

# When “Words Fall on Deaf Ears” An Outline of Albania’s Socialist Architecture

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**Keywords:** faster, cheaper, better, socialist architecture, politics, Kolevica

“...It seems as though time had stood still there...”<sup>1</sup>

According to the Albanian philosopher and sociologist G. Bobi,<sup>2</sup> the Albanians’ current sense of cultural identity is very well portrayed by Minkowski’s patients’ answers to the question “where are you?” One patient said he was “here”, while another one said “I know where I am, but I do not feel I belong here.” The former points to an extremely burdened identity that expresses provincialism and historicism, while the latter, vaguer, envelops a lack of identification to his place of origin: *everywhere and nowhere*. Bobi identifies a socio-cultural degradation, caused by multiple factors such as the loss of security, once ensured by the former regime, the dismantlement of the social structure created by that regime for half a century, and the new regime’s inability to offer the benefits it promised (pluralist democracy, welfare, etc.) The social and cultural upheavals following the fall of the regime have particularly baffled the middle class and those faces considered the “pride of the system.” What used to be excommunicated is now glorified, and vice versa.

Following its isolation from the rest of the world for several decades during the 20th Century, Albania is one of the most understudied East European nations. Although the socialist era represents a milestone in the modern history of Albania, the “socialist architecture” has never been the subject of an analytical English-language monograph. A range of articles that periodically appeared in various newspapers and magazines have been taken into account; they are the only available sources able to reveal the theoretical framework, if it indeed existed. In addition, the last two decades have grown rich in architects’ memoirs, as well as in studies on the subject, conducted by both Eastern and Western scholars. All these have found a place in the research presented hereafter.

This study is based on the most relevant so-called *typical* and *atypical* publications – however few in number - that best reflect the architectural discourse of the period. The typical publications will help to have a better overview on the official precepts regarding art and culture; meanwhile, the atypical writings will spotlight some sort of civil disobedient subtext, containing rhetoric questions, or even just providing an outline of the myriad of restrictions that architects were facing in their everyday working life, without concealing the rather grim reality. Throughout the years, architects’ yearning call for freedom has been constant, unlike the varying degree of mass media restrictions.

1 The following is an excerpt from Bruno Marini’s book, where socialist Albania is narrated by one of the few western journalists able to obtain permission to visit and survey the isolated country’s everyday life.  
“L’Albania ho cercato di capirla. Erano loro gli Albanesi, che si vergognavano di mostrarmela, la dove il tempo è ancora fermo. Come se mi dovessi vergognare di certe zone depresse italiane, che sono il documento di una società che non è ancora tutto a posto, anzi. La vergogna semmai, è di non fare nulla perche le cose cambino. Da noi, come altrove.” See B. Marini, *Albania, oggi : testimonianza di un giornalista / Bruno Marini* (Bologna: Capelli Editore, 1964), 14.

2 G. Bobi, “Gli attuali percorsi dell’identità culturale degli albanesi,” in *Annali del Dipartimento di Scienze Storiche Filosofiche e Geografiche, Università degli studi di Lecce XI* (2009): 609-617.

It is important to acknowledge that after more than twenty years since the fall of the Communist dictatorship, there is still some kind of silence, and above all, a strong disdain towards the socialist era, which *have produced widespread scepticism toward collectivist ideals and public institutions altogether*.<sup>3</sup> After two decades, today more than ever, it becomes necessary to understand the *power of the past*<sup>4</sup> rather than just blaming it for the malfunctions of the present.

The purpose of this paper is to present the preliminary results of an ongoing research project on the socialist Albanian architecture, in close connection to a blend of cultural, social and economic issues. In spite of the descriptive method used, this study also attempts to bring some initial reflections on, and interpretations of the facts it exposes. Focusing on the architectural and political spheres, the main question is how the Socialist Realism imported from the Soviet Union starting with the late 1940s, was understood and applied in the specific Albanian context; the influences of and relations to the periods prior to, and following socialism are also taken into account.

### Italian legacy in architecture

In order to better understand the evolution of planning and architecture during the socialist period, it is necessary to start from what they inherited from the past, especially the impact of the cultural dialogue between Italy and Albania prior to the Second World War. This moment is important not only for the impact it had on the Albanian physical context, but mostly for the cultural and educational impetus due to the high level of education offered to young Albanians, also giving birth to the first generation of contemporary Albanian artists.

According to Nicola May, *Italy has been ambivalently and alternatively represented throughout the history of independent Albania as both invader and provider of a “Westernness” that is somehow rather close to Albanian values and tradition*.<sup>5</sup> Albania represented an important focus for the Italian foreign policy in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is noteworthy that among the Balkan countries, Albania was the last one to gain its independence, under the constant threat of being partitioned by its neighbours. Italy became the preferred partner providing economic, technical and military aid, much needed by such a small country. Even more relevant to this study are the contributions to modern building techniques and technologies, to planning at all scales, starting from regional and town planning to urban design and architecture projects, and to the entire built environment conceived in a unitary vision. (Fig. 1, 2, 3)

The establishment of the Central Office of Architecture and Urban Planning (1939-43) brought about the formulation of town planning guidelines for major cities giving birth to an exceptionally prolific period. Albanian cities became a fertile ground for the application of architectural and urban planning theories and models set up by the Italian architects.

It is worth mentioning how a similar concept was shared by East German Ministry of Building directives concerning urban planning, 30 years later:

*“... Urban planning is the foundation of architectural form giving... The planning and realization of parts of the city like plazas and major streets with their adjacent housing quarters, are to be carried out simultaneously with work on the city plan and in harmony with it.”*<sup>6</sup>

3 S. Hirt, *Gates, Suburbs and Privatization of Space in the Post-socialist City* (Malden: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2012), 33.

4 F.E. Ian Hamilton, et al. *Transformation of cities in central and eastern Europe: Towards globalization* (Tokyo, New York, Paris: United Nation University Press, 2004).

5 N. May, “The cultural construction of Italy in Albania and vice versa: migration dynamics, strategies of resistance and politics of mutual self-definition across colonialism and post-colonialism,” *Modern Italy* 8 (2003): 77-93.

6 J. Ockman, *Architecture Culture 1943-1968* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1993), 128.

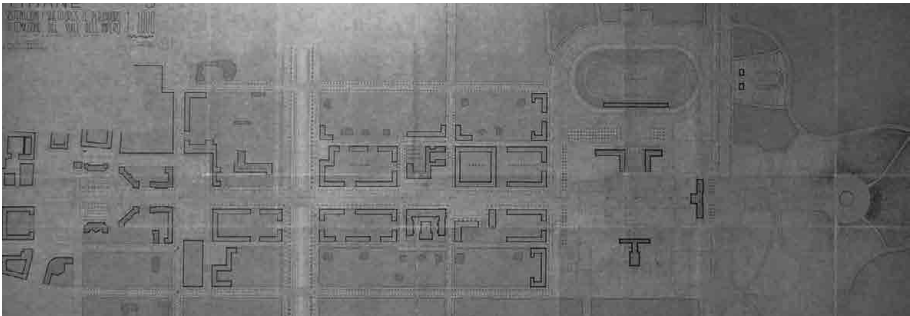


Fig. 1. Master Plan of Elbasan, Overall perspective, I. Lambertini, F. Poggi, 1942, 18x11cm. (A.Q.N.SH. - Central Technical Archive of Building, Tirana, Albania)

Fig. 2. Master Plan of Tirana, detail of the Empire Boulevard, Littorio and Scanderbeg Square, G. Bosio, I. Lambertini, 1943, 18x7cm. (A.Q.N.SH. - Central Technical Archive of Building, Tirana, Albania)

Fig. 3. Master Plan of Vlore, View from the square in front of the Cathedral, Unbuilt, 18x7cm. (A.Q.N.SH. - Central Technical Archive of Building, Tirana, Albania)

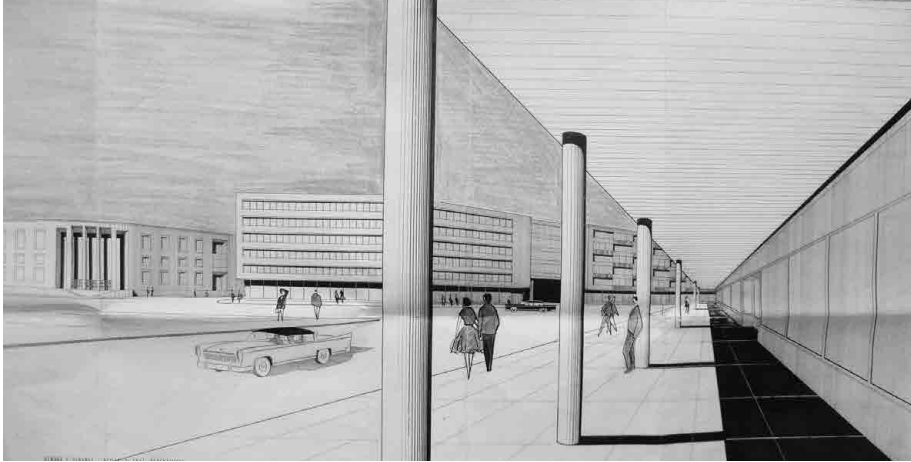


Fig.4. Tirana's Center unbuilt project 1970s, with the existing National Bank building, arch. B. Mørpurgo in the left, 18x7cm. (A.Q.N.SH. - Central Technical Archive of Building, Tirana, Albania).

The principles of Rationalism, such as the one of *urbanistica integrale*,<sup>7</sup> were applied in urban planning, while architecture styles varied from classicism to severe and unadorned buildings. However, this intense building activity was interrupted by the war, in 1943. Today, 70 years later, the Italian pre-war footprints on the Albanian towns are still visible. It can be claimed that the *dialogue* has never ceased completely: on the contrary, it has remained present on the Albanian planning and architectural scene, although to a limited extent. Kolevica, an Albanian architect, writes about Italian heritage as follows:

*"The intellectuals returned home after the end of their studies conducted in Western Europe countries, were able to highly appraise Italy's era realizations such as the hotel Dajti, the National Bank (Fig. 4) and the Maternity Hospital for their architectonic values. Those realizations have been a kind of reference point regarding the aesthetics of the built environment that followed."*<sup>8</sup>

This strong relation to the Italian legacy is easily readable in some of the most important works during the socialist period as well, such as the Palace of Culture and the Historical Museum, both facing Scanderbeg square, the core of Tirana. In the light of the latest transformations, the country went through a violent informal urbanization process that significantly altered the shape of its urban fabric. Spontaneous developments, fragmentation of public space, demolitions and other threats to townscape heritage have also touched on modern *Italian* architecture. These phenomena have been brought into the open by numerous studies over the last few years, conducted mainly by Italian scholars. It should be noted at this point that the burgeoning literature on this theme has brought important contribution to the rediscovery of architectural projects carried out in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the final goal to enhance and consolidate the historical-documentary identity of this great heritage.<sup>9</sup>

7 P. Capolino, *Architetture del moderno Tirana 1923-1943* (Rome: Prospettive Edizioni, 2011).

8 P. Kolevica, *Arkitektura dhe diktatura* (Tirana: Marin Barleti, 1997), 12.

9 A. Giusti, *Albania architettura e città 1925-1943* (Florence: Maschietto Editore, 2006).

### The architect's role in the newborn political system of socialist Albania

The prominent role exercised by the Party in the realities of a socialist country is fluently interpreted by Groys as follows:

*“When the entire economic, social, and everyday life of the nation was totally subordinated to a single planning authority commissioned to regulate, harmonize, and create a single whole out of even the most minute details, this authority - the Communist party leadership - was transformed into a kind of artist whose material was the entire world and whose goal was to “overcome the resistance” of this material and make it pliant, malleable, capable of assuming any desired form.”*<sup>10</sup>

The post war years were characterised by an official attitude of problem solving, which went beyond ideologies. The lack of a critical background is one of the biggest obstacles in interpreting the architecture of the socialist age. The official discourses replaced any form of critical or introspective approach, as Shlapentokh sharply notes:

*“Important policy changes were often “signalled” rather than communicated in the form of clear and detailed directive. A signal might be given in a speech or article...or via a show trial or the disgrace of a prominent official associated with particular policies.”*<sup>11</sup>

A signal was given even by a missed call, as it happens in the meeting between artists and the prominent leader. This is documented in one of the numerous published works of the PPSH<sup>12</sup> (Labour Party of Albania) leader, “*Mbi letersine dhe artin*” [Concerning Literature and Art]. The volume contains various speeches, articles and conversations covering the period 1944 - 1976.

In the eve of the first Congress of the LAWA,<sup>13</sup> held in June 1957, the political elite attended a meeting with representatives of various artistic and cultural categories, such as literature, painting, music and sculpture. This can be seen as a sign of the great importance the regime gave to art and culture. At the same time, it shows that architecture did not receive the same treatment: not even one architect was invited to the meeting. This reflects a subordinated role given to the architectural practice by the rulers.

When their absence was noticed by the Minister of Interior Affairs, Hoxha (the Communist leader of Albania, 1944-1985) had a serious outburst: “... they didn't pay the due attention to giving national imprint to our architecture ... We don't need them formally to be here!”

Considering the episode, the architect M. Velo recounts:

*“In 1967, an architectural section was created within LAWA. There was not a lot to be mentioned except for a few conferences and the appearance of some articles in LAWA's periodicals, Drita (Fig. 5) and Nendori. Most architects stood marginalized. [...] The socialist system structure was set up in such a way as to facilitate all the personnel to be under the administration of a department, in order to exert centralised control. Design was considered a practice merely connected to the building process, alien to the artistic creation... except for a few cases. Obviously, the choice was not made by architects... any architect's request was considered excessive.”*<sup>14</sup>

10 B. Groys, *The total art of Stalinism* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), 3.

11 V. Shlapentokh, *Soviet intellectuals and political power* (London, New York: I. B. Tauris&Co, 1990).

12 Partia e Punes se Shqiperise [Albanian Labour Party].

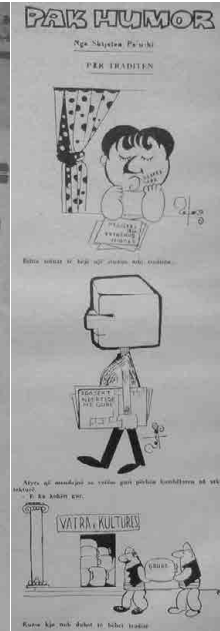
13 League of Albanian Writers and Artists.

14 M. Velo, *Parallel with architecture* (Tirana: Shtypshkronja Stevia, 1998), 88-89.



Fig.5. *Drita*, LAVA's weekly magazine, front page, 1976, 10x9cm. (Personal collection)

Fig.6. Satirical sketches on the misuse of tradition in construction, 1976, 8x22cm. (*Drita*)



### How to build: the official attitude towards the built environment

According to the records, since 1955, at the initiative of PPSH, the slogan *faster, cheaper and better* became the prevailing principle that accompanied the Party led construction sector throughout the entire socialist period.

“*Faster*” represents explicitly the mindset shaped by the belated development of Albania compared with the rest of Europe.<sup>15</sup> After the collapse of communism, the lack of patience might be seen as the extension of the communist era’s attitude expressed perfectly by the slogan to build fast. Edi Rama, a painter by profession, Mayor of Tirana in the past decade, and currently the new elected Prime Minister, illustrates the strained connection between Albanians and time. His comments read:

“... *This is an important moment in our history: We are trying to get rid of the past and are working hard to catch up with the future but we are still remaining in the middle of both... I do not think that a day will come when Tirana will escape contradiction. It will remain contradictory as the expression of the impatience to catch up with the future before the future catches up with us.*”<sup>16</sup>

15 In this respect I cite Jacomoni’s memoirs: “...il contatto con gli italiani, che già ai tempi di Zog aveva costituito una spinta al progresso, portava gli albanesi ad affrontare dinamicamente i problemi della rigenerazione economica, sociale, politica e morale. Era diffusa un’ansia di riguadagnare il tempo perduto, un orgogliosa aspirazione a dare prova delle migliori qualità, per mettersi al passo con le nazioni più progredite e meritare un posto degno nella famiglia dei popoli occidentali...” See F. Jacomoni, *La politica dell’Italia in Albania* (Focca San Casciano: Cappelli, 1965), 179.

16 M. Salzmann, *Tirana, Planning Building Living* (Salzburg-Vienna: Mury Salzmann Verlag, 2010), 75-80.



“*Cheaper*” (low cost building) is hardly surprising, as it is the only option for an underdeveloped economy. The foreign aid has been a binding constraint to the economic growth, while the later strategy of self-reliance, if anything, was unrealistic and catastrophic.

“*Better*” seems to indicate the aspiration for beauty. As it will be argued below in the text, abuse in the name of cost reduction at the expense of aesthetics and beauty became a frequent practice. All these considered, it appears obvious that there was an evident inner contradiction between building fast, cheap, and better. However, it is not easy to understand the real architectural dimension of that period, unless regarded in the limited position that architecture held during the years of the regime. It furnishes quite clearly the ambivalent standpoint of political rhetoric and ideological complications.

PPSh’s monthly magazine “*Rruga e Partise*” [Party’s Road] provides a survey regarding questions of aesthetics in architecture, entitled: *Issues of aesthetics in architecture*.<sup>17</sup> The author, Shinasi Dragoti, Minister of Construction, underlines the main ethics that socialist architectural ideals should take into account:

- (1) Socialist architecture must be characterized by simplicity.
- (2) Modern architecture should be the example to be followed on *scientific bases*. The principles of composition were to be found in simple shapes, line harmony and clear structural schemes.
- (3) National form is fundamental for the principles of a new architecture. Instead of borrowing shapes, elements and details from the past, architects should study tradition in order to attain a better understanding of historic residential areas, detecting the components of urban transformations, influences, and mainly giving the right responses to social demands.
- (4) Last but not least, the necessity of economic limitations of the building program is an inseparable part of the socialist economy regulations.

### Parallel realities

*“In socialist societies, most intellectuals express their views privately, and only a small number are able to publicly defend their views or even be involved in “material” forms of oppositional activity.”*<sup>18</sup>

This paper is based on published material from the 1960s and the 1970s, when the focus was on the building industrialization and rationalization, and when the first steps towards prefabrication were made.

Maks Velo and Petraq Kolevica stand out not only for their contributions through their projects and realizations, but also for shedding light on socialist architecture through their memoirs included in their books: *Paralel me arkitekturen* and *Arkitektura dhe diktatura*.

Velo’s academic formation, like his colleague Kolevica’s, was completed in 1957 at the Polytechnic Institute in Tirana. His deep knowledge and sensibility of traditional values is manifested in his disapproval of the proposed demolition of Tirana’s Clock Tower by his colleagues, as documented by the LAWA’s weekly newspaper: *Drita*, 28.03.1965.<sup>19</sup>

*“The Clock Tower is missing from the model and the drawings edited by the urban planning section of the Ministry of Building.... What is impressing is the fact that it is proposed by my architectural colleagues, as they should be the first citizens taking care of architecture heritage.”*

17 S.H. Dragoti, “Mbi disa probleme te estetikes ne arkitekture,” in *Rruga e Partise* 7 (1974): 26-37.

18 Shlapentokh, *Soviet intellectuals*, 104.

19 Velo, *Parallel with architecture*, 55.

In his first essay<sup>20</sup>, Kolevica addresses the uniformity and monotony, both derived from the inappropriate use of dwelling types, a practice that has been extensively applied since 1949:

*“Since the special team of experts focused on drawing prototypes for various building types erroneously ceased to exist in 1958, the only change carried out was on the etiquette of the type name, as the 1958 type has been renamed for the following years in type 59/1, 60/c etc with the add “revised” or “reworked”. What does that mean? For 8 years we have been using the same types of dwellings, are we going to do the same for the following 5 years? Should we wilfully accept monotony?”*

The article entitled *Construction to be embellished or beauty to be constructed?*, signed by Mosko, Kolevica, and Comi, was defined by the authorities as the *black article* according to Kolevica's memoirs.<sup>21</sup> It appeared in the main daily political newspaper *Zeri I Popullit* [People's Voice] on March 19, 1972. In this essay, the authors draw attention to dominant questions dealing with aesthetics. They make an objective portrayal of the Albanian architectural reality, focused on the close relationship between architecture and economy. The main reason for still not reaching high quality standards was not the economic factor, as the lack of funds often led to believe, but rather the bad layouts and poor efficiency of the building program. By quoting the Vitruvius triad - solid, useful, and beautiful - the authors call attention to the prevailing negligent attitude toward the third quality, as if it were an optional component of the architecture practice, instead of being an indissoluble part of the whole. The second issue is the role that tradition plays in the contemporary architecture, and how architects perceive the values of the past, in order to satisfy contemporary needs. They assert that architecture is inextricably linked with its era and that it can express itself only in the contemporary form and language. The third issue reviewed in the article is architecture and urban planning, considered as two different but inseparable elements. They mention the superficiality of urban studies and the inappropriate use of building types among the numerous reasons for the monotony of cities. The authors make a frank remark for the potential effect that the upcoming prefabricated buildings might have on cities:

*“Last but not least, materials and the works quality play an important role in achieving beauty in architecture. Generally speaking, we haven't moved forward in regards to this field. Architects are generally left alone to fight the difficult battle of quality in construction. Any extra request of the architect gets labelled with the bitter words “architect's caprice”, as if the architect was to build his own private building rather than public housing, hospitals, schools, etc. ... carrying the great responsibility assigned by the party such as building the cities, creating the tangible environment where entire peoples' lives take place ... the architects must be the first ones to advocate for the execution and implementation of the decisions of the 8th Congress of the Party, to raise the scientific and aesthetic level of our architecture, so that it becomes more diverse, appealing, and pretty.”*<sup>22</sup>

Reflection on art was not allowed due to severe censorship. By reading the article, one might sense even the authors' uncertainty whether to publish their critique or not. A sense of fear and insecurity can be easily captured in the following phrase:

*“...It happens very often that one argues, raises problems, indicates plausible solutions, but unfortunately nothing happens; there is a gap between theory and practice and worst of all is that even the curators of this text are not certain that publishing the article was the right thing to do.”*

The following events proved that their fear and concerns were founded. The opposition was usually conducted through critical articles up to the dramatic events of the 4<sup>th</sup> Plenum of the Central Committee of the PPSH, which brought political repercussions. Clearly, the authors

20 P. Kolevica, “A critical overview of our buildings,” in *Zeri i Popullit*, 28.01.1966.

21 Kolevica, *Arkitektura*, 76.

22 Instead of the official triade faster, better, and cheaper.



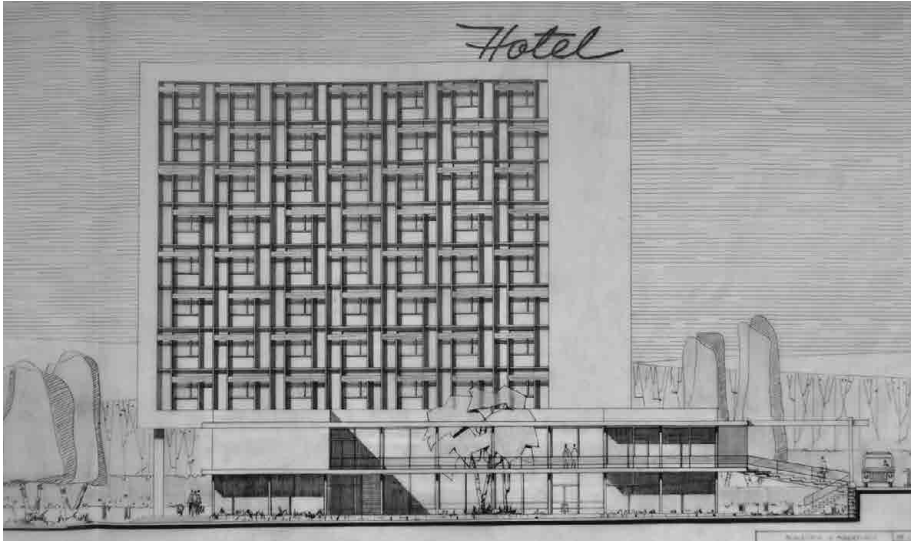


Fig.7. Arch. Valentina Pistoli, study architecture in Poland, Hotel Elbasan, 1973, 17x10cm. (A.Q.N.SH. - Central Technical Archive of Building, Tirana, Albania).

Fig.8. Arch. P. Kolevica, Dwelling in Korca town, even constrained to the use of type apartments, the result is not in contrast with the beauty, 1968, 17x10cm. (Nentori 6/19).

trespassed the limits set by the Party. And indeed, under the strong pressure of the political elite, one of the authors was compelled to condemn the attitude and the theories expressed in the previous writing.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, some of his colleague's work were cited as realizations under the foreign decadent influences: Korca's Library, ATSH building, the multilevel hotels in Tirana, Shkoder, Korce, Elbasan, or Sarande, socio-cultural buildings in Corovode, Fier, etc. (Fig.7, Fig.8) The typical purge ritual was that of confessing your sins, recognizing your errors by apologizing and if you were lucky, it resulted in a simple warning.<sup>24</sup>

### The first National Conference of Architects

The first National meeting of Architects in Albania only took place on May 6, 1971, in the lecture room of the Palace of Culture of Tirana, under the direction of the LAWA. This delay expresses a stagnation that was far beyond what occurred in the so-called Eastern Bloc during that period, hence confirming the marginal role reserved to the architectural profession by the political agenda of the Party. Nevertheless, the event was widely reported by the League's monthly magazine *Nendori*, No. 6 (1971), *Arkitektet shtrroje problemet e tyre*. [Architects lay their problems]

The main purpose of the summit, as the keynote speech revealed, was to bring a contribution, however small, to the *inexistent* architectural debate. Sokrat Mosko, an architect who graduated in Moscow, member of the guiding Committee of the LAWA, presented the keynote speech entitled: *Per nje nivel me te larte ne krijimtarine tone urbanistike dhe arkitektonike* [To a higher level in our urban and architectural creativity]. It started by extolling the strides architecture and urbanism made under the auspices of the PPSH during the post-war years, as the norm of political correctness demanded. Thereafter, it focused mainly on the efforts undertaken by all the specialists to produce quality projects, both at the architectural and urban scales. The rational use of land was widely treated. The author stressed the necessity of adapting the new housing location to the local morphology and climate. By following the logic of the terrain, the buildings would be integrated with the surroundings, at the same time keeping away the risk of monotony.

Listing a series of questions that architects have to deal with, the author considers the lack of attention to ethics and aesthetics as the main issues responsible for the situation. The tasks given to architects included the pursuit of national form and the search for solutions to prevent the risk of monotony in residential buildings. Monotony was singled out as one of the main concerns, an occurrence that erroneously was often charged to the shortage of building materials and the necessity of keeping low building costs.

Among several lectures, Kolevica's speech, *Arkitektura duhet te ece perpara* [Architecture should go ahead] stood out for its objectivity in the way the issues were presented. Petraq Kolevica belonged to the first generation of engineers<sup>25</sup> trained in Albania (no program of architectural studies existed there until 1966). The text underlines the responsibility and the important role that architects should play within the Albanian society. Kolevica's blunt statement goes far beyond the individual interest, it points out the emergent need to raise the cultural level among the architects, in order to deal with the current issues. I quote from it extensively:

"Being an architect entails great responsibilities towards our society... It is painful what I'm going to say, but we need to observe critically in order to know ourselves better. Scarcity of theoretical

23 S. Mosko, "Roli edukativ i veprave te arkitektures," in *Drita*, 04.04.1976.

24 The thing that strikes one who reads communist authors is the uniformity of style in which their work is written. It is though they were the product of one single mind.

25 The first contingent of architecture graduate students in Albania came in 1971, though, only a small part of the Polytechnic Institute students could graduate as architects since 1956.

approach is a fact in our professional reality. Dilettantism is prevailing in our performance. Architecture and art history as interpretation tools of contemporary aspects is missing... It's a common practice to proceed in a superficial way or even by leafing through magazines without following a design concept. Our judgment stops here: I like it, I do not like it. A further consequence of this phenomena is that sometimes architects pick up erroneously from the reference model the unfitting element!"

No less controversial is Kolevica's view regarding the disdain shown by the rulers towards the architectural profession. By mentioning the significant fact that there has never been an Albanian architect who studied abroad for any period of time, either the construction problems of schools, hospitals, houses, or how foreign cities dealt with similar urban issues, Kolevica points out the profound isolation and utter need for freedom to contact foreign colleagues, and have free access to information. Obviously, the nonconformist aspect of the discourses focused upon specific aesthetic issues, was not well received by the authorities, Hoxha's wife included. This was the start of a series of events with dramatic consequences for architects, making it an integral part of the never ending *fight against bourgeois and revisionist tendencies*.

### **The assault against foreign influences in artistic creation and its impact on architecture**

The long-term strategy that the Party adopted in dealing with Albanian intellectuals was two-pronged schemes, which expressed themselves into a series of love-hate issues. Let us have a glance at the overall ideological assault undertaken by PPSH before quoting the architectural works that were subject to fierce criticism.

The first confrontation dates back to the second half of 1940s. At the time, Albania was undergoing a vast radicalization process, distinguished by centralization of power and determination to bring intellectuals under the control of the Party. Against a background of fear and suspicion, intensified by the isolation from the West,<sup>26</sup> Sejfulla Maleshova, the first president of the Union of Albanian Writers (founded on October 7, 1945<sup>27</sup>) was "successfully" expelled from the Politburo and the Central Committee. His creed consisted in a moderate line and conciliatory policy between communist and non-communist writers. In regards to foreign policy, his beliefs involved closer relationships with the West. It was a turning point for the cultural reality. Maleshova's fall in early 1946 and the other harsh measures targeting liberal and moderate intellectuals, oriented literature and art towards the Soviet Union; this gave life to the Socialist Realism era, subordinating art to politics. A fast increasing exchange of information, experts, technology and planning instruments took place between Albania and the Eastern Bloc countries<sup>28</sup> throughout the 1950s.

A series of events, starting with Khrushchev's attack on Stalin and Belgrade's rapprochement with Moscow, led to Albania's official split up with the Soviet Union in 1961. This break had repercussions on the inner policy; consequently, a campaign of bloody purges targeting the Moscow-trained specialists occurred in the mid-sixties. Blumi sharply analyzes the events:

*"The goal of the state was to recruit a refined personnel, untainted by the irretrievable past... in less than four years Hoxha created a class-war pitting labourers, party members, youth, and intellectual groups against each other..."*<sup>29</sup>

26 M. Vickers, *The Albanians - A Modern History* (London, New York: I. B. Tauris Publishers, 1995), 169.

27 R. P. Pritti, *Socialist Albania since 1944* (Cambridge, London: The MIT Press, 1978), 168.

28 During the period 1949-1961 Russians, were the only to be taught as foreign language in Albania. More than 3000 young Albanians completed their university studies in the Soviet Union; see X. Gjecovi, et al, *Historia e Popullit Shqiptar*, vol. 4 (Tirana: To Ena, 2009).

29 I. Blumi, "Hoxha's Class War: The cultural revolution and state reformation, 1961-1971," in *East European Quarterly* XXXIII 3 (1999): 314.

The method used was that of sending many writers and artists to the countryside to “purify their minds by soiling their hands”, the real goal being to intimidate intellectuals and control them. An article published in the Party’s daily press *Zeri i Popullit*, on June 18, 1966, was attacking the writer Dhimiter Xhuvani for his novel *Tuneli*, containing foreign bourgeois-revisionist aesthetic concepts.

That was the period when the so-called Albanian Cultural Revolution took place, in parallel with the Chinese Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. One of its “greatest achievements” was the abolition of religion by closing down religious buildings, a few being converted into cultural centres, sports halls, theatres, and storage depots.

In the early 1970s, top prizes in literature were awarded, to Dh. Xhuvani among others, confirming PPSH’ dual strategy of attacking artist when they committed errors and showing compassion when they “overcame” them. The 4<sup>th</sup> plenum of the Albanian Communist Party in 1973 was a watershed moment in the Albanian history, especially in the history of the arts. Hoxha’s report focused on the struggle against foreign influences and liberal attitudes. The plenum directives exerted immediate repercussions on the LAWA, whose leadership was replaced. Critics of modernist tendencies in art and culture went so far as to dealing with outward appearances. Before entering the country, the few foreign visitors were obligated to “pay a visit” to the airport barbershop, in order to be brought in line with the Party standards. This was meant to protect the Albanians against “extravagant” foreign fashions.

There have been endless purges - only partially exposed so far - of *undesired elements* throughout the entire period ruled by the PPSH, including all fields without exception, starting from the political, religious, or military milieu, to the artistic sphere. Architecture was not absent from the scene. Its turn came in the mid 1970s. It is to be stressed that the Prime Minister, Mehmet Shehu made a parallel between the longhaired youngsters’ alien fashion and the suspect works, projects and achievements, subject to modernist tendencies, stressing the urgent need for revision. In this atmosphere, during a meeting held in Tirana’s Palace of Culture, in the summer of 1975, a group of architects including S. Mosko, K. Comi, M. Velo, M. Bego, and P. Kolevica, were charged with liberal attitudes, modernist influences contrasting the anti-formalist “healthy socialist taste” for the following respective projects: the Theater in Fier, the Palace of Culture in Sarande, the Residential Building near Tirana’s center and the ATSH building, the extension of the Beaux Arts Institute of Tirana, the Library building in Korçe. (Fig. 9, 10, 11) As usual, all critiques and attacks found ample space in magazines and newspapers; to cite just one of many:

*“In our discussions conducted in recent years, it is a fact unanimously accepted by our healthy artistic opinion that Fier Theater, Korça’s Library, ATSH building and others as well have been subjects of formalism, imitation of foreign patterns with disregard to economic factors, etc... They are creations in contrast with our healthy socialist society’s taste.”*<sup>30</sup>

This latter phrase carried a lot of weight in that epoch, with diverse side effects for the protagonists. Maks Velo’s case is emblematic. Not only was he the first one to have been enrolled in the LAWA in the late 1960s, both as a painter and architect, but he was also the only one to have been imprisoned for his modernist inclinations.

*“The colleagues’ ambiguous attitude was that of architects calling me a painter and of painters in their turn considering me an architect. Neither faction would fully accept me in their ranks. My twofold activity was considered (not loudly) a shortcoming. Under the socialist rule, there are certain tolerable professional boundaries within which one can act. I violated the borders and this was considered a mistake.”*<sup>31</sup>

30 A. Uci, “Architecture and aesthetics,” in *Nentori* 8 (1977): 45.

31 Velo, *Parallel with architecture*, 100.

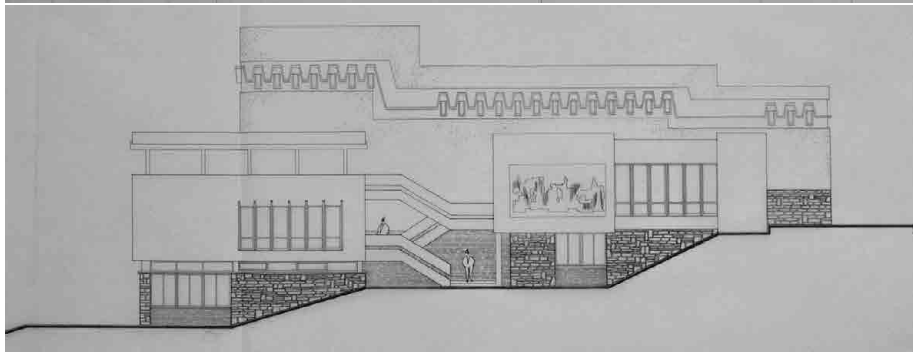
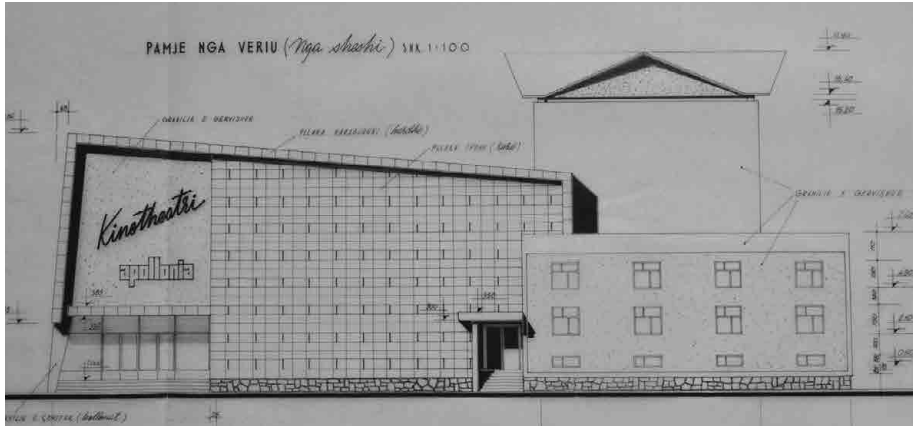


Fig.9. Theater of Fier, Arch. Sokrat Mosko, 1968, 17x9cm. (A.Q.N.SH. - Central Technical Archive of Building, Tirana, Albania).

Fig.10. Theater of Sarande, Arch. Koco Comi, 1976, 17x7cm. (A.Q.N.SH. - Central Technical Archive of Building, Tirana, Albania).

Fig.11. Residential building, Arch. Maks Velo, 1971, 17x13cm. (A.Q.N.SH. - Central Technical Archive of Building, Tirana, Albania).



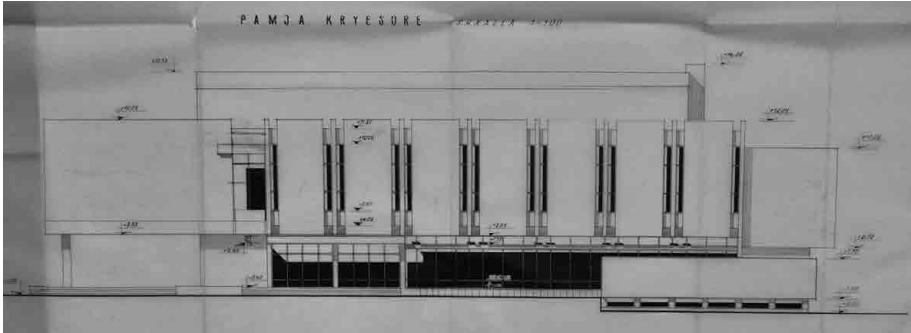


Fig.12. National Gallery of Art, Arch. Enver Faja, 1973, 17x9cm. (A.Q.N.SH. - Central Technical Archive of Building, Tirana, Albania).

Maurizio Bego's career, which had started in Tirana in 1965, was shifted downwards: he was dismissed from the Institute of Architecture and Town Planning of the Fier district, and transferred to a State Construction Services Company. In his memoirs<sup>32</sup>, Bego marks the period that followed the 4<sup>th</sup> PPSH Plenum as the *witch-hunt* period, namely hunting for scapegoats in order to put into practice the directives of the Plenum. It is worth mentioning the embarrassing situation when Bego was bound to draft a document that "should utter self-criticism after reflection-into-self". It was a double-edged sword. On the one hand, by rejecting your faults you could be considered an anti-Party element, a situation with uncertain ending; on the other hand, taking full responsibility would mean condemning yourself. Like his colleague Bego, Kolevica was also transferred, despite his young age. This meant the outright end of his design activity. In his memoirs<sup>33</sup>, the architect E. Faja, author of the project of the National Gallery of Art in Tirana, (Fig. 12), pays a tribute to the work of Kolevica, whom he calls *the rebel of Albania's Socialist Realism architecture*.

## Conclusions

One of the most important general conclusions of this paper is the high price the Albanian architecture has paid being subdued to the PPSH's artistic policy. The new regime proceeded to carry out its political program where the removal of every vestige of western influence in Albania was one of its priorities. The first policy variable was brought about by the implementation of Socialist Realism, as correctly described by Åman:

*"The important thing was the rejection of Western architecture. What was to be put in its place was far from clear to begin with... It was the negative choice that mattered."*<sup>34</sup>

Despite Hoxha's long lasting rule, the socialist development in Albania was not a monolithic all over the period. The main features to be considered in this respect are the post-war unsettled context of the architectural practice, and the drastic political and economic changes Albania went through. The continuous reassessments of strategic priorities that resulted from changes in the foreign policy exerted a negative impact on the cultural policy. Hence, the creative potential of architecture was limited by isolation, by fear and by the deprivation of rights, such as the free access to information, the right to openly discuss professional issues, etc. Shlapentokh so eloquently argues that:

32 M. Bego, *Skeda arkitekture-Ne kroniken e nje jete te dallgezuar 1965-2004* (Tirana: De a sh.p.k, 2009).

33 E. Faja, *Kush e drejton urbanistikën shqiptare* (Tirana: UFO Press, 2008), 54.

34 A. Åman, *Architecture and Ideology in Eastern Europe during the Stalin Era* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1992), 254.



*“Common sense dictates that, all other things being equal, a nation’s technological and cultural progress depend heavily on its capacity to utilise the talents of its people, including those with special education and training that foster creativity. A society’s capacity to capitalize on such talents depends very much, in turn, on the social status of intellectuals and, in particular, on the intellectual’s attitudes toward the existing social, economic, and political order. The greater the intellectuals’ alienation from the society in which they live and create, the less they will contribute to the progress of that society.”*

In the end, the published works consulted for this research allow two general observations: Despite the harsh official censorship, some honest intellectuals’ reaction was present within the dull, dreary, mediocre, and blatantly propagandistic Albanian press, such as Kolevica’s articles, which prevail among his colleagues’, and set an example of moral courage. The ultimate purpose of controlling the aesthetics of buildings was to keep the leading actors from developing a proper theoretical view.

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