking about €800 per sq metre but are open to bargaining.

Façades on several buildings on the south bank of the Lana river have in recent years been painted in eye-catching colours by local and foreign artists, thanks to an initiative launched in 2000 by Edi Rama, Tirana's mayor and leader of the main opposition socialist party, who was a painter before he became a politician. Tirana's first masterplan dates back to 1917, when the city was under Austrian rule. Italian architects in the 1920s laid out the broad north-south Shetitorja Boulevard, lined with pine trees and interspersed with parks. The Communists' most striking contribution was a pyramid-shaped memorial museum to Hoxha. The current plan was put together by Architecture Studio after Rama oversaw the demolition of hundreds of illegally built cafés and kiosks in a central park and along both sides of the Lana. It calls for the building of 30 tower blocks across the city centre for office, residential and commercial use, which would be "landmark examples of contemporary architecture", Shalsi says.

The Blok is one of the biggest beneficiaries. There is a flourishing café culture thanks to popular establishments that import brand-name coffee and the latest Italian espresso machines. "People are serious here about coffee. You can get espresso in Tirana that's as good as or better than Italian and the Turkish coffee is excellent," says Lauren Bohatka, from Ohio, who works for the United Nations Development



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Programme and lives 10 minutes' walk from the Blokk. The neighbourhood also has Tirana's first organic shop, selling honey, herbal teas, olive oil and wine.

There are still downsides to living in the Blokk, of course. There are few parking spaces and it gets noisy at weekends. Like the rest of Tirana, the area is affected by Albania's chronic electricity shortage and this autumn power cuts averaged five hours per day, with frequent "brown-outs" resulting in dimmed lights. But residents have learned to cope. "You keep a torch [flashlight] on your key ring and get used to candle-lit evenings," says Genc Boga a lawyer who lives in a spacious top-floor Blokk apartment. "Having a big generator in the basement of your building is necessary as you don't really have an alternative." adds Genc Boga



According to government officials, it will take another two or three years to sort out these problems. But more funds for infrastructure are becoming available under a first pre-accession agreement with the EU and private developers are contributing to improvements..

"Tirana is developing in a very interesting way," says Gregory Ibanaz of LaGuarda, a Texas architect designing two projects in the city. "There's a rush into modernity, an element of making up for lost time, but I think people here are willing to embrace different ideas and they're also savvy about new trends."

Albert Haxhi, an Albanian consultant, says he moved into the Blokk "to enjoy a more European lifestyle". But he believes that other areas around the centre will soon start to compete. "The next fashionable place might be close to the new shopping and commercial area that's developing just north of Skenderbeg S quare. Young people are going to move to wherever exciting new buildings go up."

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