

Great Constructions in Albania during the Period '70-'80

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Abstract

The Albanian architecture during the XXth century reflects worthily the aspirations of the country's foreign or native leaders who were in power until the fall of the Berlin Wall. Starting from Zogu, Mussolini, and finishing with Enver Hoxha, they all demanded for the architecture to be personalized according to the state's ideology, giving a demarking spirit to the main square of the capital, like they wanted to do to all the country. The sober rationalism of the '40s created by Bozio, was attempted without success to be substituted by the "Red Doric" of the '50s, and then coming back to the rational, but functional language of the '60s, a very contemporary voluminous one. Its gazing towards the West gave a little freedom to the ideological solidification that would legitimate the decades that would follow. The '70s-'80s period would be the confirmation of the native architectonic language, with buildings that aggravated the state's finances as the image of the dictator was aggravating everything else until his last years of life. As a typical mirroring of a disintegrating or delirious regime, it followed its destiny until the last hours, as a typical confirmation of the will imposed from the power-holders, like happens in any dictatorship.

Keywords: Albania, architecture, ideology, totalitarianism, socialism.

1. Totalitarian Features in the Albanian Architecture after WWII (Introduction)

According to Crowley and Reid, by changing the material circumstances, the architecture under a totalitarian state aims to change the thoughts and behaviors of the individual. This way, the architectonic format of the cities and their urban space planning, had to be accompanied with the transformation of the social activities of the citizens, while the organization of the cities is the most important factor for the psychic organization of the human masses (Crowley, Reid, 2002: 7). This is relevant for the Italian architecture we see at the Albanian capital during the '40s, and also for the after-war architecture developed under the imposed will of the communists, the victorious political force after WWII.

The architecture of the '50s, being dogmatic and paradoxical in its request: "to be socialist in its content and national in its form", was soon forgotten because of the breaking of the "brotherly" Albanian-Soviet relationships. As Enver Faja claims, by going out of the Eastern Block, the Albanian architects availed themselves to depart forever from this foreign form, intangible and incomprehensible as it was. It was replaced from a new and modern urban architectural language, which drew its inspiration from the western developments that happened between the two World Wars. Inspired from solid personalities of the field like Gropius, Le Corbusier and Van De Rohe, they aimed at a style that created a new world, a new architecture, an architecture which drew its inspiration from the sun, the light, fresh air and greenness ... and (since it was a time of economical shortage), why not an economical architecture, rational, simple and functional (Faja, 2008: 14).

Being rational and functional, the geometry of the architecture during the '60s, is totally detached from the "Red Doric" of the '50s, having a more voluminous and more contemporary language. Its gazing towards the West gave a little freedom to the ideological solidification that would legitimate the decades that would follow. Its characteristic sign are the hundreds and hundreds of cine-clubs, cultural houses and palaces, which would quickly double their number during the '70s (Gjikola, 2012: 15). Being placed exclusively in the centers of the strategic urban and rural points, they reflected the state's decisiveness to convey the ideology at every corner of the country. They had to be the focal point of the socialist reality experience, where the culture and the art would materialize the state's ideological vision for the citizens.

2. Its Developments during the '70s and the '80s

The new modern spirit of the architecture, which had started to be applied during the mid '60s, was being sanctioned

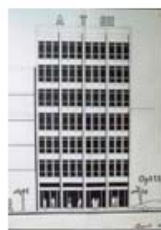
gradually along all the next decade. The typical Soviet architecture now belonged to the past. The native school continually provided prepared architects, while the state would finance more and more ambitious projects. After the building of the Great Palace of the Culture and the tens of institutional or residence buildings, the modern architecture was approved as the new official language of the state's esthetic will. The free circulation of the Romanian, Czech or Bulgarian magazines, or the articles where was supported and displayed this architectonic language, would propagate in the reality and in the press a somehow calm climate. Serving to the function of the new urban reorganization of the cities, the new architecture was replacing slowly the spaces that were traditionally invaded from the oriental past. The Albanian state was definitively transforming the Albanian cities, as an attempt to perform a new massive and psychological reorganization. Its image had to be a new, different and modern one, an image that would coexist with its paradox: "to be socialist in its content and national in its form".

For about two decades ('55-'75) the Albanian architects lived somehow calm days. Their road was similar with the road of other artists, at times with clashes and absurd requests and at times with consoling sympathy. But this didn't last for a long time. After the IVth Plenum (1973), without doubt a part of the national fury towards the intellectuals was reserved also for the group of the architects. To the previous labels of the modern architecture were added the phrases "wrong", "harmful" "not-national", "tendency for luxury and giant-mania" and then to close the epithets with the most 'loved' phrase for the esthetes: "an expression of the formalist influence".

Shinasi Dragoti writing at the press of the time would emphasize that at these projects were visible the improper influences of the modernist architecture. The cine-theater in Fier, which was rightfully criticized for its unattractive shape, gave the impression of a being similar to a church, like the ones that were built in capitalist countries and were advertised from the bourgeois-revisionist propaganda. But there were also other foreign tendencies, which appeared in some buildings where there were walls without any window. According to him, these were pseudo-esthetic conceptions, which had their source at the harmful influence of the modernist architecture (Dragoti, 1974: 81). Also, Alfred Uçi, the selected esthete of the regime, some years later would emphasize that from the discussions that were made, it was admitted unanimously from our healthy artistic opinion that the shapes of the Cine-theatre in Fier, the Korça's Library, the ATSH building, were an expression of the influence of the formalist influence... they were created contrary to the healthy tastes of our socialist society (Uçi, 1977: 45). The "formalist" terminology was mentioned often in order to imply the inclination of certain visual artists during their persecution, and was naturally used as an official term for the condemnation of the "underlined" architects.



Korça's Library, P. Kolevica



ATSH Building, M. Velo



Building near the Mapo, M. Velo

The blow came during the summer of 1975. The sacrificed architects were the same ones, Petraq Kolevica and Maks Velo. The first one for the Korça's Library building and the second one for the building near to the Mapo¹ and for the ATSH building. Being both of them labeled as problematic elements since a long time, apart from the continual movements to several working places, the cancelling of projects and the educating work near the working class, in a premonition climate, they would "welcome" also this next move. To their names were attached the names of M. Bego for the Institute of Arts building, S. Mosko for the Fier's Cine-theater and K. Çomi for the House of Culture in Saranda. One part were simply criticized, Kolevica and Bego "were circulated" temporarily, while Velo, paid with ten years of prison his

¹ Known also as the Kadare building, Kadare himself recalls: "...maybe it was the only residence building in Albania that was projected with a fireplace at each of its apartments. (Both of these modifications, the space and the fireplace in the apartments would become a problem later on and the matter would be brought even to the prime-minister. The building would be target of accusations, especially after Maks Velo's sentence. It would be called modernist, cubist, and several times would be proposed its demolition)". Ismail Kadare, preface of the book *Kohë antishenjë*, by Maks Velo, (Tiranë: Zenit Editions, 2005), p. 71.

stubborn modernism, which he had “spread” also in painting.²

After the next reprisal, the rearrangement of priorities and hierarchies, the work of the architects would continue in the materialization of the projects for the building of socialism. Under the new image of the expected isolation, in the '70s, the state started to invest by building a chain of touristic hotels in the centers of the big cities. As a clear attempt to convey the image of the triumph and revulse the attention from the dramatic political developments, the raising of these structures in the centers of the cities was demanded to be imposing and glorifying. Being overstretched vertically, they had to dominate the urban centers, as the new symbols of the communist era. Certainly, the most vertical and tall one had to be the hotel in the capital. At a predefined multistory height, “Hotel Tirana” had to visibly overpass everything that was built in the past. Apart from this, the architectonic values had to be at the proper level, because they were confronted in a major square where the historical and architectonic values were stratified. Thus, it was composed the working group with the architects V. Pistoli, P. Kolevica, K. Çomi, M. Pepa, and the new architects, K. Kolaneci and N. Theodhosi. After the usual discussions, “the fifteen storeys building”, at its completion was a sober structure, vertical and “interrupted” from the lineaments of the windows. It didn't have refractions in its volume, but was raised as a unique structure, superposed on a wider basis, destined for the hall, offices, meeting rooms and restaurants. Its façade, a rhythmical mix of marble and glass soon was made an object of pride for the whole political class of the country, being proposed as a new center and a meeting point. For this reason, along with the luxury of the time in the interior decoration, the building was equipped also with underground emergency exits.



Hotel Tirana, reconstructed Tourism Hotel, Elbasan, (V. Pistoli) Tourism Hotel, Shkodër (A. Lufi)

The other tourism hotels in the country, although were built with good capacities, seldom were used for tourists. Clapsed in the morse of isolation, they were visited more from the native travelers than from the few tourists that passed the Albanian border. Most of them, because of the economical downfall, could not be optimally utilized in their full capabilities. Also voluminously and architectonically, the major part of them are not distinguished for authentic values, being proposed unanimously with a significant verticality, aiming to dominate the squares, following the example of the “fifteen storeys building” in the capital. Anyway, together with the palaces of culture, they would absorb the maximal engagement of the architects and urbanists, as the new stylistic language of the urban centers. In fact, Hoxha's state, until the end of the '80s would succeed in totally transforming most of the Albanian cities. The huge building blocks, at times elegant and at times with minimal costs (prefabricated structures), were the definition and the habitat of the new Albanian Man. The residence buildings always came into existence along with health centers, schools, playgrounds, sporting fields and parks.



Historical Muzeum “Gj. K. Skënderbeu”, Kruja National Historical Museum, Tirana

²Maks Velo was sentenced to 10 years of imprisonment in 1978. He was released after 7 years and a half because of the general amnesty granted following the dictator's death.



National Gallery of Fine Arts, Tirana



The Palace of the Congresses, Tirana

But beyond the aspect of the urban organization, the state was attentive also to the near and far past. As a consequence, was undertaken the edification of some major structures (with a lot of economical efforts), dignified to reflect the glorious history of the Albanian people. The top of this request for identity would be without doubt the National Historical Museum, which would be raised alongside the new hotel, giving to the Scanderbeg square a new conception and a final separation from the past. After building the Great Palace of the Culture and Hotel Tirana, the Albanian state edified the third personal building in the main square of the country, which this time was dedicated to the history. According to Faja, the state (regarding the space concept) would treat the centers of the cities as urban spaces in the function of the patriotic and revolutionary education of the working masses (Faja, 2008: 122). In order to edify this master-plan, the state was ready to sacrifice even the cultural heritage, as was the case of Tirana's Old City Hall, constructed by Italian architects, which was demolished to be replaced by the National Historical Museum.

About the museum's project, the guidelines were given directly from Enver Hoxha. In his personal logic, he saw the history divided in three parts: before, during and after the war, the last one being known as the building of socialism and the new museum had to reflect exactly this reflection. So that nothing was lost from this vision, "the cradle" that would hold the history, was materialized from an integral conceptual platform which would summarize the main points that the group of architects had to have in regard.

The final group of designers was composed from Enver Faja, Petraq Kolevica, Nina Shehu, under the direction of Sokrat Mosko. According to Faja, the museum is distinguished as a compact volume upon a square plan composed in a central symmetrical way against an atrium court (Faja, 2008: 122). A different interpretation is offered to us from Gëzim Qëndro, for whom the whole volume resembles to a massive bunker of concrete and marble, an impression which is reinforced from the windows that look like tall embrasures. This impression is in full harmony with the image that the power wanted to convey about "the unconquerable castle on the Adriatic coast" (Demo, 2008:15). It seems clear that the relationship between the building's interior and the space outside aims to emphasize its hermetic side, which was also a noted characteristic of Albania during that time.³ Qëndro brings further his argumentation when he adds that the upper part of the building, being brighter in colors and wider in size, stands upon a wall of dark marble. This detachment wants to visibly communicate the idea that the history of the communist Albania stands upon an historical tradition which, although is pervaded with struggles and skirmishes, cannot be compared with the victories and achievements that the Albanian people won after the triumph of communism. If we see it carefully, the entrance at the main gate of the museum seems to have been placed exactly where the second floor begins (the one of the socialist period) and stands upon the first one by persuasively conveying the idea of a favorable start of the history for the Albanians (Demo, 2008:15). Whether this is true or not, the National Historical Museum conveys a tendentious hermetic and monumentality sensation, which unfortunately is in harmony with the esthetic taste and the general climate in country. Apart from the fact that this was a monumental enterprise, both for the designers and the state's finances, it constituted in its essence his personal meta-confession on the history, whose importance is easily understood from the dimensions it has and the place where it is located in the main square of the capital.

One year after the inauguration of the National Historical Museum, in 1982 was inaugurated the national Museum "Gj. K. Skënderbeu" in Kruja. This museum/memorial was smaller in its dimensions and displayed a newer and different

³ Qëndro adds that this was "a typical mindset for the totalitarian ideologies like communism; in this mindset, the history is connected with a memory and a predefined project, written at the DNA of the human society: the Albanian communists were the chosen ones from the history to lead the Albanians in the road towards the communist paradise, where they would go without doubt after the consecutive changes of the social systems". Excerpt from Elsa Demo, "Zelli për spastrime të kujtesës: Gëzim Qendro e quan gabim të pafalshëm heqjen e mozaikut." *Shekulli newspaper*, 9 january (2008): p. 15.

challenge in comparison with the one built at the capital, because it was chosen to be placed inside the city's castle. Being similar in spirit with its location, the museum aspired to follow the general appearance of the castle, while the biggest challenge remained its division in pavilions and the character that the museum would have in function of the hero's figure. About this, the head of the group of historians, Kristo Frashëri, recalls that in the discussed platform was persistent the idea that the main feature of Scanderbeg which had to dominate during the conception of the museum was the one of the "Freedom Fighter", the great strategist that led the Liberating War always to victory (Drishti, 2012: 25). It was more than understandable that the building inside the castle would aim to mythicize this period and also to make an analogy with the modern times. Like the Albania of that time, the modern Albania had to be an invincible castle of freedom, whose warranty was now proposed to be the leadership in power and the people that were transformed into soldiers. According to Frashëri, the Museum of Kruja, was induced from Odhise Paskali, who took an interest upon it and the project was fulfilled from Hoxha's daughter, Pranvera, in cooperation with the architect Piro Vaso. According to Drishti, the whole building has the monumental character of the Museum's architecture and a pyramidal conception with volumes that tend to decrease towards the upper part (Drishti, 2012: 19). Beyond the volumetric treatment, the museum stands out for the rich interior and the affluent expenses, as a materialization of the Leader's will.

The investments in the years to come would be oriented in building an edifice where would be held the party's congresses or the festivals, as was the case of the Palace of the Congresses, built during the period '82-'86. It was built to be the monumental venue of these events and the building, designed from Klement Kolaneci attempted to ethically intertwine the requests of the time: the monumentality and the national spirit. Having a big assembly room with 2,100 seats and its circular cover with a diameter of 54 meters, it fulfilled the aforementioned requests. Also, the other inputs would give to the structure the necessary elasticity to be adapted to different events.

Apart from the museum and celebrative buildings, the Picture's Gallery that was opened in 1952, was a problematic building for that time. Only a few years after its opening, it was necessary a proper gallery for the figurative arts because of the increase of the number of the works of art and the absence of the exposing halls. The inauguration of the National Gallery of Fine Arts was held only in 1974. It was designed from Enver Faja and was built based on a full program for an authentic art gallery, to exhibit, restore and study the works, and also for organizing national and international conferences, lectures and private meetings with artists (Faja, 2008: 63). At first, there were inaugurated only the exhibition halls, because the need for them was huge. According to Faja, later on, in 1979 there was built the temporary exhibition building; for this contributed also the architect M. Mitrojorgji.

After the dictator's death and the deepening of the economic crisis, the big constructions were sensibly reduced. The only building worthy for the state's attention was the "Enver Hoxha" muzeum, which in itself was summed up as a climax of the myth of the late dictator. Just like a mausoleum, it demanded a special interpretation – an esthetic one in function of the summarizing of his work as a warrior/leader and a strategist of building the socialism. The meaning of this structure for the statesmen that survived to him did not only concern the heritage of his cult, but also the image that was projected upon his successors, as a warranty on the chosen path (the continuity road).

Being projected in the family, by the couple of architects, Hoxha's daughter, Pranvera and Klement Kolaneci, her husband, the building is clearly different from any other building of the after-war period (Grosi, 2008: 19). It is proposed as a new geometric definition of the eagle, but being seen as such only from above, while from the viewpoint of the passer-by is evidently similar to an Egyptian pyramid which has opened its "wings".



"Enver Hoxha" Historical Museum, Tirana

Known in everyday talk as "the pyramid" it was placed wayside of the "Martyrs of the Nation" boulevard, at one of most important points of the capital. About the term that was used, the architect Kolaneci emphasizes that: "We, as designers, didn't think that were building a pyramid. The building was called 'The Pyramid' from most of the people and so the thought of the majority has to be taken into consideration, but in fact the building seems as such only if you are standing

at a lower level than its ground. If you see the pyramid from the frontal viewpoint, it resembles with the wings of an eagle, so, it has nothing to do with the name given to it" (Delisula, 2010: 13).

Being projected as the wings of an eagle, the symbol of the nation itself, it seems that the structure is raised on the paradox of being enjoyed only from above, as this privilege would be reserved only to those that look at it from the sky. Anyway, its climactic shape and the rhythmical fractures it has, propose it as an original and dynamical building, as an attempt for a qualitative departure from many contemporary structures. Even more special it is introduced with the functional solution of the internal volumes. About this, the architect Maks Velo says that this special object has a harmonious consistency between the outer pyramidal form and the inner space, which is the most voluminous among the cultural objects. This clean space, without columns or other holding structures is impressing. As it is harmonious, it is also functional. The spiral movement at the side stairs and the balconies made possible that the lower and the intermediate spaces had infinite attractive viewpoints. The light coming from above is a factor of a soft glow... And ultimately, I have emphasized the extraordinary acoustics it had. Surprisingly (Boriçi: 2012).⁴

3. Conclusions

Adolf Hitler, during the 1935 congress, said: "... even if the last witnesses of this unfortunate nation would be silent forever, the stones would start to speak". He was expressing, according to his optics, the view that each civilization is reflected in the buildings it succeeds to construct. His colleagues, similar to him in the dictate format, and not indispensably in their ideology, would think likewise: that the architecture of their regimes should change radically from the preceding ones. These architectures needed to reflect the ideology, (which, at times was racist/dominative and at times, progressive/glorifying), but in the total vision, it needed to reflect the state's organizational rule.

As defined by the Furher, this was an "ideology set on stone", destined for Eternity. For every dictator, it was destined to convey the greatness of the time during which they lived.

During the middle of the XXth century, Tirana was transformed into a construction site, where are intertwined the multilingual architectonic discussions of the Italian, Albanian and Soviet architects. Hoxha's regime aimed to find its stamp in this arena of architectonic languages, because every totalitarian regime which demands to be respected has to leave his imposing architecture, as a reflection of the state's philosophy and ideological platform.

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