

The morphosis of the Albanian socialist cityscape. A reaction to buildings with high-energy consumption

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Abstract

For more than 45 years, Albania went through the toughest experience of communism among the Eastern Bloc countries. Ideology strongly influenced the urban character of cities, which underwent an intensive development during this period. Although the city had to represent the power of the system, architecture, considering the poor economy, offered merely the basics. In the housing sector, industrialization and standardization resulted in the production of modest shelters with very low or no concerns about building quality, energy consumption and comfort.

After the fall of the regime, the buildings and the city failed to meet the increasing demand for energy, comfort and better life standards. Under these circumstances, people took control of architecture and started to adapt their buildings by leaving remarkable traces that definitely altered the Albanian socialist cityscape. The article discusses the options for regaining the image of the city while pointing out the need for resilient and efficient models in architectural design and city planning.

Keywords

Albania, socialist city, energy, cityscape.

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The Albanian socialist cityscape

The end of World War II found Albania with a population slightly over the million, while by the fall of Berlin wall, almost 46 years later, the number had raised to over three million. During the same period, Albania had to build and enlarge its cities, an urbanization activity which structured and defined the urban landscape. Parallel to that, an entire social and political system was built based on the principles of Marxism-Leninism and Stalinism, a system which resulted to be the most radical and absurd experiment of communism in Europe.

Spiro Kristo, in his painting "The children" in 1966 (fig. 1), offers a detailed illustration of the relationship between the social and urban system, which grow parallel to each other united by the socialist ideology. The artist illustrates the city under construction in parallel to healthy growing and happy children and to a young planted tree. While the adults on the background carry on with the construction works, the children play with toy guns and toy trucks, ready to fight with no fear and protect their country, much the same as the partisans did, and willing to build their future proudly, just like their parents do.

The Albanian socialist city, growing parallel to the new social and political system, was modeled to best represent the system and to best serve it. The

city had to belong to the masses but at the same time, it had to be a medium to control the physical and social environment. In doing so, the city could not be spontaneous, but well designed, ordered and predictable.

Enver Hoxha, the communist leader and dictator of Albania, in his talk on the urbanization of the capital, Tirana, in 1948 states:

Everything that will be constructed should be adapted to our popular regime. Health and comfort should be considered: the houses for workers and administration should be beautiful, with gardens and trees; they should not occupy a large amount of space but should not lack anything for their inhabitants. The buildings should lay in horizontal and not much in height; the architects should consider the popular style. [...] Attention should be paid that the main state buildings be located in the center of the city, in appropriate places that would fulfill the needs and would decorate the capital. The streets of the capital should be larger, and we should put all the efforts in creating parks and green spaces. [...] The capital should entirely resemble a garden, it should be planted with woods that cast shadow and with trees full of fruits. [...] Houses of culture should be everywhere; our people need and are thirsty for education and such role should be assigned to these houses. (Hoxha, 1970)

Such description of the capital will gradually become reality in the following years not only for the



capital itself, but also for all the Albanian cities. The people who elaborated and tested the model of the Albanian socialist city were professionals forced to operate isolated from the rest of the world. They produced a standardized model, which had to be adapted to different layouts. Like the standardized individual, shaped in the socialist society, that had to have a controlled behavior, thoughts and look, the socialist city had to obey to preset rules and principles.

The socialist city was considered as an artistic entity (Aman, 1992) and had a hierarchic organization. Referring to the Albanian academic literature of the late '80s, urbanism is seen as a social phenomenon, which represents the socialist life led by the Marxist-Leninist ideology. The socialist city is planned and has a clear functional zoning, distinguishing the housing areas, industrial areas, and green areas. The housing is organized in blocks or complexes, which include educational buildings, so-

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Fig. 1 – *The children*, Spiro Kristo, 1966, exhibited in the National Gallery of Arts, Tirana.

cial and cultural buildings, services and public and/or green spaces. The cities, considering their pet-it size, are mostly organized around a single center, which is hosting the most important public buildings and spaces. As a rule, such components of the central area should be the headquarters of the Party of Labor, the executive committee (Municipality), the palace of culture and theater and cinema, the squares for manifestations and meetings, the shopping area, the hotel, monuments, parks and fountains (Kote, *et al.*, 1988).

To better understand the standardized city model, it must be considered that it was the State to run all the planning and design institutes/offices, construction companies and the whole real estate sector. At the same time, there was neither private economy nor private property on the land. Building on *tabula rasa* with no other obstructions except the economical ones, produced an urban landscape that represents at its best the dichotomy between the ideological will and the poor economic conditions. The above-mentioned context led to planning, designing and building very similar cities, with a standardized appearance, with streets contoured by four to six floors high buildings, with large squares and parks, with the palace of culture playing the urban role of the religious building¹. This model spread in almost every city, by offering a very

predictable cityscape and experience (fig. 2). Luckily, most of the major cities had a historical center, or strong geographical features that shaped their character and prevailed on the socialist therapy.

The socialist city was in fact a huge public space, a city designed for the collective character of the society, a city belonging to the masses. A model full of people in its streets and with almost no cars, except the very necessary ones for public services and transport. A city, which was simple and suggestive at the same time. A model relying on the sense of community, a well-controlled community that had to watch over the individual's behavior. A very specific landscape for a new ideology, capable to bring a different model of lifestyle supporting clear rules but replicating the same pattern with minimal possibilities of site-specific adaptation. The priority was given to the rules of housing and to 'equal for all' choices, driven by ideology, 'accepted' by the people and creating an urban environment based on simple and clear elements. The new townscape is simply the result of the people, thus it is not produced or participated by their choices, it was imposed as a new mandatory standard of living, the architectural image as a sort of emitter for the energy of the ruling ideals. So wrong, being based on minimal and economic (often cheap) choices, the result is not elastic to changes or adaptations, the lack of a knowl-

Fig. 2 – Areal view of the capital Tirana
(Jasa & Zajmi, 1990).

edge about energy consumptions and 'sustainability' at the time of their construction made of most of these buildings quite 'energetic' districts. What previously was thought for spreading around seemed to change into something dragging, consuming and proposing non-comfortable standards.

Socialist housing

The political route followed by Enver Hoxha, gradually isolated Albania from the whole world. The country was highly dependent on the economic help offered firstly by the Soviet Union and later by China. In the end of the '70s, after having interrupted the relations with both countries, Albania finds itself isolated from the rest of the world and has to face everything on its own forces. Besides the fact that economy had never reached a level comparable to other Eastern Bloc countries, the '80s would bring gradually the country to total collapse. In such a context, while speaking about housing, the main objective was to shelter the population that was living in critical conditions in overpopulated houses. Under these circumstances, the only solution for a quick and less expensive construction was found in the typization and industrialization of the construction process. Everything was firstly inspired by the speech of Nikita Khrushchev regarding the industrialization of building construction in 1954:

Brick, the main building material, has always been, and continues to be, used in cases where construction is mainly carried out by hand. In such cases great importance attaches to the weight of the material used in the walls, the weight of the brick. In our age – given the availability of concrete, electric motors, cranes, and other mechanisms – we have no excuse for continuing to employ the old methods of working. (Khrushchev, 1954)

Such words show a change in the urban scape not only from the point of view of the result, but also of the landscape created by the courtyards, the new city, grow in between machines and with a new, previously unseen, velocity. The energy of the 'new' is manifest since the construction, the energy of the courtyard reaches the people around showing the contemporary way of house production. At the time, Albania being a satellite of the Soviet Union, had to follow the new vision which was a convenient option over the neoclassical building tradition of the past decade. Although six years later Albania was breaking its alliance with the Soviet Union, from this point, the country would go on with the industrialization of the building sector based on its own specialist and latter assisted from China (Islami, *et al.*, 2017). The slogan for the designers and engineers was "to build fast, good, cheap" (Bego, 2009). A massive campaign of housing construction was carried on through the '60s but the build-



ing rhythm was not meeting the demand. The next step to face the housing problem was taken in the mid '70s, when a Chinese technology for producing prefabricated concrete panels for multi-apartment buildings was introduced as a faster alternative for the housing sector (Islami & Thomai, 2015). This gave few improvements to the speed of the process, but the design and construction standards remained low.

The typization of the construction in general and of the housing construction was a natural phenomenon in a society where typization started with the individual and ended up to the town (Dani, *et al.*, 2017). Typization, standardization and prefabrication meant not only order, repetition and monotony in the cityscape but also architectural simplification to benefit from every possible reduction of cost. Attempts to overcome the monotony problem were made by introducing several façade design options but this did not help much. On the other hand, the real problem was the design and construction qual-

ity. Apartments were designed for a primitive living standard compared to Western Europe's one, a standard that was reflecting the development stage of the society.

The main source of energy for cooking and heating the water was kerosene, which could be used only in bathrooms or balconies to avoid the sharp smell. The presence of washing machines was not frequent while refrigerators were of minimal dimensions considering that the products to store in were not always present². A single plug and a lamp for each room were foreseen in the standard electrical plan layout. This was fair enough considering the lack of electrical appliances. In most cities water supply was available only few hours a day, while having a daily shower was considered a luxury. The thermal comfort standards were almost neglected. Wood stoves were used for heating only one room during the winter, while the buildings lacked thermal insulation and the single glazed windows could not achieve a good airtightness. Cooling dur-



ing summer was planned only through natural ventilation, which results barely effective in most of the cities. In addition to this, the scarcity of construction works often was creating additional problems such as water and air infiltration, condensation, thermal bridges, etc.

While the public building architecture had some qualitative achievements, in the housing construction they were mainly quantitative. Behind the simple, regular and tidy cityscape made of typical buildings and prefabricated ones, a silent and poor reality was hidden; a hidden reality that everyone knew but no one dared to complain about.

The socialist city looks primordial, as an obvious externality of a poor economy and technologic development. The missing attention towards basic is-

ssues such as energy consumption and dweller's comfort will immediately be reflected in the city's lack of ability to adapt to new conditions. The fall of communism will test its resilience.

The post-socialist morphosis of the cityscape

After the democratic revolution of the early '90s, the social, political and economic system in Albania experienced dramatic changes, which visibly affected also the built environment. The centralized political and economic system had now collapsed and a new pluralistic reality, relying on the free market and the free initiative started to emerge. The character of the city is not the same anymore. What belonged once to the masses, now is serving the individual. People take control over their life, over their

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Fig. 3 – Prefabricated concrete panel buildings under construction (Photo: AQTN).

buildings over their city. The Shtesa phenomenon³, a reaction of the dwellers to socialist architecture, fed by the need for space and the sudden and unlimited presence of freedom is obviously the most noticeable change of the post-socialist cityscape (Di Robilant, *et al.*, 2018). The streets and public spaces got populated by cars, objects related more to the personal status and comfort rather than to the real need.

At the same time, the housing blocks underwent a series of transformations related to the fulfillment of the dweller's needs and to the improvement of their living conditions. Considering the contextual changes in the socio-political environment, the physical one found itself unprepared to face the new challenge. What has essentially changed in this perspective is the demand for more and more energy in buildings. Buildings designed to be just basic shelters would have to transform into sophisticated houses in increasing need for energy and comfort. Add-ons and gadgets, needed to enhance the performance of buildings, would start to appear first on the façades and gradually would get to dominate the whole cityscape.

The prefabricated concrete panel multi-apartment buildings are the most problematic type of housing built during socialism in terms of energy efficiency and comfort conditions. Referring to a survey con-

ducted in Tirana in 2013 by the Polytechnic University of Tirana, in more than 90% of cases thermal comfort is not met due to the high thermal conductivity of the building envelope and the numerous thermal bridges. Based on the same survey, it results that less than 10% of dwellers can afford the energy consumption without having to reduce their comfort level. It is estimated that real need of energy in these buildings should be at least 50% higher than the actual consumption (Islami, 2016).

A series of transformations, related to the need of buildings for more energy, affected the multi-apartment buildings in the post-socialist city. The increase in number of electrical equipment implied the renovation of the whole building's electrical network, operation that expanded also on the outer side by marking visible traces in the exteriors of buildings. The socialist housing block got covered gradually by a spider-net of electrical cables and telecommunication lines (fig. 4). The increased need for energy, found an unprepared infrastructure for such demand, leading to almost two decades with discontinuous electrical supply. Electric generators were a temporary remediation for such problem. They occupied the ground floors and noticeably altered the city's acoustic environment. With the recent improvement of the infrastructure, such a phenomenon is gradually disappearing.



On the other hand, split AC units resulted to be the best solution to the lack of an efficient heating/cooling system and to the lack of thermal insulation. In some cases, spontaneous initiatives of thermal insulation of the apartments have occurred also. Both the AC units and the thermal insulation interventions have resulted to have a noticeable impact on the exterior appearance of the buildings (fig. 5). The still present problem of water supply has been managed on individual basis. Every apartment owns its own water tank placed on the roof of the building and fed by water pumps. Mixed with the silhouette of the TV antennas, the presence of water tanks has definitely altered the skyline of today's city as well as its fifth façade (fig.6).

Fig. 4 – Electric and telecommunication cables laid on the building façade (photo: Gj. Islami).

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Fig. 5 – Transformation of the façades due to the need for thermal comfort. Left: installation of AC units. Right: partial thermal insulation of an apartment (photo: Gj. Islami).

Fig. 6 – Typical skyline of water tanks and antennas (photo: Gj. Islami).

A series of transformations starting from the individual until the society have been reflected also in the built environment, starting from the living unit until the city scale. While architecture found itself unprepared for such contextual changes, people had to adapt, and they took control over the situation. They reacted to architecture and adapted it to fit their needs. Fulfilling the basic needs for space, energy, and comfort was a very individual process that went against the collective character of the socialist city. Suddenly the regular and almost monotonous cityscape would be transformed into a dynamic stage where the socio-political transformation gets reflected and exposed on every single building.

The future of the socialist city

What happened to the socialist city is a testimony of the attention that planning should pay to the quality of built environment in general and to the demand and supply for energy in particular, from the building to the city scale. Referring to Stefano Boeri, the author of the General Local Plan for Tirana, the buildings in some areas of the city are really degraded and consume that much energy that would be more expensive to repair and recover them, than pulling them down and rebuilding with a new qualitative architecture (Boeri, 2016). While this could be partially true, considering the complex



situation on the ownership of buildings and adding to this the scarce economical potential of the community, this vision seems to be far from getting real in the coming decade.

The studies conducted on the concrete panel prefabricated buildings, as the most problematic housing typology regarding energy consumption and com-

fort, have evaluated different scenarios for improving living standards in such structures. In all scenarios, studies show that thermal insulation of the existing buildings is a must in offering thermal comfort and improved living conditions for the inhabitants. These interventions that can cost up to 15% of the new construction cost, can noticeably improve



the indoor comfort, and could extend the expected use of the buildings by at least one decade. Nevertheless, these interventions are not expected to introduce significant energy savings considering that the actual consumption is far lower than the real need, due to the lack of possibility to afford the real energy demand in these buildings (Islami, 2016). For planners there are two main challenges to be confronted with recovering the degraded image of the housing blocks, and of the socialist city in general, and second, exploring new ways for increasing its resilience to adapt to new and rapid changes.

In the present situation, the socialist city is facing a particular need to adapt to the new social order and to regain its image. The spontaneous efforts of the dwellers have resulted efficient enough to keep the socialist architecture operative but at the same time, they have radically marked the cityscape. The experiment conducted in Tirana, starting from 2003, by colorfully painting the housing blocks, resulted to be an efficient aesthetical operation that temporarily hid the real problem and that soon faded away. In fact, such intervention was more a political action in a city with minimal budget, than a rehabilitation project (Rama, 2012). While the mu-

nicipality of Tirana has restarted the same coloring process in 2018 (fig. 7), still not enough attention is being paid to the causes of the problem.

Integrated solutions of both aesthetical renewal and building renovation, including measures for energy efficiency, thermal insulation, electrical and water lines, etc., would be practices being considered to regain not only the image but also the performance of the city. To do so, a series of incentives and mechanisms that attract dwellers and invite them to invest in such a process could be used⁴. Another debate to consider regarding the image of the city and its aesthetical renewal is whether the socialist city needs to be colorful and artistic or it should regain its disciplinary character.

The case of the Albanian socialist city has revealed that when professionals impose inappropriate and non-flexible models, people react and take control on architecture. While many questions raise for architects and planners, the socialist cityscape keeps transforming and adapting, a metabolic process related to its basic needs: space, energy, comfort.



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Fig. 7 – Artistic painting of the façades in 2018 (photo: E. Tanini).

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Wind Farm nearby Vizzini, Catania (photo: A. Frascari, 2013).

Note

¹ In 1967, an official campaign started in Albania against the religion, where more than 2000 religious buildings were closed, demolished or transformed into public services. In 1976, Albania becomes by constitution the first and only atheist country in the world.

² In the '80s, for a decade, Albania faced a food crisis, which brought to food portioning for the population.

³ Shtesa is the Albanian word for expansion, a phenomenon that describes the informal modifications of socialist multi-apartment buildings that started to occur after the fall of communism.

⁴ A co-investment scheme, between dwellers and authorities, called "The community fund" has already been introduced by the Municipality of Tirana in 2017.

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