

# Urban Transformation of Authoritarian Spaces within the Framework of Urban Planning

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**Abstract:** *The modern history of Albania has undergone through different epochs of totalitarian regimes, which have influenced in different ways the urban texture of the cities. Today there is an emergent need for Conservation and wise management of dissonant heritage of 20<sup>th</sup> century. This study deals with the transformation of some of the main squares in Tirana in order to understand and evaluate the architectural aspects of totalitarian architecture, which in Albania consists in coexistence between Fascism and Communism. How did ideology affect their architecture, how did they affect the city and how they are managing the changes of their initial program and adapting in a transitory economy, are some of the questions that is dealt with. The city squares were the first, which were submitted to democratic changes, although they were constructed following a different political ideology. After over two decades of democracy, the totalitarian past is slowly fading in memory of the citizens. Cities try to reinvent their self's and adapt rapidly to the new circumstances often by ignoring the existing contexts, which during this period has been systematically alienated. In particular analyzing Scanderbeg Square architecture emerge facts that demonstrate that this alienation happened also in the totalitarian past that somehow has affected the present conditions.*

**Keywords:** totalitarian architecture, Skanderbeg Square, dissonant heritage, post-socialist city, transformations.

## 1. Introduction

Albania as many other post – socialist countries, from many years faces daily challenges and heated discussions regarding the preservation of the past architectural heritage and the future development of its cities architecture. These debates were present even during communism regime however, they had another different approach, which was based mostly on a historical conservation than in a cultural heritage program. The communist idea about the past was to preserve it as it was, and to marginalize it from all the rest of the city. During communism, the traditional neighborhoods or buildings served as an isolated museum that had nothing to do with the new life that they wanted to construct and to build and with the social progress that they aimed. Most of the old buildings were destroyed to construct new uniform buildings, and very few were preserved in an isolated way. The past was so closed into a merely rigid “box” not interacting with the new, and the new was not rooted in the past. In this way, the new came out to be something completely different from local Albanian traditions and impacted in different ways local people. However in all these discontinuities still is possible to note some continuities in between different periods of time and ideologies that influenced modern architecture in Albania. The socialist period in Albania was not a homogenous one, and it took many models not only from Soviet Union and other socialist countries but also from the former regimes. They also appropriated from the former constructions what was considered as ‘best’ and ‘useful for the proletariat’. But, while today still exists an enormous mystery on the architectural production of this époque, which makes it difficult to refer to a larger point of view, it is still possible to analyze some facts and attitudes that emerge looking at the representative public space were condense the main characteristics of totalitarian architecture in Tirana.

This paper deals with the formation and transformation of Skanderbeg square in Tirana in nearly a century, by using it as an example that demonstrates the main ideological purposes of two different totalitarian regimes, that of fascism and communism also as the post socialist urban developments. The approach was firstly inspired by the ATRIUM project, the main aim of which was the wise management, preservation, reuse and economic valorization of architecture of the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century. As such, this paper will try to give answers to all their fundamental questions such as ‘What kind of planning and architectural visions were recreated in the material structures? Why did these material structures in particular fit the rulers’ ideologies? Did the creators of the material structures consciously submit to the ideological prescriptions – and if so, to what extent? Alternatively, did they follow the dominant urban planning and architectural trends of their epoch? How did people fill these material structures with their lives within the context of a (specific) totalitarian regime?’[1].

The city squares were the first to be submitted to democratic changes, although they were constructed for different purposes. Their initial construction was made for public manifestations supporting the regimes. Regularly organized demonstrations backing the system, meetings, gatherings and marches created demand for spacious streets and squares, which were very important modes or axes of spatial organization of socialist cities, and were distinguishable and particularly visible in large and small cities. As Czepczynski points out ‘the celebration required usually large, open spaces. Grand squares in almost every socialist city centre were not only signs of lack of land rent, but also played important ideological functions. Marches, manifestations, meetings, speeches and parades were crucial part of socialist ritual and ideological celebrations. Those celebrations

created new sacrum in socialist cities, where the cult to the abstract or personal ‘gods’ was ritualized’ [2]. The stylistic ‘innovations’ were accompanied by a number of monuments, aimed at becoming focal points of the new urban establishments, by adding comprehensible texts to the settings. It is important to base the analysis of the square not only through the conventional historical analysis of urban transformations but above all through tendencies. We should be more concern with identifying layers of orientations, continuities as well as ruptures or relative discontinuities. As Lefebvre, states ‘where the virtual enables examination of the realized, and in which the ‘blind fields’ that prevent the emergent reality of the urban from being adequately understood are challenged’ [3]. The main idea is that whoever wants to be acquainted with the main changes of the former socialist cities, can only do that by seeing them as continuously changing entities and as possibilities for future development and innovation. The paper expresses also the deep contrast between the individual and collective categories, between old and new buildings, between ‘one’ and ‘many’ buildings, between ‘myth’ and ‘reality’. According to Rossi, these kinds of contrasts emerge ‘from the city and from its construction, its architecture’ [4]. As he points out the contrast ‘is one of the principal viewpoints from which the city can be studied. It manifests itself in different ways: in the relationships between the public and private sphere, between public and private buildings, between the rational design of urban architecture and the values of locus or place’ [5]. The locus for the socialist city planners was also very important but it had not much to do with the relation between “public and private” because these classifications did not exist at all, instead it was transformed into a propagandistic “*monologue*” directed from the regime to the working class. So the decision of place and space has been political and strategic, influenced by the communist ideology including also the surreal fears of the Cold War which transformed plaza and public space into a sort of “field of March” to support massive military manifestations. (Figure1)[6]



**Figure 1:** ex-O.D.A, Casa del Dopolavoro Albanese during the First Congress of Communist Party 1946 [7]

## 2. Totalitarian architecture as cultural heritage

The first traces of Albanian modern architecture can be related with the European colonial architecture that was built

after the end of Ottoman dominance up to 1950s. This period extends over three decades and consists mainly in architecture developed during fascist occupation and communist regime. During this period, building of cities was a main issue and resulted in the realization of big projects that today are still mostly without a proper protection status. The architectural heritage of Albanian cities today is mostly composed by a long tradition of Ottoman buildings, a short but impressive period of Italian and fascist constructions, four decades of socialist planning and newly incorporated post-socialist and post-modernist structures. If somebody visits Albania today, can inspect some elements very similar to the former Soviet countries, other ones can be very similar to Turkish traditions and the overall impression is an organized urban chaos of the post socialist cities which is reflected also in their daily life. According to Rossi ‘the identification of particular urban artifacts and cities with a style of architecture is so automatic in certain contexts of space and time that we can speak with discrete precision of the Gothic city, the baroque city, the neoclassical city’[8]. To study the Albanian architecture it means that you are looking for materialistic reproductions of structures belonging to different ideologies, mostly non-democratic (ottomans, authoritarian regime of King Zog, fascism and communism). Albanian cities, villages, roads, houses, factories and industrial units and even architectural and planning offices were submitted to different models and policies which have left their mark on them and have produced a new mixed identity. All cities have a history of their foundation and a continual history of their transformations. The local people didn't welcome all the new changes that appear in the landscape of cities. However, with the passing of time, people are accustomed with cities landscape and they even protest when governments decide to demolish specific buildings. This can be understood from Rossi when explains that ‘with the time, the city grows upon itself: it acquires consciousness and memory’ [9]. Not only preservation is connected with the building itself, but refers also to some kind of nostalgia for the past and the way of living that the building inspired. According to Krier ‘in architecture no valid aesthetic experience can exist without proximity, without the closeness to the masses and the details, without our experiencing the constructed spaces from within’ [10].

In Albania, due to the former totalitarian policies we can speak of total planning of the society that influenced also all aspects of urbanism and organization of daily life. Totalitarian architecture and especially the socialist one, tried to re-organize and re-consider the role of architecture and architect and their influence in the society. As Gutnov et al. describe ‘the architect now is chiefly responsible for the total organization of space, not only the spaces in a building but also the open spaces between the buildings’ [11]. What can be seen as a typical characteristic of the new socialist city is its organization as a productive unity where the residential buildings and industrial units were economically and culturally integrated. While in the new transition to the democratic society the role of architecture is based on the market economy and on some limitations focused on the interests of the public interest. In the last 27 years, since the collapse of the socialist regime, has been challenged the way

architecture shall be planned and build but especially has been faced with the dilemma what kind of buildings to preserve from the totalitarian heritage of the past. Many historical buildings and places have been left to slow decay and local people are losing the historic memories of their cities. Maybe this is somehow an unconscious elimination of unwanted landscapes, effectively there are also people who do not want to remember, but however dark it may be this heritage is present and part of the city's history.



**Figure 2:** Residential block “Shkërvëzë”, completed in 1952 with abusive interventions of after 90’ [12]

The communist regime was also harsh to the heritage of what was accumulated as a knowledge before this period, somehow it was eliminated and prohibited to be reused. The former totalitarian fascist architecture based the construction of the new buildings in Albania by taking some local elements from the local tradition. In their rational architecture it was common the searching of national roots which it was reflected also in the new buildings that were constructed between the years 1928 -1941 and in the urban planning of the Albanian cities.

During socialism, there was a well-known postulate, which served as a premise and starting point of Stalinist thinking in architecture and which needed to be accepted as true without controversy also in other socialist countries. This was the idea that the new architecture was required to be socialist in content and national in form. This was translated also in the Albanian socialist reality but it had its own specifics. In one of his last speeches, Enver Hoxha recommended: ‘The Party has ordered us continuously that we need not only to rely ourselves on the local tradition but we need also to cultivate it, because tradition for us is also the rich tradition of socialist realism [...]. In all the areas – literature, art, architecture we need to create works that are loved,

understood and felt by people’[13]. By making a discourse analysis of his speech, Hoxha meant two things; firstly it meant that the local Albanian tradition was eliminated from the official architecture and was permitted only the tradition of socialist realism. This was more visible in the last years of socialist regime in Albania. Secondly, it meant also the elimination of the socialist traditions of other countries, mostly Soviet ones, by considering them as imperialistic. However, this happened after 1966, when Hoxha decided to dissent from Soviet Union and refused its internal and foreign politics.

Nevertheless, the idea to reject what was constructed in the past continues in Albania even nowadays. Many still find irrational the question of preservation of the totalitarian buildings. Others find it right to preserve some of these buildings. Even though a large part of Albanians are still living or working in the buildings constructed during communism, which are continuously changing their initial use and adapting to the contemporary life.

As I stated above the socialist regime in Albania, like in other communist countries pointed mostly to “protect historical buildings, a goal that many Bolsheviks did not see as consistent with social progress” [14]. “To the Bolshevik ideologists, in contrast, point zero was the ultimate reality. The art of the past was not living history that could serve as a guide to the present, but storehouse of inert things from among which anything that seems appealing or useful could be removed at will. It was often said in Stalin’s time that the Soviet Union was the sole preserver of the cultural heritage that the bourgeoisie itself had rejected and betrayed” [15].

Despite the fact that communist in Albania rejected ‘modernism’ as a term, my main approach here will be based on this concept. One of the main assumptions of the paper is that the foundation of new socialist squares and transformation of the old ones can be analyzed as ‘modernist projects’ although they were included in the frame of a totalitarian ideology. Since most of “the consequences [of socialism] included the secularization of society, the emergence of a professional class, and the rationalization of the building industries [...] the politics associated with modernization have varied from totalitarianism and dictatorship to republicanism and democracy”[16]. Thus usually the socialist system in its propaganda was against the modernist project but it was not against ‘the modernization’ as a process. Often modernization was considered as equal to the Technical and Scientific Revolution. This was translated also in the socialist architecture. The first suggestion from Party’s leaders was to construct modern and beautiful buildings.

Some part of the communist urban projects can be considered as ‘utopist’. As Stanek explains ‘contrasted to “abstract utopias” extrapolating from the status quo, “concrete utopias” are “models” of possible development: operative ways of testing hypotheses that account for complex and aleatory reality and thus are never exhaustive and always require a confrontation with other models’[17]. Also Pinder analyzing Lefebvre theories, points out that: ‘Lefebvre therefore denied utopia’s inherently pejorative

connotations [...] he favored more ‘concrete’ explorations of what was possible that were rooted in everyday life and space’[18]. In this paper, totalitarian projects is not defined as ‘utopist’ for the mere fact that these cities projects were implemented and still functioning. The same it can be said for the city squares. It is true that their foundation was justified by ideological reasons, although with the passing of time they have been serving also as a reference and representative points of the city. History shows that it is people’s ability with passing of time to “de-ideologize” and “re-contextualize” controversial heritage. As Pinder notes, these monumental city squares can be seen as possibilities for ‘experimentation and invention within present conditions. He presented the search for the possible in dialectical relation to the impossible, a move that demanded analyzing conditions of possibility as well as finding openings to what could be’[19].

### 3. From Traditional to Totalitarian Representative Space

In many studies, Tirana usually is taken as a model to show the scale of development of the whole country. Although there are contradictory ideas that Tirana cannot serve as an indicator of measurement, in terms of representative space it is still possible to use the transformation of Tirana representative space to give a short view of what happened in Albania after the fall of the socialist system. Referring to Rossi ‘common experience confirms that the most thorough studies have indicated: that a city changes completely every fifty years. Of course, there are certain periods of time in which a city is transformed especially quickly’ [20]. Tirana has gone through both these processes. Many suggest that Tirana is unrecognizable of what it was fifty years ago. For some people is unrecognizable even for what it was before 25 years. Fortunately, there are still some places in Tirana that show a degree of identity continuity and these are not the squares any more.



**Figure 3:** Tirana Old Bazaar.(to the left the Old Mosque)  
Postcard by Purger&Co, Munchen [21]

The main heritages of Tirana from the Ottoman Empire period were The Old Mosque, Mosque of Et’hem Bey, Tirana clock tower, the old Bazaar, ect. The first and the last of this list were destroyed by the communist regime soon after raised into power, while Mosque of Et’hem Bey and the clock tower still remain today the most iconic buildings of

the city. The beginning of construction of modern Tirana started during the twenties since it became capital. As the Albanian architect Velo describes ‘Tirana inherited a conglomerate of architectures: a Balcanic or Albanian architecture, as we may call it in the years before 1920s, after this period it was implemented an Austrian –Hungarian architecture and later it was continued with the Italian influence’’[22]. The impact of Italian constructions in Tirana was immense and it transformed the identity of the city. It is true that the buildings were designed according to the eclectic taste of Italian architect De Fausto and supported and financed by the Italian government but King Zog played also his part on that. He putted some pressures during the negotiations by inviting in the competition also German architects. It is also true that Di Fausto was re-proposing many of the themes of ‘solemn ruralism’ of Predapio, by repeating variations of large scale of Roman baroque [23]. On the other hand, the buildings constructed during the reign of King Zog in contrary to the buildings constructed during the Fascist occupation, represent more Zog authoritative desire to consolidate the Albanian administration through the construction of Ministries. This is expressed also in his tenacity to focus in the organization of the centre and its administrative buildings. As Maria Concetta Miglieccio explains ‘for the realization of center of Tirana, together with all the ministerial buildings, the Italian government presented a financial plan to sustain the project of Di Fausto, that needed to be more competitive than the German plan’[24].

In our days, many Albanian architects speak about the rustic style of King Zog which was developed during his reign, especially regarding the architecture of his villas.[26] His vision fitted very well to the monumental baroque and romantic style of Di Fausto who designed the Ministry Buildings and the plaza between them. The architecture of this period of time is usually classified by the Albanian architects of socialist realism as a pre-modernist or proto-modernist one. While ultimately more accurate studies on fascist architecture define it as an unified style with contextual, nationalistic variations in all the fascist colonies.[27]



**Figure 4:** Royal Palace, reconstruction of 1928 [25]

As Ulisse Tramonti explains there is continuity between the constructions of Di Fausto in Predappio, Italian colonies of

Rhodes Island and the buildings of Skanderbeg square [28]. While Godoli describes ‘first at Rhodes, than to Predapio and contemporary in Tirana, Di Fausto found himself to intervene in a urban track defined and imposed to a dominant axiality that supported the idea of a city clearly inspired to the surreal suspension of the Italian Renaissance that he cherished; in all three different environmental contexts, he confirms the idea of the unavoidable effort to reconnect to the legend, to the myth, and to the story of the place’[29]. The preliminary observation of Di Fausto regarding the constructions of the public buildings in Tirana was that they had an industrial character ‘disdainful for the picturesque environment [30], so he felt the need to reinvent the context by applying monumental stile enriched with national elements he went to discover in Albanian history.

After communists came into power, the idea of city and public space didn’t changed so much. Totalitarian regimes all meet in relation to questions that have to do with monumentality and huge urban scale. Both fascists and communists agreed in the form, size and use of public space. Great boulevards and big plazas were built both for propaganda and military issues. According to Ching, D.,et al. “were designed not only to frame grand marches, parades and official manifestations, but were also broad enough to introduce tanks and troops’[31]. In Albania officially the main idea was to use them for manifestations and grand marches of workers and military officials. This happened until the great protests of the 90s against communist regime, when plazas and grand boulevard became fighting areas. However communists showed more brutality towards tradition and architectural heritage, especially the ottoman heritage in Tirana. Systematic demolitions were made during post war reconstruction period that culminated with the destruction of the Old Mosque and the Bazaar which both made the historical center of the city and the main reason of its existence.

After the fall of the socialism, Albanian architecture and public space has been going through a long transition period that has violently marked urban landscape. Transformations often were politically oriented more than collectively responsive. Privatization processes without a proper legislative status on the totalitarian architecture heritage, in many cases resulted unhealthy and deteriorating for the technological and esthetical state of the buildings.

## 4. ‘Skanderbeg’ Square

### 4.1 Genesis

Both during King Zog time and the World War II the Italian intervention tried to implement rational planning to some of the main Albanian cities. Tirana became the perfect example of the city where rational and irrational urban planning met. On the other hand, Tirana was also the place to illustrate the fascist ideology through its buildings and urban architecture.



**Figure 5:** A. Brasini, Masterplan for Tirana Capital, 1927. [32]

First project for Tirana were emerged the strong monumental axe was a rather utopist and outdated proposal made by Armando Brasini in 1927. His proposal consisted in a new government center completely separated from the existing city. This baroque flavored linear monumentality was planned to meet the existing city by mean of a rounded central plaza that was meant to be at south of today’s Skanderbeg Square. Brasini’s project was not executed due to unclear circumstances, but further developments of the city show that later plans for Tirana, took reference of it. The drawings of Di Fausto were also referring to the rounded plaza with the sunken garden in the middle, but geometry in his case is sharper and the buildings are more rational. The Italian architect under the supervision of King Zog, was putting efforts toward contextualization with the existing center. The plaza of Brasini now meets the Mosque of Et’hem Bey by making a continuity, that was crucial for the coexistence between the ottoman city and the modern one.



**Figure 6:** Skanderbeg Square during 30s with the Ministries plaza of Di Fausto [33]

During the Forties’ Scanderbeg Square could not be completed in the north side were fascist regime could finish only two buildings: the Town Hall of 1931 by F.Di Fausto [35] with a monumental entrance in the language of the Ministries, reinforced by the presence of two towers that culminate with the National flag. While the other building is the National Bank of Vitorio Morpurgo (Fig.8) [34] inaugurated in 1938 in a fascist rationalized style with a holly brick façade with travertine frames. This building in comparison with the rest of the plaza was a standalone that replicated only to the uniqueness of the Mosque of Et’hem Bey. [36]



**Figure 7:** (to the left) National Bank of Albania, 1938; [34]

**Figure 8:** Tirana Town Hall, 1931 [35]

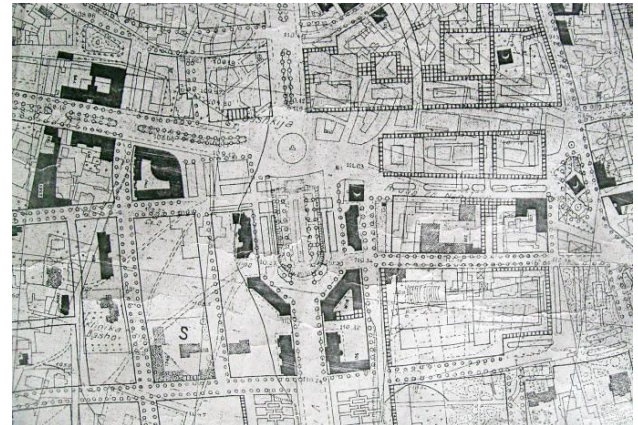


**Figure 9:** Photo of a drawing made in the portico of Et'hem Bey mosque that shows Skanderbeg Square and the National Bank of Albania, 1940 [36]

Two periods of Italian architecture can be clearly distinguished in Albania: the *eclectic architecture* in style of Italian "novecento" during the reign of King Zog, when were completed the buildings of the Ministries, and a second period of *classical rationalism* that was applied mainly during the fascist invasion of 1939-1943. In this period, architecture in Italy changed a lot regarding the romantic and revivalist style of Brasini and Di Fausto. Now it was under current a much more modernized classicism which developed mainly by A. Libera e M.Piacentini e gruppo MIAR who operated in Italy. The official style in Tirana was interpreted by G.Bosio, a young engineer/ architect from Florence who redacted the first regulatory plan from 1939-41 in the period he was directing the planning office in Tirana. He developed also a new proposal for Skanderbeg Square and the project for Piazza del'Littorio which today is Mother Teresa Square.

Bosio's proposal for the main plaza makes a shift from the design of his previous colleagues that seems more politically than contextually oriented. He proposes an expansion of the urban space orthogonally with Brasini axes, defining in this way a sort of "decumanum" from East to West of the city passing into the historic center in the name of "Viale Mussolini". Even though this project was not executed, because of the short period of fascist invasion and their primary interest consisted in building the new fascist center in the southern end of the main axis, later this proposal served as a model to communist planners who implemented the transformations with big costs in terms of culture and

urban heritage of the city.



**Figure 10:** G.Bosio. Fragment of Skanderbeg Square in the Regulatory Plan of 1941 [37]

However there can be noticed huge differences, both the first and second phase of fascist architecture in Tirana was clearly affected by a dictatorship expression that was eminent on all the building production including the main land. As in the Roman Empire, they were building for eternity and this is demonstrated with the obsession with sheer size, symmetry, and durable building materials. In addition, employment of literal iconography was an essential mean of communication of ideology through their facades. Later during communism, fascist symbols were replaced with the communist ones and they fitted perfectly. At that point, no one was speaking anymore about fascist architecture, there was only socialist architecture and fascist style was absorbed and substituted by the new ideology.

During the years of socialism from 60s to the 70s further interventions were implemented to define permanently the shape and size of the main square. These interventions consisted in the demolition of the Old Bazaar in order to build a huge Palace of Culture that was inaugurated in 1966. The new intervention that became the first page of propaganda of the communist regime of the time, merely followed the shape of the previous design by Bosio with a main difference, while Bosio was thinking about a contained commercial plaza with lodges and panoramic roofs in the Italian style, the later intervention brought to a completely different type of square, Scanderbeg Square more than doubled its size and the new buildings which were strictly cultural and institutional remained isolated into their power, losing the sense of "plaza" with human proportions that Bosio's project represented. Grandiose proportions were firstly dictated by the Great Palace of Culture (Fig.11)[38], which construction was affected by the Soviet-Albanian split of 1961. This building included three separated functions: a congress house, exhibition center and the National Library. A local architect Maks Velo who was active at that time, affirms in an interview by Domus Magazine that: "(...)our dictator wanted a single building and a tribune for military parades that had to be accessible to tanks" [42]. In a propagandistic movie of 1966 it is acclaimed that beside the 'sabotage' from the soviet revisionists that abandoned the realization of the project, they achieved to complete the construction by doubling the general volume of the building from 65- 115 thousand of cubic meters.[43] Despite the

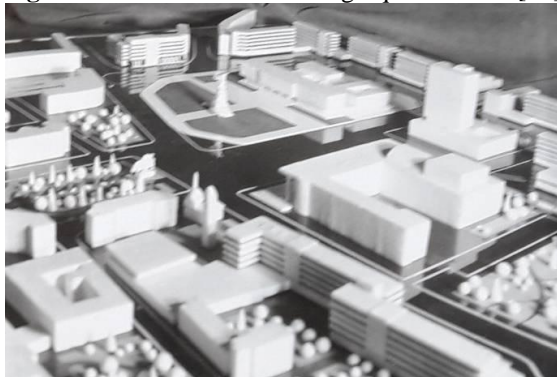
contradictions with the Soviet government of the time, the Stalin statue stood on the central square until 1968, the year when it was moved further along the central boulevard and replaced by the Scanderbeg Monument, which still stands today and gives the name to the square.



**Figure 11:** Drawing of Skanderbeg Square by G. Bosio 1941 [38]



**Figure 12:** View of Skanderbeg Square ≈1980 [39]



**Figure 13:** Model proposal for the center of Tirana 1978 [40]



**Figure 14:** Center of Tirana at the end of socialism [41]

For the communist regime “bigness” was significance of good, strong and beautiful, and this notion goes also to representative public space which should be huge enough to hold glorious and crowded manifestations. Although Palace of Culture was still using the loggia as a main feature of expression, but differently from Bosio's proposal, the loggia now stands elevated on a stair platform that separated the building from the plaza's and not easily accessible.

At the end of 80', there were made several studies for the permanent definition of Scanderbeg Square. Although there might be noticed some differences, these proposals share the same intentions: the Town Hall of Di Fausto [35] was decided to be demolished to leave place National Museum which opened in 1981, also as the Orthodox Church and the resting part of the traditional center would leave the place to the construction of Tirana Hotel in 1979. In terms of space and composition the new museum is a huge monumental volume nearly the size of his predecessor Palace of Culture, but with an architecture full of nationalist symbolism. This building also needed a personal space in front where a second monumental sculpture was planned before, and attributed to Enver Hoxha after his death in 1985. His monument due to position and size, became the focal point of the square, totally transforming proportions and perception of space. More than a dynamic public space due to its central position, it became a sort of solid abstract of a glorified history in the image of an European version of Tiananmen Square or Mansu Hill in Pyongyang of North Korea with the bronze statue of Kim Il Sung where meet all the central axes of the capital.

#### 4.2 Theoretical background

The necessity of a discipline that would secure a proper design of the public space seemed valid since 1951s with the CIAM conference “The heart of the city” as much as nowadays. “*The elements of social life, the associative life, are in decay. Where can the masses gather?*” Giedion asks in *the 1950s* [45], while a similar question can be posed also in the contemporary debate about the design of Tirana public space. An entire conference was dedicated in 1956 to the heart of the city not only for the physical nature of the public space, but also as a question on the engine that generates the city life, obviously two concepts that continuously complement each other. Indeed the heart seems to be recognized as a valid humanistic idea and urban design concept, which should be studied nowadays. The main mistake of the 1956 conference is, for Alexander C., the unawareness, the incapacity to focus the attention on the public space as the generator of the city, or more specifically, on what he calls “*the positive space*” “*it is a coherent space which has the attribute that people want to be there, choose to be there. It has the quality that people feel well in themselves when they are there, and they are capable of experiencing their own life when they are there*”. [46] As opposed to this “*positive space*”, the building masses have instead characterized the architecture projects leading to the crisis of the contemporary public space, the rush for controlling the space and privatizing it as a response to the increasing demand for commercialized use.

This produced confusion on its reading and inability to understand its layers and therefore produced intervention designs that radically and permanently alienate it.

The re-organization of the structure of the city, toward the positive Heart of the City, as “a genuinely new concept requiring the remaking of space”, is an aim proposed by 20th Century CIAM members who, however, were not able to accomplish it. This remains, therefore, “what we 21st - Century architects, now must deliver.”- claims Alexander, underlying the importance of contemporary discourse about the Heart of the City. [46]

To be successful on the strategy of redesigning a square, which eventually affects the entire city in terms of space and at the same time exceeds the capabilities of current creative research, “continuity and aestheticism are ways of reviving,” states Rob Krier in Urban Space [47] regarding “the art of architecture that lost its way in modernism”. It is important to investigate how the traditional understanding of Scanderbeg square has been lost within the modern city. If we consider the aesthetic criteria, every urban space has been organized according to its socio-political and cultural attitudes.

The formation of Scanderbeg square is in itself a product of imposed ideological process, mostly created by authoritarian regimes although that method is rarely a linear one. We seem intermittently aware of the layering of history, which the city represents, with its manifestation of political conflicts and changes. But (as described by M. Christine Boyer), if the city of Collective Memory embodies the ambition for an authentic and resonant public realm and its simultaneous erasure, how might we define those urban spaces where history has been manipulated for political ends, based on narratives which are highly selective if not fictional? [48] It is necessary to explore how cultural and typological memories are exploited.”

### 4.3 Contemporary square

After the fall of communism, the square became the arena of people free will & expression, the symbol of change, the space where the voice of everyone could be heard. At no other time like in the ‘90s has the Scanderbeg Square served its purpose as peoples "positive space".



**Figure 15:** The end of dictatorship The Scanderbeg square during massive protest in 1991 in Tirana. People threw down the statue of the dictator as a culmination of the protest. [49]

The photo above shows the historic moment, when through free and massive protests the bust of Albania dictator, E.Hoxha was threw down by the protesters, an act that marked the end of a dark time for Albania and the hope for a bright future. The design and the need for "reinventing" Scanderbeg Square came first in 2000, when Albania had just over passed an economic breakdown, after the collapse pyramidal firms, and was ready to rebuild its economy. One of the most promising sector of the time was the construction industry as the demand for housing and business areas rapidly increased from driving forces of free market, free movement feed by foreign investments and Albanian emigrants that wanted to invest in their country.

Below is shown the winner proposal of Architecture Studio from the competition organized from the municipality, for the purpose of transforming and giving a new identity of Tirana center. *Renewal Tirana* project, drafted in 2002 and approved by 2004 by the council of the municipality of Tirana.



**Figure 16:** 3d render view of Tirana master plan, proposition of Architecture studio[50]



**Figure 17:** View of Tirana master plan, proposition of Architecture studio

It is important to notice here the proposal of the first, new high rise buildings; the development of the hyper-centers that would create cross promenades linkages of the city from east to west, but marking so forever the surrounding of Scanderbeg Square and the city historical silhouette.

The activities that the new buildings would accommodate attempt to hence the relationship between the piazza and the new citizen: *the consumer*, and bring various service facilities in to surroundings. It is not the aim of the paper to analyze the projects proposals of the winning competitions but to mark the stages of transformations of Scanderbeg Square in the new socio-political contexts through the last 10 decades, to delineate the main design thinking process and the main drivers that pushed for the "architectural-urban" transformations propositions.





**Figure 18:** Sketch of concept proposition for Tirana Scanderbeg square, 54N4E competitions entries materials. [51]

The second phase of transformations is also marked by international architectural and urban design competition in 2008, now in focus only the redesign and reconceptualization of the main square. This phase of intervention proposals can be described as more meditative and ideological approach in relation to the first one where the main drivers where the new emerging market economy. It consists to a constant search for the dematerialization of the true nature of original Square and somehow its de-communicization. Now the dominant transformation factor is not economical but a *social* one. The citizen is placed in the center of the idea of the square. So much is evaluated the role of a single citizen that at the and only one can perceive the square at a time, as the pyramidal square arise from the ground. Even with this proposal the space is "controlled" but in this case, in the center of the control system is not the *totalitarian ideology*, nor the *market economy*, but by the *citizen*.

Symbolically and as a modern open society approach, the proposition has many positive aspects in relation to find a way to represent the new Albanian society free and in control of itself, but at the same time fails in relation to staying true the context.

The proposed change was radical and the mass opinion and civil society never fully supported the wining propositions of both the two phases, it showed that the projects did not achieved the reconciliation with the social approach and the memory that the society had for the square. In the first phase the control comes from the economic factor and brings us build public space, fragmented space in an effort to separate the functions that existing facilities impose, in an attempt to an artificial "de-communicization" "process of the square. The public space is not perceived as an historical value although the history and the complex diversity of the objects that surround it.

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Because the winner projects were not implemented (not until after 2014), as much as for political reasons as for public opinion rejection, the Skanderbeg piazza transitioned for some years into an amorphous unidentified form. (Fig.19)



**Figure 19:** Scanderbeg Square 2014(source: panorama.al [52]

Part of the winning projects saw the implementation phase only after 2014. The new project of the square was finalized on 2017, nearly ten years from its approval as a concept design. Maybe tired from investing time, energy and their tax money to the forever transformation of the square initiated from different parties of local government, the public debate opposing the radical change of the piazza was barely present. At the end, because of a long period of transition and many transformations and alienations of Scanderbeg square there was not much left from the original Italian concept design to save.



**Figure 20:** Skanderbeg Square wins the European Award for Urban Public Space 2018 in Barcelona [53]

The new square (Fig.21) was a success from the part of the new local government. The administration made possible the implementation of the project in a short time and even added to the original project design a large underground public parking space. Even though the project was even honored with the first prize of "2018 European Prize for Urban Public Space", the void that it produced is inescapable. An example that nice renders and good poetry are not enough to provide knowledge to provide knowledge for the real scale perception of the space. The municipality administration now in charge of the city, is very proactive and present in the

city's social and recreation activities. This is why we can suggest that there where the urban design has successfully failed the *management* somehow has succeeded, it realized to fill the *emptiness and the silence of the new space*, by enriching the multi programming of the piazza as a place to share, communicate and show creativity.



Figure 21: Today use of public space [54]

## 5. Conclusions

*" [...] it is of the very essence of our growing sociological reinterpretation of the past to see its essential life as continuous into the present, and even beyond, and so to maintain the perennity of culture, the immortality of the social soul. "* Geddes P., 1915

As it was showed, the Skanderbeg square is identified as the most important public space in Tirana and is still perceived as the most representative plaza of Albania. This comes more because of its strong centrality and historical importance of collective memory and protagonism in Albanian history, than for the capacity of socialization and interaction that this space complies.

The modern history of Albania has undergone through different types of totalitarian regimes, which have influenced in many ways the urban texture of the city in general and Skanderbeg Square specifically. This particular space has always been under high pressure to radically change its shape and features by political regimes that went throw. Although, the square was programed mainly for manifestations or celebration of political power being it fascist or communist, it was also the place where the end of totalitarianism and dictatorship was signed by the people through free democratic protest. The city square and the public spaces were the first, which were submitted to democratic changes although they were constructed for different purposes. However it is still soon to evaluate the outcomes of the changes, as the main transformations are still to come - referring here to the new high-rise buildings surrounding the square, part of the first competition above described, yet it can be noticed that somehow people tend to forget the political pressure submitted throw public space and as time pass by, unconsciously tent to absorb and commercialize also their past, even if it has been not very kind with them. So, it can be affirmed that whoever wants to

get acquainted with the main changes of the former socialist cities, can only do that by seeing them not as a solid material rather than continuously changing entities with open possibilities for future development and innovation.

Throw this analyze come also out many problems that many socialist representative spaces seem to share. As the emergence of the square and its existence had at their core a strong power, it resulted a difficult and some may argue impossible space to be activated with functions, with the exception of organized events and public manifestations. The totalitarian squares in Albania present aspects of the lack of adaptability and flexibility over time. In the absence of a dominant politic power, these squares in their bigness are often mute and full of solitude, testifying the heavy historical failures that influenced urban radicalism on city making. To the other side central space with its rich history, gives us as architects and planners the eternal lesson that these spaces first need to be understood if we tend to intervene on them. This process can only be achieved through deep knowledge of the history that made them and which they help to make.

So, considering the big efforts of past and present regimes to transform Skanderbeg Square as a reflection of their political image, it seems that today the Ministries' square and the agglomeration with the Et'hem Bey mosque and the clock tower, still remain one of the most contextualized interventions that have been made to Tirana Capital in modern era. This particular and isolated area today and for long after, will represent the city's condensed image in the minds of the people.

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