

“Out our home” tel quel: An Opinion on the Albanian Pavillion in the Venice Biennale 2021

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In this year’s Venice Biennale, the Albanian pavilion named “In our home” proposed a notion of *neighbourliness* that presumably existed “less than 20 years ago,” yet one that has now disappeared as a result of “diving deep in the waters of globalization” and moving “toward an isolated indifference and uncertainty.”¹ By ‘peeking sneakily’ at such reality through clips of “In our home” (*“Në shtëpinë tonë”*) – a rather consummated cinematographic totem of our communist quotidian anthropology, the pavilion invites us “to cross [the walls of our globalist apartment] and rediscover the gift of this bond².” Such crossing is ‘scripted’ through a pinwheel axonometric composition, in which four neighboring apartments “share a [‘secret’] space that can only come to life if the neighbors are willing to make the discovery.”³ Some inconsistencies notwithstanding, like the association of a communist era film with the wrong periodization of “20 years ago” (which should be like more than 30 years...), or the fact that the number of the ‘neighboring apartments’ in the brief is miscounted as three (when it should be four as an immanent result of the very pinwheel composition of the square), the pavilion explicitly proposes a return and recovery of a ‘lost’ time and its related ‘neighborliness’.

The topicality of the Albanian pavilion has already been criticized for romanticizing and producing a sort of false memory of the communist era, a time in which the subject

was robbed of everything, more importantly, of that very interiority necessary to individuate as a subject in the first place. This *telquel* opinion, however, is concerned not so much with the topicality of ‘neighborliness’ as such, than with the architectural language chosen to communicate and carry .out such topicality. This language is the very same one as that of Dogma’s “The Room of One’s Own,” exhibited at the Chicago Biennale of 2017. This exhibition consists of “48 [*ligne Claire*] perspectives that depict the ‘private’ room from antiquity to the present day.” The conceptual aim of the exhibit is to “study the private room as a specific architectural form.”⁴

Yet what might the relationship between such concept and that of the Albanian pavilion be, beyond the obvious similarity of their titles? And how does the architectural language figure in such conceptual content? The concept of Dogma’s exhibit is to draw the specific architectural interiority of the room, but not any kind of room... They are the rooms of Giorgio Morandi, Virginia Woolf and Marcel Proust, among others, characters whose real room is their very work, characters whose *oeuvre* is a kind of interior in the Bachelardian sense, in the same way that a mollusk secretes its interior, its shell... Dogma’s drawings attempt to hit a resonance with the process of such *secreted interiority* through the rigor of the very act of drawing, which is metonymically similar to the precision and meticu-

lousness of the shell. In an existentialist sense, the work of the inhabitants of these rooms tends to undermine the very notion and boundaries of home, or the room as the most 'homey' of all other spaces. The final result of their work is not to find home but homelessness, the only state, according to Heidegger, in and through which one can find one's true home... The concept of the Albanian pavilion, on the other hand, is rather the opposite: it is to re-find the 'lost home'... It re-establishes 'home' through the narrative of a neighborliness that never existed as depicted "In our home." What appears as neighborliness, was, indeed, nothing else than the negative result of a dreary everyday life.

If there is not any conceptual affinity between "The Room of One's Own" and "In our home," then what is the significance of the very act of choosing Dogma's architectural language? Choosing someone else's language in a biennale is kind of 'weird', since the very purpose of participating in a Biennale is to exhibit a new language, technique, or script, a new way of doing architecture. If choosing someone else's language (in this case Dogma's) signifies anything (in this particular case) is that we, Albanians, are not capable of inventing and practicing an architectural language by our own, and we have to import one. The very idea of going back to one's home..., to the 'secret room...', to the too familiar... signals a preemption of any desire to invent or speak a new language. Why would anyone bother to invent a new language if one were to only speak in one's home... *Homelessness is the real price of finding a new language...*, and conversely: *finding a new language is the only way to find one's true home...*

Of course, in this particular context, Dogma's partners being Italian is way more significant and operative than their being Marxists... Italy is Albania's modernist consciousness...; Italy has given us our boulevard, our *Champs Elysée*, even before we had Tirana... As Adrian Guma, the Albanian intellectual in Ismail Kadare's novel *The November of a Capital*, elegantly but *untruthfully* put it with regards to the urban interventions in Tirana during the 'Time of Italy': "I have seen cities without boulevards, but I have not seen boulevards without cities."⁵ What is known as the 'Time of Italy'⁶ is more than just an historical periodization: it is a concept of *branding* that mysteriously renders all the things produced in this period as 'Italian', as if 'Made in Italy', even if many were 'Made in Albania' by Albanian architects. Show a 30's modernist villa in Tirana, Korça or Gjirokastra to anyone in the street, an architectural student, or even an architect, and insofar as s/he will identify it as belonging to that historical period at all, such identification will almost always default as 'Italian', being accompanied with admiration for a sophistication and elegance that could only have come from 'beyond the sea', as it were... (The sea in question is the Adriatic...)

Recent scholarship shows, however, that there was already a *modern vernacular* in Albania, well before the 'Time of Italy'. Such vernacular formed the basis of the 20-s and 30-s modernism which was, no doubt, substantially shaped by the Italian architects, but also by Albanian architects who had studied in different European countries and the United States, as well as by

Austrian, French, Greek and even American architects, such as in the case of the Albanian American 'Charles Telford Erickson' Agricultural School of Kavaja, designed by Howard Raymond Meyer of 'Thompson and Churchill' Architectural firm in New York, in 1925.⁷ Both spatially and temporally, geographically and historically, modernism was never national but always already *inter-national*, well before the advent of International Style...; it was always already post-modern, well before the advent of postmodernism... Indeed, modernism is precisely that which transgresses and displaces the national, the home, the familiar, the autochthonous... This is modernism's true emancipating function. *To be modern means and has always meant to not be in one's own home...* This is not to say, however, that home is rejected or disavowed as an identity or specificity, but rather that it is reconfigured and re-invented anew in and through the very act of being displaced, de-&-re-territorialized, and dis-positioned. *It is only from outside home that one can re-invent one's own home and language...* Perhaps the Albanian Pavilion in the next Venice Biennale should be called: "*Out our home...*"

¹<https://www.labiennale.org/en/architecture/2021/albania>, accessed June 21st, 202

²Ibid

³Ibid

⁴<https://drawingmatter.org/dogma-the-room-of-ones-own/> accessed June 21st, 2021

⁵As cited in Ismail Kadare, *Nëntori i një Kryeqyteti (The November of a Capital)*, (Tirana: "Naim Frashëri" Publishing House, printed by "8 Nëntori" Press, 1975), 62, (translated by author).

⁶See for instance: Skënder Luzati, *Qyteti i Shkodrës: Urbanistika dhe Arkitektura gjatë Rilindjes e Pavarësisë Kombëtare (The City of Shkodra: Urbanism and Architecture during the National Renaissance and Independence)*, (Tiranë: Botimet Kumi, 2012), and Pirro Thomo, *Korça: Urbanistika dhe Arkitektura*, (Tirana: Morava, 2012). In this book, Thomo recounts how the local specialists – the architects and builders of Korça changed the design of Florestano di Fausto, which was distinctly monumental and expressive of the official language of fascist Italy. The local architects changed the façades completely, as well as its proportions and decorations (p. 339).

⁷ See Shpend Bengu's documentary film "*Damnatio Memoriae: Albanian-American Institute of Kavaja, Near East Foundation, 1925-2020*," shown in *Tirana Express* on September 20th 2020.