The Destructive Rebirth of the Pyramid

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More than a decade has passed since the heated debates on the destruction of the Pyramid of Tirana, and its substitution with the new Albanian Parliament, a winning competition entry by Coop Himmelb(l)au. Whether it should have been demolished or not, and whether there should have been a parliament in its place or not, were two different debates *erroneously* packed in one. This debate degraded into a false either-or political choice, namely, that between a new Albanian parliament building that would symbolize the democratic values and a building that presumably embodied the values and memories of the old communist regime, as the former Museum of Enver Hoxha, Albania's communist dictator. The parliament proposal, however, was only an unambiguous instance of a destruction process and a destructive force that had already started and continues to this very day. The Parliament proposal did not go forward, yet the Pyramid was eventually not saved. I would argue that it is only today at the very moment of its 'revival' or 'rebirth' into a digital hub through a design of MVRDV that the Pyramid is finally destroyed. What MVRDV's design destroys is the only thing that Pyramid really had of its own, regardless of its initial function and reference: *its form.*

The Pyramid-Museum was designed by Klement Kolaneci, Pranvera Hoxha, Pirro Vaso and Vladimir Bregu, and it was finished in 1988, just three years before the communist system would fall. When it was first built, its shiny white marble finishes and its monumental composition radiated an aura of eternal stability and continuity, which, in those unforgettable late eighties, contrasted not only with the economic poverty but also with an unconscious sense of intimidation and uncertainty in the face of what was soon about to come. The wind of change would soon sweep Albania and turn everything upside down. The country was opened to the world after 45 years of isolation; many people emigrated, some never to come back; and the market economy and capital spread in all its forms across the whole territory. This wind of change also affected the Pyramid: it blew away the plexiglass star on top of it; the original museum function disappeared together with the statue of Hoxha in the lobby. In the early nineties the pyramid became an International Cultural Center, but this would be only one of the many functions that the building has had or was planned to have. At the same time, in and through its very deterioration, even as its marble tiles started to fall, and the glass roofs started to leak, the Pyramid acquired a special status in the cognitive map of post-communist Tirana; it became *the* 'Pyramid', what everyone knows and has a special - personal or collective - relationship with, a public place where people passed through, met, or sit in the steps outside, a gap, a void, a space of freedom, and a point of reference in the frenzied, everchanging

landscape of a city determined to erase its own past, to a point of no return. Such embedded referentiality was sustained by the *form* of the pyramid itself, revealed as the only thing 'left' to the pyramid during the time of its deterioration, of its use and abuse. *It is this coupling of form and time that is the real heritage of the Pyramid, or the real Pyramid as heritage.* And it is precisely this heritage that is erased by MVRDV's design.

But what does 'form' mean in this case? Henry Focillon's distinction between sign and form might be helpful in addressing this question. Focillon argues that both sign and image on the one hand and form on the other signify, but their signification is different: "whereas an image implies the representation of an object, and a sign signifies an object, form signifies only *itself.[1]*" Sign is the conceptual content of form, its contour or diagram, the "graph of an activity:"

Although an earthquake exists independently of seismograph, and barometric variations exist without any relation to the indicating needle, a work of art exists only insofar as it is form. In other words, a work of art is not the outline or the graph of art as an activity; it is art itself. It does not design art; it creates it. Art is made up, not of the artist's intentions, but of works of art … [Art] must renounce thought, must become dimensional, must both measure and qualify space. *It is in this very turning outward that its inmost principle resides.* It lies under our eyes and under our hands as a kind of extrusion upon a world that has nothing whatsoever in common with it save the pretext of the image in the so-called "arts" of imitation[2].

In Jean Molino's terms, the sign would be "no more than an identity card, or police record.[3]" Focillon further argues that "the sign bears general significance, but having attained form, it strives to bear its own individual significance; it creates its own new meaning; it seeks its own new content, and then endows that content with fresh associations by the dislocation of familiar verbal molds.[4]" Sign and form are not oppositions or exclusive of one another; instead, they are two different stages in an interval, process, or "activity" of trans-formation of the material, an activity in and during which form overflows the signifying space of the sign by acquiring an internal, formal "dimension" of its own, which paradoxically turns "outward," toward a radical exteriority that cannot be accounted for and signified by the signs. This occurs both on the level of the making process, the process in and during which the form is found, as well as *after* this form is found, once it is implicated in a dynamic network of other signs, meanings, and contexts.

In the case of the Pyramid of Tirana, the pyramid – as the geometrical signifier 'pyramid' signifying the pyramid as a transcendental idea – is the *sign* of the *actual* Pyramid (that is, that before its destructive rebirth…); the geometrical signifier is the pyramid's "identity card," but *not* its form. The form of the Pyramid of Tirana is not its identikit - a pyramid. Neither it is a star or an eagle when looked from above, as many quite confidently claim. The form of the pyramid consists of a eurhythmic composition of radially distributed masses with different inclinations and proportions around an interior void (which was only temporarily occupied by a statue of the dictator, and which

has already been occupied again with some cubes placed perhaps 'loosely', say, with a formal 'negligence', that pretends to contrast with the uniqueness of the statue..., but that, indeed, it turns out to be as oppressive in its hegemonic formalism as the initial statue). Only those on the west side, facing the Boulevard, are pyramid-like, as they slope and taper toward the top. Yet upon close inspection, the identikit-pyramid fails to account for the articulation of their form. These sloped masses are more like piers that form a sloped entrance portico, or one that has 'fallen' on parallelepiped and subtracted a chunk of it. The two main piers on both sides of the entrance tapered to receive the entrance glass structure, which is also articulated, in turn, into two strips on the side that fold into the main glass plane in the middle, leading to the entrance. The massive sloping piers slope less, and thus become longer, away from the central axis as they are gradually transformed into cubic masses on the side and the back (Figure 1). In the back, the building looks very different from the front; it consists of chunks of cubic solids spaced by thin voids. Overall, the form of the building evokes the image of a huge rock carved from within. The space around the pyramid is as important as the building itself and an integral part of the form. The space is defined not by walls but by the object in it. The building is not placed in the middle of the space but a greater distance from the boulevard than from the street behind it. Such distance is balanced by the strong symmetrical axis of the entrance at a right angle with the boulevard's axis. This right angle receded from the boulevard engages and connects the other buildings along the boulevard with the Lana axis and the neighborhood behind the pyramid. The pyramid is more than just one building, it is an urban ensemble or formation that works at multiple scales.

All this complexity and density of the form of the pyramid is neutralized and anesthetized by MVRDV's design. "'Working on a brutalist monument like the Pyramid is a dream', says founding partner of MVRDV Winy Maas.[5]" The characterization of the Pyramid as a Brutalist building is false, according to Rayner Banham's definition of Brutalist style as being about "1: memorability as an image; 2: a clear exhibition of structure; and, 3: a valuation of materials as found.[6]" While the Pyramid *seems* to fulfill the first point in having a memorable, albeit, as we have already emphasized above, a highly nuanced and ambiguous image (is it a pyramid or a parallelepiped…?), it does not fulfill the other two points: The Pyramid does not use materials as found, but is clad instead in a highly polished marble skin; it does not have a clear exhibition of structure since the concrete frames are hidden behind or embedded in the sloping, tapering planes/piers. But even if the Pyramid was of a Bru-

[1]Focillon, H. (1992) The Life of Forms in Art, (Trans C. Beecher Hogan & G. Kubler, Trans). New York: Zone Books, 1992, 34;
[2]Ibid., 33-34 (my emphasis)
[3]Molino, J. Introduction of The Life of Forms, Ibid., 23
[4]The Life of Forms in Art, Ibid., p. 40
[5]https://www.mvrdv.nl/projects/312/the-pyramid-of-tirana, accessed September 28.
[6]Banham,R. (1955). The New Brutalism. Architectural Review, 355–59.

talist style, MVRDV's design does not respect this brutalism; does not respect the form of the Pyramid as given, as found; it covers over it; hides it and quiets it down. The strongest, most neutralizing move of MVRDV's design is a series of seemingly randomly distributed cubes across the Pyramid, in its grounds around the building, on top of it and even in the interior, like a cube-disease taking over the building (Figure 2). This rash of cubes is an effective tactic in deactivating or 'jamming' the form of the building, its massing, its eurhythmic composition, its orientation, its proportions and different axialities.

Such deactivation isolates the building from the urban ensemble that it was part of, and thus turning it into just another, new building of the new urban 'archipelago' of Tirana. The cubic masses in the interior fill and thus erase one of the most important attributes of the building: its interior void, which structured and held together the original eurhythmic disposition of the piers. Like a virus, these cubes undo and annihilate the original monumental disposition of the building. On the other hand, the stairs on the sloping piers – in itself, a rather cheesy - and the horizontal screens in the front completely dim the strong piers of the entrance portico. It is as if all the design decisions have been guided by a fear or phobia of architectural form, panic-driven to cover up any raw and authentic architectural expression.

MVRDV's design, however, is not an unconscious act, but a conscious one; it is the same act as all those 'archipelagic' objects *thrown* on the 'cheap' land, without a past…, of the Albanian capital, either by destroying an existing nuilding, or under the guise of destructive revitalizations. The intention behind such acts is precisely to erase the *image* of the city, its patrimony, its spaces and its forms. The intention behind MVRDV's 'revival' of the Pyramid is the same as MVRDV's Downtown One project, 200 meters east of the Pyramid, which incorporates a heightfield image of Albania's map in its façade, a sign of Albania as vernacular real estate… There were only two choices that could have been taken with regard to the pyramid: one solution could have been to demolish it completely, and another building or, better, no building at all be built in its place. This would have been a violent solution (which, unfortunately, we are not short of...), but at least an honest one, if our (or at least our majority's) declared disapproval of the communist regime were genuine... This solution would have been quite poignant and radical particularly in the second case, that of not building, of leaving the plot empty, that is, celebrating the void and not the solid, as an urban commemorative condition... In in this case, one could think of *a real* monument against the communis regime (a monument that we do lack); or more universally, an anti-monument that would commemorate the damage that regime brought about, through the void of the inability to re-present that damage coherently and fully in a collective scale; a monument *à la* Vietnam Memorial, which would not occupy the plot volumetrically but simply dig or scratch it... Perhaps the blueprint of this scratch could be the very planimetric projection of the Pyramid... The second possibility would have been to preserve the Pyramid to accommodate any kind of function – including today's digital hub, but restoring it in such a way that her form would be revealed, engaged, emulated, factored, and released, with the very formal specificity that characterizes it - a solution that would have encouraged a multitude of interpretations and would have mobilized a wide range of theories, practices and schools of restoration. The possible solutions could range from the most conservative ones à la Cesare Brandi - which would require not only the preservation of what Brandi calls the first or the author's time but also the second time[7], in this case being that of its degradation - to radical avant-garde interventions *à la* Gordon Matta Clark where the Pyramid could be cut or 'sliced' with different geometric shapes, thus releasing and revealing the very essence of its form. A moderate, but still powerful approach, in my opinion, would have been to replace the glazing with thin marble elements *à la* Beinecke Library at Yale, a building designed by Gordon Bunshaft of SOM in 1963: such a solution would allow a restrained and silent light to be shed into the inner void and would enable the reading of a monolithic form of the object from the outside. *What should not have been done is only what was actually done.*

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[7]*Brandi, C. (2005). The Theory of Restoration (C. Rockwell, Trans.) Firenze: Nardini Editore, 61. Brandi writes: "First, there is the duration of the externalising of the work of art, while it is being formed by the artist; second, we have the interval between the end of the creative process and the moment when our consciousness becomes aware of the work of art; third, is the instant when the work of art strikes consciousness like a bolt of lightning."*

Figure 1. Pyramid of Tirana, Albania, Creative Commons Attribution 2.0>

Figure 2. East Side of the Pyramid of Tirana, Albania, photo by author, October 22, 2022