



Albania – Decades of Architecture in Political Context

10 October to 22 November 2019

- Press tour:** Wednesday, 9 October 2019, 10am
- Speakers:** Adolph **Stiller**, Sotir **Dhamo**, Besnik **Aliaj**, Saimir **Kristo**
- Official opening:** Wednesday, 9 October 2019, 6.30pm (invitation only)
- Curator:** Adolph Stiller
In collaboration with the academic working group at Polis University in Tirana.
- Venue:** Ringturm Exhibition Centre
Schottenring 30, 1010 Vienna
- Opening hours:** Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm, free admission
(closed on public holidays)
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In autumn 2019 the Architektur im Ringturm series raises the curtain on Europe's "terra incognita": Albania. Architecture is a relatively new discipline in the long-unknown land of the Shqiptars. Since the fall of the communist regime, the development of architecture in the country has revolved around transition in all its various manifestations. The upcoming exhibition brings together a remarkable selection of rare architectural artefacts from the past century from across Albania.

Until the early 1990s, Albania was long seen as Europe's best-kept secret, with outsiders all but barred from entering. Today, tourist literature is basically the only source of insights into the country. Architektur im Ringturm is bridging this gap by devoting an exhibition and accompanying catalogue to the diverse architecture of Europe's southernmost country on the shores of the Adriatic.

From an architectural viewpoint, the period since Albania gained independence at the start of the 20th century can be broken down into four phases: the era **from the first world war to 1939, Albania's occupation by Italian troops** until 1943, the **years of communist dictatorship until 1990**, and finally **1990 to the present day**. Although political context is always crucial in the emergence of architectural styles, it has played a particularly important role in Albania, resulting in a development unlike that of any other country.

Phase 1: the first world war to 1939

For not entirely altruistic reasons, the Habsburgs had a decisive hand in Albania's independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1913. The entire apparatus of the state (including administrative, cultural and educational infrastructure), and all of the related buildings, had to be created from scratch. Alongside challenging economic conditions, the political situation was the main obstacle to significant progress, especially in terms of construction. What's more, Albania had never been a homogeneous entity at any time in its history – political, economic and social life were shaped by clans, extended families and major landowners. The north and south of the country were separated by more than their very different dialects, the coastal region had always had its own religion, and religious plurality was ubiquitous.

So it is little surprise that architectural advances remained modest until the start of the 1940s. Traditional, mostly two-storey houses based on the Ottoman style were par for the course, while more substantial structures built without qualified architects were rare exceptions.

Phase 2: Italy occupies Albania

Troops from Italy's fascist regime invaded Albania six months before the start of World War Two. The occupation lasted until 1943, against the backdrop of the second world war, and during that time administration, planning and architecture came wholly under Italian influence. The official formal language was known as stile littorio: a simplified classical style, it was characterised by solid stone, marble and travertine cladding, the repetition of basic elements, the use of low relief on facades and interiors, and the design of squares featuring statues. This brief, but all the more intensive phase of development had a significant impact on every aspect of construction – from urban planning for all larger towns and cities to architectural designs and their execution. The period ended with Italy's surrender. However, the design concepts implemented during this time were to have a long-lasting effect.

Phase 3: the decades of communist dictatorship

Planning and construction work only gradually restarted a decade after the end of World War Two, but under a new, totalitarian regime and under completely different premises. Before Albanian Communist Party chairman Enver Hoxha aligned the country closely with Stalin's Soviet Union and rose to become Albania's dictator, in 1948 the country entered into a pact with communist Yugoslavia – there were even plans to make Albania the seventh Yugoslav republic. When it came to architecture, the opening decade of dictatorship saw the adoption of Soviet models. Young architects studied in Moscow, while experts came from the Soviet Union and entire factory complexes were built. Loans helped to finance extensive housing construction, as well as party-affiliated cultural centres in towns and cities of all sizes.

General regulation plan for Tirana

After a period in which Italian architects had left a strong impression, a group of dedicated Albanian experts drew up the first general regulation plan for Tirana in 1957-58. It bore all the hallmarks of the Eastern bloc mentality, especially that of the USSR. This influence was magnified by the young student generation, who had completed degrees in the Soviet Union and other communist bloc countries. The Albanian architect responsible for the project, Misto Mele, had studied architecture and urban planning in the Soviet Union, after which he took part in numerous urban development surveys in Albania. He also headed the state planning institute. The regulation plan adhered to a clear concept of creating (or expanding) industrial and economic zones in suburbs directly adjoining urban centres, with the aim of keeping down the distance to residential areas and, in turn, transport costs. The west of the country was home to the main manufacturing and industrial zones.

Kombinati i Tekstileve Stalin (Kombinat Stalin Textiles Factory)

The key industrial area was the Kombinat Stalin Textiles Factory, which was built with Soviet assistance. It was situated on a 25-hectare site in Yzberisht-Tal, five kilometres from the centre of Tirana. When production began in 1951, the factory was Albania's largest industrial enterprise. It employed 2,200 people at the start of 1953, and there were plans to increase the workforce to 4,500 by the beginning of 1955. Although the Kombinat was not far from the city centre, it was almost designed like a satellite town: it had its own residential district, service providers and power plant, and good connections to the railway link with the Kashar industrial zone. The detailed blueprint for the Kombinat's residential area was reworked on the basis of the original Russian design, but the plan head, dated March 1955, listed Skënder Kristo Luarasi as the creator.

Meanwhile Enver Hoxha remained wedded to his convictions – he had become fascinated with Stalin following a visit to Moscow. Even after Stalin's death, and in spite of the revelation of his scheming and plotting, Hoxha followed Stalinist principles to the letter. Until the very end, he saw himself as the world's only true Stalinist-Leninist. However, Moscow was not keen on his brand of national communism, and even sneered at it. Relations broke down following the introduction of Khrushchev's reforms.

After this split, the Albanian dictator looked to garner support by aligning with the People's Republic of China, not least out of economic necessity, but this came to an abrupt end in 1977. The Middle Kingdom's influence in subsequent years was modest, and Albania gradually stagnated. Nigh-on desperate steps were taken to improve the situation using the most basic means and technologies. Brigades of workers – including women and children, and living in tents next to building sites – created rudimentary mass housing developments, using standardised ground plans as opposed to unique architectural designs. Political indoctrination was ceaseless: a few rare private recordings (which were forbidden and also expensive) show slogans painted on house walls in huge lettering and blared out of loudspeakers, cars bearing party propaganda, and visits by high-level party functionaries to building sites, which served as effective photo opportunities. On top of this, out of an overblown fear of attack, bunkers were built across the country.

Bunkers across Albania

The bunkers served as dugouts for army soldiers, and today they symbolise the paranoia behind Albania's communist system. The 170,000 or so documented bunkers differ in terms of structural features, which reflect their geographic location. They were built throughout the country – in the countryside and in urban areas – under the rule of the totalitarian regime, to defend against a future invasion. Many were single gun emplacements, while others comprised groups of three or more bunkers in hills or mountains, joined by tunnels. They served a variety of military purposes. Bunkers can be found on almost all residential estates and in housing blocks in every town and city in Albania. In case of attack, they would have provided underground shelter for the civilian population. The construction of defences against a potential aggressor that never emerged strengthened the impression of the country as a prison state. These monuments in the countryside and in cities embodied physical and mental barriers, and still serve as a reminder of Albania's past.

Hoxha's reforms culminated with a ban on religion and proclamation of the "first atheist state" in 1967. Hoxha tried to turn the fragmented country into a united entity by smearing its history. And urban construction was a particularly effective tool for obliterating the past – the demolition of entire sections of old towns wiped away historical remnants. Tirana's typical oriental charm was lost, and Shkodra suffered much the same fate: in 1983, most of the traditional Ottoman-style houses with their arched gateways and gardens were torn down, while some Italian villas disappeared under new building fabric.

Phase 4: 1990-2019

Hoxha died in 1985, and was succeeded by Alia Ramiz, his right-hand man in his later years. After 45 years of totalitarian rule in Albania, it was clear that the existing architecture and urban designs had not created a better living environment, but instead represented a spatial manifestation of suppression, which had its roots in the lack of a sense of identity and the spiritual void that hallmarked all aspects of life in the country. For this reason, people took a strict line with urban spaces, and hardly displayed any affinity with them after the regime's collapse. A furious wave of informal urbanisation came crashing over the country's most important metropolitan areas.

Albania became a parliamentary republic after the communists' downfall in 1990. The first free elections took place a year later, but the subsequent transformation process was sluggish. In 1997, state structures imploded in the face of what came to be known as the pyramid crisis. Since then, reforms have been implemented that are aimed at readying Albania for membership of the European Union; the country has been classified as an official candidate for EU accession since 2014.

At present, architectural developments are being influenced by the process of transition, and by an environment in which creating quality architecture is a tall order, due to the complex relationship between privatisation, restitution and international investment. Enthusiastic regional and urban planning is now aimed at creating control mechanisms and frameworks which will provide a solid, long-lasting basis for high-quality architecture.

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