

## The National Theatre of Tirana: a non-normative DNA

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*This is not just the fall of a building designed by Giulio Bertè in 1939, an important part of the architectural and Cultural heritage of Albania, as the building doesn't mark of only architectural value but of course of its impact in the urban morphology providing a qualitative public space in the center of the city of Tirana as an integral part of its conception, but the repeated act of the fall of democracy in Albania after the destruction of the historic houses of Tirana, the destruction of the National Stadium, and the collective memory and history of Albania. (Kristo in Bugaric, 2020)*

At the first light of dawn of Sunday 17th of May 2020, the bulldozers escorted by the police forces started the demolition of the National Theatre of Tirana, by now one of the still-standing shreds of evidence of a very kaleidoscopic history such the one that Albania and its capital have been living during the last century. After driving away all the actors and activists that had been staying inside the structure during the last few months in its defense, around 4.30 AM the first blow of the bulldozers hit the main façade of the north-right building of the complex. Just a few seconds and an iconic image of the city of Tirana, and indeed of the country itself, ceased to exist.

If we refer only opinions regarding the value of the building before and after the destruction, the debate behind the event risks to fall into a subjective point of view, where every opinion claims to be sustained by the most valuable and proven theses. Instead, what we find worthy to analyze is the originality of the National Theatre that represented for many decades a non-normative act either from an historical, urban, and behavioral perspective, within the peculiar condition of Albania, or in its destruction that embodied an unique manifestation of the decision to not follow any existing norm regarding the defense of

recognized valuable buildings. Following this thread, we firmly believe that new reflections can arise and, maybe, it could be clearer why so many people stood in its defense and why its destruction was a scar that cannot be healed in the physical environment of the city of Tirana

### **Between Autarchy and Propaganda: a Non-normative History**

In his work, *Le normal et le pathologique*, the French philosopher Georges Canguilhem (1966) defined normativity the capacity of organism to create more or less efficient way of organizing their structure with the purpose of surviving, and indeed, the life - and reiteration - of complex systems is a normative act in itself. Starting from this parallelism with medical thinking and physiopathology, we use this concept to identify some enzymes of non-normativity of the history of the National Theatre of Tirana, we highlight why, in its specific case, his long-term existence was guaranteed precisely by its inner non-normative DNA.

The National Theatre, built during the late 1930s by the construction company Pater-Costruzioni Edili Speciali di Milano



**Figure 1.** The National Theater of Tirana. Author: Saimir Kristo

based on the design of the Italian Architect Giulio Bertè, was completed in 1940.

In our speculation, what is interesting to underline is that the above-mentioned company was mostly known during the Italian Fascism for the realization of residential interventions (Viliani, 2012) in the former Italian Empire and for small pavilions and exhibitions spaces dedicated to party fairs and propaganda. The National Theatre of Tirana represents, instead, an exceptional act of its activity since it is one of the few public buildings of that kind that Pater - and Bertè - could realize under the fascist times. Furthermore, as reported by a 2008 research by the Polytechnic University of Bari, the building was made with material prefabricated in Milan - experimental cement mixed with poplar fibers and algae. (Menghini, 2013). The use of that material, called 'carpilite', even though being glorified during the Italian dictatorship, was an act of necessity rather than a technological advancement as it is claimed by Mussolini's propaganda. The poverty of Italy, and the impossibility to retrieve good materials from many European nations because of its alliances with the Hitler's Germany, were justified by the Fascist Regime with the concept of 'autarchy' that, in the International law, stands for the capacity of a country to be completely independent of the foreign production of any kind of good. The original project was named "Circolo Skanderbeg" or "Italian-Albanian District - Skanderbeg". The project was part of the Italian strategy during the occupation of Albania between 1939 and 1943. Two main parallel buildings formed the complex, divided by a half-patio for relaxing, with a pool in the middle and a gym at the front end of the building. The architecture of the complex was based on the principles of the "ventennio", as the twenty years of Mussolini's regime in Italy are called. Initially, the left building was used as the Savoia Cinema where films were shown, and theatre and concerts were performed. The technical infrastructure was entirely suitable for cultural and public events because the building materials offered perfect conditions for acoustics and light technology. It was therefore for a long time also used for meetings and conferences.

The main front entrance doors lead to the main hall, paved in black and white marble, and draped with a double layer of velvet curtains. The doors also lead to the left and right lodges and a gallery as well. In this theatre, Albanians could admire Greta Garbo, Laurence Olivier, Alida Valli, Anna Magnani and attend performances by composers such as Vivaldi, Paganini, Chopin, Schumann, Verdi, Bellini, and Donizetti, not to mention those of the most popular Albanian artists of that time. In 1941, it was renamed Kosova Cinema. Its mirror image, the building on the south was the main headquarters of the Skanderbeg Foundation which undertook, under the motto "Pro Cultura", several studies and important publications, and was the forerunner of the Academy of Sciences of Albania. After the Second World War, communist authorities used the complex for public show trials of governors accused of collaborating with ideological enemies. Thereafter, British and American, later on, Russian films were shown there. Later the Professional Theatre of the State was located there, until June 1991, later known as the Teatri Popullor (People's Theatre). When it was called the National Theatre, the most famous artists of communist Albania performed there. After the fall of the dictatorship, the theatre building was neglected and left to itself, because of a lack of financing. Recently the Theatre is in the center of a citizen movement. "The Citizen's Alliance for the Theatre" fighting to prevent its demolition from a political campaign that is stigmatizing the building as Fascist and built of poor-quality materials. The building stands against the decisions of the municipality of Tirana and socialist governments that, since 2002, tried at least twice to demolish it and replace it with new high rise profitable developments, and finally succeed the 17<sup>th</sup> of May 2020 conducting the life of the National Theatre to an end. Moreover, not only the Albanian civil society was engaged in its defense: on the 17<sup>th</sup> of March 2020, Europa Nostra - the paneuropean federation for Cultural Heritage - inserted the Theatre in the its list of the '7 most in danger building of the European Heritage' and, together with them, many other foreign institutions and associations. Anyway, even this call remained unheard and, what we can see if we go today to the place, it's a desolated void waiting for nobody knows what.

### **The value of images: a non-normative collective appropriation**

*«The destruction of the National Theatre leaves a vacuum in Tirana's physical space. Despite its specific architectural value, recognizable in its big courtyard able to generate spatial tensions and urban space within its twin bodies, through the months of its defense has strengthened the human identity of many in the name of a sense of collective and civic responsibility. Maybe, it is because of this that the Theatre should have been saved, because it reminded us that the built form defines images that, through a process of ac-*



**Figure 2.** The destruction of the Theater. Source: Albanian media.

ceptance and human appropriation (Dix, 2007), contribute to an evolutionary modification of ourselves. (Perna, 2020b)» As we have seen, the history of the National Theatre is full of non-normative events. Its construction was almost a *unicum* within the history of the Italian Empire and, not least, its technical features represented an obligated choice within an extraordinary historical moment of market isolationism and (fake) self-sufficient propaganda. Its entire life was indeed a series of moments where the original nature of the building continuously suffered attacks and discreditations generating the only case in the world where a public building such as a theatre of that kind it is transformed a bingo and casino house (1991) without further questioning and debates. Besides, the latter was just one of the main acts that led to its final destruction. Of course, there also some positive dynamics that aroused from these tragic events. During the last two years, a tense public debate ensued among intellectuals, artists, citizens the Alliance for the Protection of the Theater who became passionately involved. Citizens spent nights and months within the structure guided by the certainty that the building still was a bearer of social and collective values of the Albanian society that deserved to be defended and transmitted to the new generations. It has been a human appropriation of the architectural space of the theatre and a moment of empowerment and evolution for the national civic society at large and, just for this, its image and architecture had to be saved because it represented the spark with whom many people have constructed their sense of human and political beings. Just before the curtain fall for the National Theater of Albania, its last show was dedicated to the collective art exhibition of 52 young artists curated by artist/curator Stefano Romano. The exhibition “Objects, sounds, images, questions and some answers” a production laboratory with intellectual and creative discussions to encourage the student’s cultural and personal growth dedicated to the Theater itself, and as an oxymoron gesture, together with the Theater as a monument of architectural and historic values, fifty two arts works are buried with it. There is a not so old movie in the Albanian cinematography which is called *Parullat* (2001 - in English: Slogans) directed by Gjergj Xhuvani. It deals with the story of Andrea, a young and liberal-minded school teacher, who is sent from Tirana to work in a small village school in the rural mountains. The whole is developed around a series of empty and narcotic political slogans that slowly disenchant the protagonist and pre-

vent any kind of cultural and social debate with the small community where he, full with hopes, is sent to give his contribution. Unfortunately, even the debate on the theatre has been transformed in a series of slogans - from many of the parts involved - that completely twisted the situation and moved the attention towards topics that have little to do with the reality of the facts and are not able to focus on the real loss we all suffered from the violent disappearing of the National Theatre of Tirana as a primary example of a non-normative meaningful urban DNA.

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