Albanian Archipelagos': The City of a Non-normativity Foretold

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> *Globalization takes place only in capital and data. Everything else is damage control*
> *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*

Sub-urban non-normativities

During the last thirty years, Tirana, the capital of Albania, has taken the form of an archipelago, a city of islands. In what used to be a countryside of rolling hills, today one encounters gated communities of 'smart' mansions, private schools and shopping centers. These islands are expensive and exclusive utopias, literally, *non*-places. (Alas, can there ever be any cheap and non-exclusive utopias…!?) In-between these exclusively normative or normatively exclusive islands lies a 'sea' of non-normative suburban growth: whole neighborhoods haphazardly packed with two to three story constructions and unfinished concrete *Maison Dom-inos*. Such uneven suburban distribution is also reenacted from within the historic city of Tirana in the form of an archipelago of towers, designed by architectural firms like 51N4E, MVRDV, Archea Associati, Stefano Boeri Architetti, and others. As in the case of the rolling countryside, the 'sea' between the islands consists of an unbridled urban growth, which in this case, it is both an extension beyond the city, and an erasure of the existing historic fabric from within. The latter consist of what is commonly called the 'organic' fabric of the old Tirana, as well as the modern architecture of the 20's and 30's.

These high-rise islands may seem as randomly placed, but when seen from the tip of the flat pyramid of Skanderbeg Square, they seem to form a larger project. In "A White Pyramid And a Center that Is Not a Center", I argue that the white pyramid of Skanderbeg Square anticipates the new high-rises in the city and the carbon expenditure that ensues from such growth. Part of this argument is reproduced below:

«*The idea of a grid of towers dropped onto the city originated with the "French" master plan by Architecture Studio in 2004. While this plan, unlike the ones that followed it, hinted at an intertwining of the historic fabric with new high-rises, the latter eventually took precedence over the former. The objective was explicit*: "*Support the growth and modernization of the city*," *the very same goal that was behind Gherardo Bosio's plan of 1939. But Architecture Studio's plan was not so much about growth expanding the city as it was a long-term substitution of the existing with another city, another urban growth from within.*

The aim of Architecture Studio's plan, and especially what followed, was not to interrupt the urban flow but to encourage

and sustain more flows, more growth, more development. In these terms, the white pyramid is not absurd, capricious, out of place, or badly designed, as many in Tirana seem to think, *but rather rational and in full concordance with the physical and monetary scale and function of a larger yet more camouflaged flow: an intensive large-scale de- and reterritorialization taking place outside the center, yet aesthetically comprehensible only from within that center. The pyramid is an infrastructure for construction at one scale and for erasure at another. It mediates between new carbon flows of up-scale private development and urban mnemonic lobotomies: the erasure of a historic poché of mostly modern villas built in the 1920s and '30s. Between an underground parking garage that attracts carbon expenditure around the center and an amnesiac crowd enacting its pedestrian image through the gardens of native plants, bicycle infrastructure, and reflective sheets of water silently gushing forth from underneath the surfaces of the pyramid cladded with local stone*, the "*restructured*" *Skanderbeg Square is the noncarbon veil for a hypercarbon space. The white pyramid is the visible manifestation of the invisible "mani sulla citta"* (Santi & Rosi, 1963) *and the* "*white mythology*" (Derrida, 1974) *of an unconscious (or perhaps all too conscious) carbon reality with everlasting social, economic, and political consequences. The real center of the pyramid, its raison d'être, its sustenance, is in what flows outside the pyramid. The pyramid itself is empty* (Luarasi, 2019, 79-80)» .

Such argument should be extended to include the countryside: If the flat pyramid of the Skanderbeg Square retroactively structures and anticipates the archipelagos of towers in the city as well as the mnemonic damage that ensues from such urban growth, then this urban archipelagos retroactively structures and anticipates the unbridled sub-urbanization of the countryside, as well as the ecological damage that ensues from such sub-urban growth.

Archipelagic Utopias
Archipelagos is a post-modern *project*, and it has a history. It is most explicitly articulated by Oswald Mathias Ungers, Rem Koolhaas and Elias Zenghelis in the sixties, and today by Pier Vittorio Aureli, one of its strongest adherents. *Archipelagos* is based on the performativity of the fragment(s), rather than the whole. In Unger's and OMA's famous project of Berlin as a Green Archipelago, postwar Berlin is thought in terms of the "city within the city" (Aureli, 2011, p. 190), or a set of *autonomous* fragments mediated by a grid. The project departs "from modernism's comprehensive planning to propose a strategic retreat into a composition of finite, limited forms" (p. 218). In the Archipelagos's project, the lack of a coherent whole *defaults* into an internal structure of the city. As Aureli points out with regard to Unger's work, such structure "reflected the separateness that characterizes city form and became, in its limited

dimension, a representation of the city. [The] 'city within the city' was not the creation of an idyllic village as opposed to the fragmentation of the city, but an attempt to reflect the splintering form of the city from within the architectural artifact itself" (p. 190). Archipelagos is considered as both a methodology and a constitutive reality of the separateness of the city itself.

The central motivation behind the project of Archipelagos is *how to find urban form amid a disposition of unbridled growth and urbanization.* Such mandate, however, was also central for the modern theories of architecture and urban planning. These theories emerged in the nineteenth century as a way to deal both with the expansion of capital and that of diseases… Nietzsche already saw the earth as a body without organs infected by man (Nietzsche, 1969, p. 153)[1]. What *form* should the modern city and its architecture take? Not a particular one, because for modernity *"form is nothing"* (Cerdà, 1999, p. 85), to quote Ildefons Cerdà, the great theorist of urbanization. The form should be rather general, that of the organism. Such was the question Cerdà, Camillo Sitte, Hilberseimer, and Le Corbusier asked. The epistemologies of extension and self-generation that laid the ground for such questioning in the first place were already laid out by the enlightenment and critical philosophy in the 18th and 19th century. Yet the formal coherence sought through the epistemological ideal of the organism would prove to be utopian in face of the fragmentary and uneven development of the modern city. In the Archipelagos's project, the lack of an organic whole turns into a generative possibility; the impossibility of utopia becomes a measure of the "project's realism" (Aureli, 2011, p. 90). Upon close inspection, however, the project of Archipelagos is as utopian and non-realistic as 'modernism's comprehensive planning', with the difference that the epistemological and utopian dimension is shifted from the whole to the part: instead of one organicist autonomous whole we have, instead, many organicist autonomous fragments or parts. The latter serve as "city islands" (p. 197) for self-organizing, ideally monastic communities that are dialectically opposed to the infinite flows of capitalist production and "uprooting forces" (p. 215) of urbanization. In the Archipelagos's project, especially in Aureli's discourse, the architecture of the island acquires almost a vital status, the life quality or character of the community imagined to inhabit the 'city island'. With regard to Palladio, for instance, Aureli writes that his "architecture extends its influence on the city precisely by being a finite and thus clearly recognizable thing, a 'species' - in the sense that the Marxist philosopher Paolo Virno has used the term - consisting of a sole individual that can only be politically reproduced and never be transposed into an omnivorous general program" (p. 82). The building, then, or the island, is

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[1] *"The Earth (he said) has a skin; and this skin has diseases. One of these diseases, for example, is called 'Man'.*

personified and expressed as an individual, a conscious and political entity that is dialectically juxtaposed with other 'individuals', or individual looking-like objects. Here there is a surreptitious empathy or projection of the epistemological, political or aesthetic subjectivity onto the (architectural) object. Such empathy is the hallmark of style, despite the vehement rejection of it by Aureli and all those bent toward an ideological reading of architecture. That there is (a desire for) style is not a problem…; on the contrary, one can never be outside style; one starts and ends *in* style. But disavowing style and the technical density it entails in favor of an ideological dogma is a problem, insofar as it deforms current reality by simplifying it, and preempts future realities, more precisely that very realism that the dogma claims to *pro*-ject.

The so called 'fragments', 'parts' or 'city-islands' are rarely, if ever, autonomous. Or rather, their very perception as such depends on their *not* being autonomous. The 'autonomous' superblocks of Vienna that Aureli admires *so* much are not really autonomous from the planning standards of the city like Aureli seems to think. Instead, they are autonomous precisely because there are planning standards and institutional normativities that ensure the *image* of autonomy. Take the *Shallvare* and *Agimi* apartment buildings in Tirana, which are very similar in form, scale and spirit to the Viennese superblocks. After the nineties, their wonderful courtyards were violated and appropriated by in-formal constructions. Their 'autonomy' was obliterated precisely because of the lack of institutional planning standards and normativities that could have saved their formal autonomy from the non-normative capitalist greed of post-communist Albania; more precisely, by the lack of that very liberal and democratic institutional tradition that Aureli wants to be autonomous from. At a suburban level, it is really the gated neighborhoods, and not the communitarian collectives, that are the autonomous 'islands' of the archipelagos. They are *literally* autonomous at the expense of an equally literal nonexistence of a shared urban space, and precisely because such islands are *de jure* autonomous from those very planning standards and normativities that regulate and calibrate the urban form.

What happens outside and in-between the islands? Here, the Archipelagos's protagonists give an answer that is as utopian as it is naïve: in between the islands there is a "sea" (p. 225) of "nothingness," (p. 226) or a "green" (p. 226) zone with gardens, left to the islands' inhabitants or those who "choose to live […] more informal[lly] and temporar[ily]" (p. 226). Such being-left-by-itself-as-a-sea-of-nothingness is indexed by the empty grid. Who are the people inhabiting such grid? The rich and *sans culotte* farming organic tomatoes together? Such naively yet deliberately unthought space is nothing less than a calculated victim or the 'damage control' of the dialectics of the project: "…the 'green' between the islands serves as an antithesis to the 'cityness' of the islands. While the islands [are]

imagined as the city, the area in between is intended to be the opposite: a world in which any idea or form of the city [is] deliberately left to its dissolution" (p. 225) In reality, such in-between space is dissolved all right…; the uneven distribution of capital takes care of that 'dexterously', as if 'by itself'… It is the very same 'sea' dissolved into 'nothingness' from the outskirts of an 'orientally' formless Tirana to the 'post-industrially' formless landscape between New Haven and New York as seen from Metro-North. Rem Koolhaas is wrong when he claims that we have not paid sufficient attention to the countryside (Koolhaas, 2020, para. 1). It is not a matter of the city versus the countryside, but rather of expensive normative islands both in the city and countryside *on the one hand,* and an impoverished non-normative 'sea of nothingness' *on the other.*

Unconscious Anticipation

What is at stake here is how the archipelago's claims are reified into their opposite: how the islands of collective living become, in reality, gated communities; how the 'sea of nothingness' ends up being a collateral damage of urbanization; how its conceptual claims for a "collective dimension of the city" (Aureli, 2011, p. 197) anticipates the segregated global archipelagos of the 21st century. More generally, what is at stake here is how the predisposition of urban form may eventually be different from its conceptual and ideological content, and how the latter may retroactively sustain and anticipate the former, despite their difference. As Leonardo Benevolo points out, the urban forms of the industrial age well predated the advent of industrial machines:

«*Examples of Baroque town-planning and particularly certain illustrious buildings of the first half of the eighteenth century, are often impressive* **anticipations** *of the spatial dimension of the modern town (one can imagine the avenues of Versailles transformed into the "boulevards" of a late nineteenth-century town, just as the radiating avenues of the Champs Elysées became the basis for Haussmann's Etoile) whereas the time factor, which was to be so important in the new urban society, remained totally foreign to them*» (Benevolo, 1971, p. 12).

In light of such hypothesis, Benevolo distinguishes between the town planning practices and the political commitment of their protagonists. Though a Marxist himself, Benevolo is critical of those Marxist approaches who saw planning as a result rather than a trigger of social change. He points out that Haussmann, who, on a political level belonged to the reactionary regime of Napoleon III, in his planning practice he served the public. What is at stake here is the unconscious anticipation of a future through criteria that do not conform to what that future was originally imagined or intended to be, the gap between the ideological *orientation* and the *technicality* of practice, as well as the disposition of the latter to skew or invert the former.

Can we identify and change anticipation before it manifests

itself? Is it possible for archipelagos to anticipate a (city) form other than one with segregated islands in a sea of nothingness? What does such update of the concept of archipelagos involve? In "The White Pyramid" I argue that "our anticipation is structured by technics and our thoughts are exteriorized by technical tendencies, even before we have them. We do not choose such tendencies, any more than we do our name, our mother tongue, our social security number. Rather we are thrown into it" (Luarasi, 2019, p. 81). Unconscious anticipation is a "function of exteriorization" (Stiegler, 2008, p. 215). Such 'fate', however, is not absolutely determined, precisely insofar as it is technical, thus being open to the indeterminations and "equivocities of the techniques involved in the process of exteriorization" (p. 81). The technics in question consists of both design techniques involved in the modeling and making of architecture, as all as planning techniques or protocols involved in the making and planning of cities.

The question, then, is how the technics involved in the making of architecture and the city can change the conceptual and ideological terms of the Archipelagos's project. Or in Bachelardian terms: how can the *common* intuition of the conceptual terms be transformed into a *worked* intuition. With regard to the concept of the line, for instance, Bachelard writes: "The common intuition of the line is a 'totalitary' intuition which has wrongly accumulated an excess of teleology on the trace of the line: the line is thus determined not only step by step as it should be but from its origin to its end" (Bachelard, 1940, p. 95, quoted in Gandelsonas, 2000, p. 120). A line that is determined 'step by step' is the parametric curve, or the spline as it is colloquially called today. The parametric curve is a relational mathematical concept that controls - to put it simply - the way the geometry of the curvature changes in time. Whether a line is (intuitively perceived) as straight or curved it obeys the same the parametric relation. Such concept is not new and predates Bachelard; in his essay "Dialectics: Quantity and Quality" in *Anti-Dühring* Frederick Engels announces precisely such scientific model:

«...*people who in other respects show a fair degree of common sense may regard this statement (that is, contradiction = absurdity) as having the same self-evident validity as the statement that a straight line cannot be a curve and a curve cannot be straight. But regardless of all protests made by common sense, the differential calculus under certain circumstances nevertheless equates straight lines and curves, and thus obtains results which common sense, insisting on the absurdity of straight lines being identical with curves, can never attain*» (Engels, 1959, p. 165).

The apparent difference between a straight line and curve is an ideological distortion that can be explained by calculus. Engels suggests a 'parametric' *Model* that generalizes what we 'wrongly' perceive to be different shapes. "Contradiction = ab-

surdity" is only on the level of appearance: ontologically the straight line and the curve are the same even if they appear to be different.

Working the archipelagos

In light of such distinction one could *work* the concept of archipelagos. The islands do not have to necessarily look like islands, and the 'sea of nothingness' does not have to look like a rectangular grid. The islands could consist of relations that yield different forms at different building, district or territorial scales. The grid, on the other hand, is an ordering concept that can take different shapes, not just the rectangular one. The 'finite' architectural form does not have to be a 'militantly' rectangular building that 'looks dialectically' to other islands or the void of urbanization. Instead its form can be informed by different geometrical, economic and technological protocols that structure both what is perceived as an island and a 'sea of nothingness'. The city, or 'cityness' cannot stand in a dialectical opposition to urbanization. Rather the latter structures the former. The city, both in its formal and collective dimension, is what might yield from the processes of urbanization while remaining distinct from them. The finiteness of architecture cannot stand in a dialectical and oppositional relationship to the forces and flows of urbanization; it rather yields from a process of *creatively* framing those very forces and flows through different technicities. Thinking about islands and an acupunctural urbanism does not relieve us from thinking about the whole. Indeed, what seems to be at stake today, in these limitless pan-demic times is precisely the *re-working, re-acquirement* or *retrieval* of the very concept of the whole, both beyond a nineteenth century organicism and postmodern fragmentary dispersions. Such concept must be *re-worked* in light of both new and existing technical paradigms and their intertwining.

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