

Theoretical Issues on the Socialist City and Reflections on Albanian Urban Landscape

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Abstract

The architecture and urbanism of the totalitarian regimes, despite the ideological shades that have been produced from different systems, in their core share similar principles which mainly derive from the use of the urban area as an expression of political propaganda. The socialist city was considered by the politics of that time as the greatest social achievement of the Marxist proletariat. It was the same unique place where the functions of residence, production, sport and recreation were mixed together, by also searching a strained unity that was supposed to dialogue more in a territorial scale rather than in a human one. Although there can be found some similarities with the Western industrial city, - like the idea of deurbanisation, - principally the new socialist city was created to generate the supporting mass based on the bynom 'residence-production'. The decoration and the integration of the so-called 'national style' in the city architecture was considered more like a communication and a means of attraction for the new emergent citizenship, rather than as an integral part of architecture. Meanwhile, by that time in Western countries, the debate about the usage of styles and decorations had already been superated, while building tradition has been integrated and transformed in modern developments. Albania, as the last country to be part of the ex-socialist campus and also the last one that left it, basically manifests similar characteristics with it, however some sort of radicalization as a result of the historical and geopolitical causes can be noted..

Keywords

Architecture and politics; socialist city; soc-realism; total art; unificated space.

Landscape as a Tool to Implement Political Ideology

In every system, there exists a tendency of showing power upon the society through interventions in the urban landscape, but this was much more obvious in the contexts that were under the totalitarian regimes no matter these leftist or rightist. However, despite fundamental similarities due to shared radicalization of politics and the iron fist on the territory, different system approaches from East to West have developed in years different attitudes toward the build landscape. While totalitarianism in the West officially finished with WW2, to the East the totalitarian reforms lasted for another half of a century which caused a stronger impact on the territory and in the same time arranged to realise and test better the scale of social interaction with the urban scale in these both glorious and utopian political urbanism which somehow survived in a close relationship with each other.

The creation of the new socialist city represented the complete viewpoint of the totalitarian ideology in terms of architecture and organisation of everyday life. The ideology was materialized in the city planning by defining a distinct landscape of the socialist city. Unlike the 'liberal architecture', 'the totalitarian architecture' and especially 'the socialist one', under the motivation of the creation of a new society based on "the ideal man"¹ of Marx, - that was interpreted as "the new man", - tried to cut all the relations with the past and aimed to build a new society which would obey the rules of the new system. Groys² (2015) states that: «*Their problem was not how to create art that would be liked or disliked by elites or by the masses, but how to create masses that would appreciate good - namely avant-garde - art*»³.

The building of new cities and radical interventions in the existing ones aimed to create reflections of the political ideologies of that time. The negligence of the historical references, - especially the feudal-bourgeois culture, - was a strategy to undo the comparative context by the 'alienation' of the individuals towards the historical heritage, as thus resulting in a bigger exposure towards the new politics. Tafuri⁴ the idea of the Progressives (in the case of Russia) was the creation of an artificial urban society that would make possible the idea of the "new man" - a complete alienation towards the history and heritage, cultivated with the ideas and principles based on the

communist ideals. As a consequence of rushing towards industrialization and modernization, this phenomena occurred in all the totalitarian regimes of the XX-th century, despite their political spectrum. The city was transformed into an arena of the supportive mass, which in the ex-Eastern campus was called "the proletariat". Referring to Czepczynski⁵ (2018): «*Building a new town was often compared to creation of the universe*»⁶.

These ideas were massively inspired by the need of building a new world which would have been better for the people. This was also expressed by the social and political movements in Europe after the war that were widely affected by the propaganda of the Socialist Campus. While theoretically these purposes contained humanitarian elements, in reality some of the greatest speculations that were actually connected with the political power were committed in the name of the masses.

The history of architecture and urbanism has known some urban products that have directly been connected with the implication of ideology and extensions of political influence through the urban landscape. For example, the cities founded by Mussolini like Pozzo Littorio, Eur district in Rome, or the ones founded around the Mediterranean as a continuity of the colonial concept Mare-Nostrum⁷. Also, there is a broad literature about the monumental projects for the city of Berlin, - which resulted as a product of the collaboration between the dictator A. Hitler and his architect A. Speer, - that are viewed as implementations of the Nazi ideology, which was dominant during the period of the Reich III⁸ in urbanism forms. In parallel with this, but less documented (especially in the West), the socialist architecture was developed for more than 60 years in the countries of the ex-socialist Campus led by the ex-Soviet Union.

This classification, which was under the general umbrella of Modernism, was applied in a much wider territory than that of the Western architecture. Also, the continuous political revision affected the unification of the architectural language by showing a system focused on the general "image", with reduced and unproportional layers compared to the fragmental architectural development that was noticed in the Western countries.

¹ The utopian Marxist concept that involves the creation of a new ideal human being replacing un-ideal citizens of that time. (Author's note)

² Boris Groys (1947) – an art critic, media theorist, philosopher, global distinguished Professor of Russian and Slavic Studies at New York University and Karlsruhe University of Arts and Design. (Author's note)

³ Groys, B. (2011). *The total art of Stalinism – Avant-garde aesthetic dictatorship and beyond*. Verso. London. pg.123

⁴ M. Tafuri (1935 –1994) – Italian architect, historian, theoretician, critic and academic, was described by one commentator as the world's most important architectural historian of the second half of the 20th century. (Author's note)

⁵ Mariusz Czepczynski – professor, researcher in Cultural Anthropology, Visual Sociology, Urban/Rural Sociology, Urban heritage and transformations. (Author's note).

⁶ Czepczynski, M. (2008). *Cultural landscapes of post-socialist cities – representation of power and needs*. Hampshire: Ashgate pg.78.

⁷ Roman term that refers to the Mediterranean Sea; later used by Mussolini in function of the fascist propaganda. (Author's note)

⁸ Reich III refers to the Germany during 1933-1945 when Adolf Hitler and his Nazi Party controlled the country through a dictatorship. (Author's note)

Socialist City vs. Capitalist City

The first socialist cities *Sotsgorod*⁹, were planned by the idealist architects with leftist views of the Western school, where among them was Ernst May, Hannes Meyer, Mart Stam, etc. These cities, which belonged to the “Modernism-Constructivism” culture of the beginning of the XX century, showed many similarities with the industrial Western cities, also as a consequence of the German movement *Neue Sachlichkeit*¹⁰ and the school of Frankfurt¹¹.

However, the main difference was the ideological one, as it basically propagated ‘the new socialist city’ as the answer to the idea that the capitalist system and the ideology developed during the XIX-th century were in contradiction with each other and that this could only be resolved by overthrowing the Bourgeois ideology and substituting it with the new Marxist ideology¹².

The socialist city also sought to create an antithesis of the famous Western model “garden-city”¹³ (Fig.1) which according to the model of Ebenezer Howard¹⁴ in 1898, predicted planned and self-sufficient communities, positioned in radial configurations, surrounded by green spaces and containing proportioned residential buildings, integrated with the industry and agriculture.

Industrial Western cities were seen from the communists as more fragmented urban. Politics, mainly based in the real estate that in most of the cases led to the expansion of the existing cities, but that never opposed the cultural heritage of the historical one. As Miljutin¹⁵ writes: *«The socialist urban landscape is going to be different from what we see today in our cities and villages. It will be neither this, nor that [...] At the moment that we remove the concentration of the industries, also the overpopulated city will stop existing and as a result of this there will be no reason for the existence of the idea of the ‘garden city’ nor of the ‘green city’»*¹⁶.

In fact, both of these models considered a decentralization and an avoidance of the concentration of the population around the historical city, principally representing a territorial reformation based on the “Marxist theory of collectivization”¹⁷. Despite this, the socialist city considered the industrial area as the core of the new city which would be built near it and in its function, thus treating the fabric as a continuous part of the urban area. This concept, which was born during the Constructivist culture, continued during the Stalinist regime when the idea of the “mono-industrial cities”¹⁸ was developed even more and where the type of the industry eventually identified and named the city. A typical characteristic of the “socialist city” was its organization in production units where the residential building and the industrial units were integrated both economically and culturally. According to Miljutin: *«Every new industry must be rationally connected to the residential area and the auxiliary implants of the production»*¹⁹.

‘The project for the new socialist city was the project for the city of the future and for the Marxist dream which was based on the gradual contiguity of the city and the village. This would be achieved by the mechanization of the agricultural industry, which meant the total urbanization of the territory.

The architects of that time often challenged themselves with almost sublime theses. The organization of the city in complex areas was seen from the Soviet architects as an

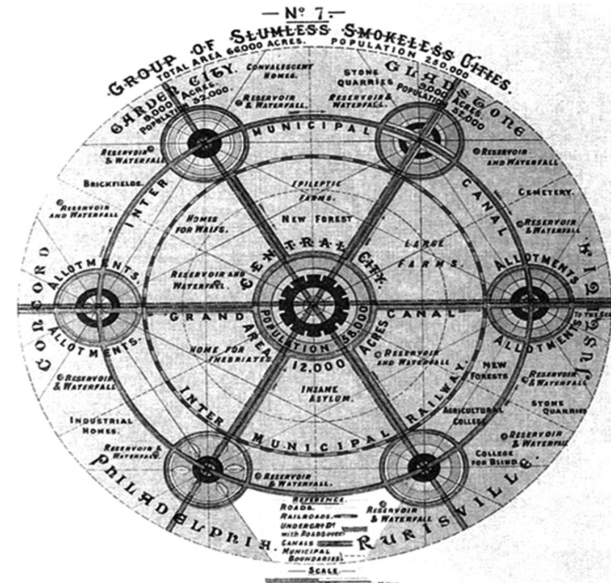


Figure 1. Concept of the “garden city” by Ebenezer Howard.

⁹ Term used for the utopian socialist cities. (Author’s note)

¹⁰ English: ‘New Objectivity’, art movement in the German art during the 1920s as an objection towards expressionism. (Author’s note)

¹¹ Original: *Frankfurter Schule*; a group of philosophers and scientists from various disciplines who were based on the theories of Hegel, Marx and Freud and whose center was the Institute for Social Research, which opened in Frankfurt am Main in 1924. (Author’s note)

¹² A method of socioeconomic analysis that views class relations and social conflict using a materialist interpretation of historical development and takes a dialectical view of social transformation. (Author’s note)

¹³ Original: Garden City movement. (Author’s note)

¹⁴ Ebenezer Howard (1850-1928) - the English founder of the garden city movement, is known for his publication of the description of a utopian city in which people live harmoniously together with nature. (Author’s note)

¹⁵ Nikolay Alexandrovich Milyutin (1889 –1942) – Russian trade union and Bolshevik activist, urban planner and an amateur architect, author of *Sotsgorod* concept. (Author’s note)

¹⁶ Miljutin, N. A. (1971) *Socgorod – Il problema dell’edificazione delle citta socialiste*. Milano: Il Saggiatore pg. 62.

¹⁷ Marxist theory according to which the peasants were obligated to give up on their farms and join the collective ones, in the name of the campaign for the fast industrialization of the Soviet Union. (Author’s note)

¹⁸ Original: *monotown*, cities whose economy was dominated by a single industry. (Author’s note)

¹⁹ *Ivi*.

answer to the urban organization which was more integrative than the Illuminist structure consisting of “center-periphery” that was inherited from the Western cities. According to them, the Western cities had problems such as the usage of areas with respect to timetables, overloading circulation and hierarchical differentiation of population. According to the Marxist principle of equality and horizontality, but also the purpose of the minimization of the costs of the transportation infrastructure, “the socialist urbanism” was ideally against the creation of the peripheries, even though as it later resulted, the peripheries were created even within the city centers. Miljutin presented an alternative city model known as the “linear city”²⁰ (Fig.2) which was characterized by a development in a linear form that would prioritize the movement. “The linear city” consisted of a polycentric development which connected several production or residential poles in the continuity of the axis of movement.

This model at that time was seen as an antithesis of the traditional city, or as it is also known the “monocentric” city, which focused its values on a single center and where the organization of the buildings was controlled in a natural way, in accordance to the land value. So, in the “socialist city” the focus was more on the unity of the organization of the city, considering it a “total art work”, rather than architecture in particular. With the passing of time this

objective was understood to be impossible to be brought to life. The linearity of the city, which led to the concept of ‘deurbanization’ as a part of the global Marxist ideology, in its core consisted of a utopia which would have limited to just a few the reasons for the city existence.

About this thesis, Manfredo Tafuri states: *«It should in any case be noted that the antiurban Utopias have their historical continuity reaching back to the era of the Enlightenment - and here it should not be forgotten that the first anarchic theories of the necessity of a "dissolution of cities" appeared in the second half of the eighteenth century - and embrace the theory of*

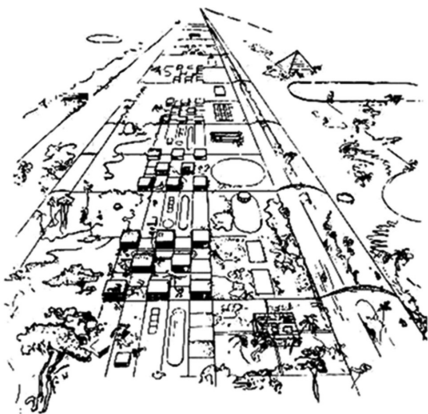


Figure 2. The working class’ residential settlement proposed by OSA, the “linear Constructivist city”.

the Garden City, Soviet decentralization, the regionalism of the Regional Planning Association of America, and Frank Lloyd Wright's Broadacre City. [...] what is expressed is a strong nostalgia for Tonnies "organic community," for a religious sect adverse to external organizations, for a communion of subjects who do not know the anguish of metropolitan alienation»²¹.

In Albania, inspired by the cultural Chinese Revolution, in the recent decades of the socialist regime, the postulate which stated “Converting the village similar to the city” existed. Actually, this objective indirectly demotivated the rural population on moving towards the city. While in the socialist city, especially in the main centers where the everyday life’s quality considerably differentiated from the other peripheral centers, problems in the distribution and differentiation of the population were noted. For this reason, the government defined strict residential rules and legal considerations, like the concept of “the yellow lines” which practically defined the confine of the urban area and that would separate the city from the village. As it is described by the Albanian architect Bego: *«Also for the villages there were made regulatory clarifications with the aim of positioning the construction within the yellow lines. There were also included the sites of the private buildings, the size of which was previously defined by the law»²².*

The ‘Building - Space’ Ratio in the Socialist City

Unlike the Western industrial cities, the government played a key role in the implementation of the projects for the socialist cities. According to Kopp²³: *«The government became the one and only responsible for everything that had to do with the residences, urbanism and the planning of the territory»²⁴.*

However, before this centralization, the architects were organized in separate studios and despite the similarities of their works resulting from the influential movements of the time, they produced an architecture with more liberal characteristics. After the grouping in state institutes of projection, the objectives of the socialist architects passed on a greater scale. It’s worth mentioning the case of the socialist architects and urban

²⁰ *Elongated urban formation, a city that would consist of a series of functionally specialized parallel sectors; method was firstly seen from the Spanish urban planner Sorya Y Mata in 1882. (Author’s note)*

²¹ *Tafuri, M. (2007). Progetto e utopia. Roma: Editori Laterza. pg. 120.*

²² *Bego, M. (2009). Skeda arkitekture në kronikën e një jete të dallgëzuar 1965-2004. Tirana: DEA shpk pg.5.*

²³ *Anatole Kopp (1915-1990) – French architect and urban planner who became involved in the movement of Marxist town planners from the 1960s and 1970s, co-founded the review Espaces et Sociétés with Henri Lefebvre in 1970. (Author’s note)*

²⁴ *Kopp, A. (1987). Citta e rivoluzione. Architettura e urbanistica sovietiche degli anni venti. Milano: Feltrinelli Editore. pg.31.*

²⁵ *Alexei Elbrusowitsch Gutnow (1937-1986) – architect and soviet urban planner (Author’s note)*

²⁶ *New Unit of Settlement. (Author’s note)*

planners, led by Alexei Gutnov²⁵ known as “NUS ²⁶Group.”

In 1968 when growing leftist and anarchist influence in Italy, they were invited to the Triennial of Milan to present their plans for an ideal communist city. (Fig.3, Fig.4) According to the critics, they showed characteristics and notions that were innovative even to the Western planning of that time. As Gutnov explained for this project: «*The new unit of settlement (NUS) may be compared to a living organism, having both a brain and a heart. Functional connections can be fully realized. Space in this new kind of city reflects the harmony and rationality of the social and economic structure*»²⁷.

In some cases, the centralized system could tangentially give priorities and a higher efficiency in the territory intrusion, even more than the liberal urban planning which obeyed the trade rules. Although, the reality proved that through the unlimited power of the leadership of that time, the city was used as a promoter of the propaganda of the regime. Also, the popular city planning politics in fact intended to create the supportive mass. Since the very beginning, the socialist city showed the organization characteristics with respect to the productive character, thus placing the binomial “collective-production” in the first place. According to Tafuri: «*If architecture is now synonymous with the organization of production, it is also true that, beyond production itself, distribution and consumption are the determining factors of the cycle*»²⁸.

According to him: «*The fact is that the industrial object does not presuppose any single given location in the space of the city. Serial production here basically implies a radical overcoming of any spatial hierarchy. The technological universe is impervious to the ‘here’ and the ‘there’ . Rather, the natural place for its operations is the entire human environment - a pure topological field, as Cubism, Futurism, and Elementarism well understood. Thus in the reorganization of the city it is the entire three-dimensional space that must become available*»²⁹.

So, the Soviet industrial complex may be considered as an architectonic work because initially it was conceived as a unity organization, even though it had the character of a rational transcription of the industrial processes that occurred within it. Their planners tried to connect the complexity of the city with analytically defined functions which could be scientifically manipulated. “Soviet industrial cities” were important elements of the urban landscape. They were characterized by a strict organization axis, objects with considerate heights and almost same general volumes, thus promoting a general horizontal image, with a height of 4-5 to 7 floors and with the in between spaces equal or bigger than the sum of their heights. Even though there is seen some kind of generosity with respect to the public spaces in the urban territory, as a consequence of the elimination of the private propriety, the public territory effectively resulted in a “no man’s land.” The spaces inside the residential units were wide and impersonal, mainly built within the boundaries of the

void.

Usually the lack of the sufficient finances for finishings and urban accessories caused that this theoretically appreci-

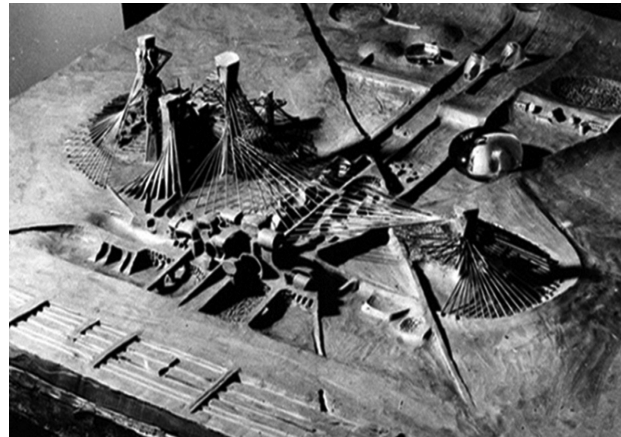


Figure 3. NUS Group, model of the urban center along the canal, Triennial of Milan 1968. © 2008–2020 Graham Foundation, NER Group Archives

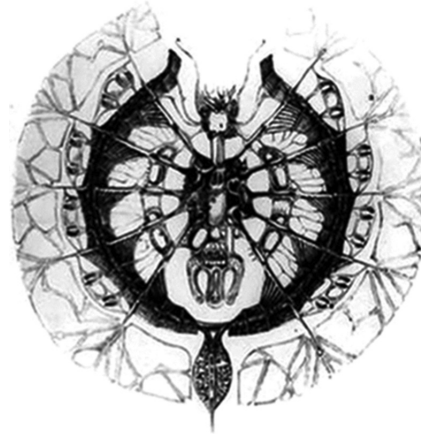


Figure 4. NUS Group, residential structure for the city of the future, Triennial of Milan 1968. © 2008–2020 Graham Foundation, NER Group Archives

ated method practically ended up generating a poor and characterless urban space.

Linguistic unification in the ‘soc-realism’ style

With the introduction of the “socialist realism” as the official style of the Soviet Union, practically the application of any oth-

²⁷ Gutnov, A., Baburov, A., Djumenton, G., Kharitonova, S., Lezava, I., & Sadovskij, S. (1968). *The ideal communist city*. New York: George Braziller. pg.154.

²⁸ Tafuri, M. (2007). *Progetto e utopia*. Roma: Editori Laterza pg. 115.

²⁹ Ivi.

er alternative cultural movement was stopped. In 1933, during the competition for the Soviet Palace (Fig.5), the refusal of all the other avant-garde styles, like the Russian Constructivism, Rationalist Modernism, was noticed.

The main purpose of this was the confrontation with the taste of the mass through the monumental decoration and pomposity. Despite this, the differences were mainly noted in the form, because the structure of the urban planning and construction was actually based on the method of 'socialist realism'. The Stalinist style of architecture was presented as a total order which had to affect all the building types by creating a unity between the residential and production area. The fabric was conceptually considered as an extension of the



Figure 5. Palace of the Soviets by Boris Iofan © Boris Iofan; Collection of the Tchoban Foundation

individual residence and, regarding their architectural elements, they even looked like one another. This was clearly expressed in the organization of the “total architecture of the new cities” regardless of the presence of the special buildings which were part of the existing city.

According to Groys: «*The architecture of the Stalin era is generally associated with an emphasis on decoration and facade. But the architectural critics of that era led an indefatigable battle against “facade-ism,” that is, against the fascination with decoration in architecture, arguing instead for the functionality and “livability” of buildings that were to correspond to human scale and human needs. This did not mean, however, that buildings were to look constructivist and cold, purely functionalistic and inhuman. Indeed, the idea of serving the people that was demanded of every Soviet architect also implied emotional connection: the socialist building was to look monumental but at the same time seem intimate, human, cozy. A few analysts of Stalinist culture have concluded that the demands critics made on architects were too paradoxical to*

be fulfilled. [...] Supposedly, these demands meant nothing less than the total subjugation of the architects to the tastes of the Party leadership»⁰.

One of the most interesting topics to be discussed in the studies for the 'architecture of the soc-realism'³¹ is the concept of what Rossi calls³² “building” or as it was found in the socialist architecture of this period as the concept of the ‘unified space’ or the city as an entity where architecture is part of it and at the same time a replicant of the whole idea. According to Rossi: “Architecture came into being along with the first traces of the city; it is deeply rooted in the formation of civilization and is a permanent, universal, and necessary artifact”³³. On the other hand, Czepczynski, during the first phase of the development of the stalinist style, described that as art: “The socialist city, especially in its initial, Stalinist form, was to become a Gesamtkunstwerk³⁴: a total work of art, based on a ‘harmonious’ interaction between urban composition, architecture and other arts, or, what we can call now, holistic aspect of cultural landscape (Groys 1988). [...] The search for an ‘assimilable’ past-prescribed by socialist realism as the only way to make the city legible for the ‘masses’ - gave rise to a wide range of sometimes surprising architectural inventions, like incorporating pseudo-baroque or renaissance décor. The new socialist cityscapes were transformed by the vertical buildings, as modern counterparts of the towers and spires of ancient churches and castles (Cohen 1995)”³⁵. So, in the impossibility of generating a modernist culture connected with the tradition referring to a regional context, urban planning turns to be an intentional ‘alienation’ or impersonification with respect only to style.

According to Miljutin: «The cultural revolution set a precise need: the creation of an analytic space which was not only a simple reflection of the surrounding landscape, nor the background for the ‘agitation of the masses’, but the space that re-

³⁰ Boris Groys 'The art of Totality' in Dobrenko, E. & Naiman, E. (2003). *The landscape of Stalinism – the art of ideology of soviet space*. Washington: Washington University Press pg.111.

³¹ Original: “Socialist realism”; a style of idealized realistic art that was developed in the Soviet Union and was the official style in that country between 1932 and 1988, as well as in other socialist countries after World War II, characterized by the glorification of the values of the communist system, like the emancipation of the proletariat, industrialization etc. (Author's note)

³² Aldo Rossi (1931 – 1997) - Italian architect and designer who achieved international recognition in: architectural theory, drawing and design and also product design; one of the leading exponents of the postmodern movement. (Author's note)

³³ Rossi, A. (1982). *The architecture of the city*. New York: The MIT Press. pg. 21.

³⁴ In english: a total art work; ideal art work; a synthesis of all types of art; refers to a artwork that uses many or all forms of art. (Author's note)

³⁵ Czepczynski, M. (2008). *Cultural landscapes of post-socialist cities*

³⁶ Miljutin, N. A. (1971). *Socgorod - Il problema dell'edificazione delle citta socialiste*. Milano: Il Saggiatore pg.16.

sulted from a set of elements with which there could be established an everyday relationship»³⁶.

Meanwhile Tafuri states: «Architecture might make the effort to maintain its completeness and preserve itself from total destruction, but such an effort is nullified by the assemblage of architectural pieces in the city. It is in the city that these fragments are pitilessly absorbed and deprived of any autonomy»³⁷

The unification of the urban landscape was the primary purpose of the architecture of 'soc-realism'. The recently created heterogeneous community needed a very precise cultural guide to get adopted in the new urban space. In these terms the Stalinist order and decoration of space, served as a cold unifying filter for the emergent society, but we have also to admit that more than a filter between society and urban landscape, resulted to be a tool for the transmission of political propaganda. In these conditions it remained unlive and sometimes unwanted.

The attempt to Modernisation in the Albanian Context

The Soviet influence in the city planning according to the 'Stalinist style' firstly came to Tirana through the experience of the Albanian students who studied in Moscow. An example of this was the proposal for the new urban plan of Tirana (Fig.6) by the fellow architect Gani Strazimiri, recently graduated in Moscow. With the force of his drawings, Strazimiri challenged the Italian city planning by incorporating the concept of urban reorganization inspired to the reconstruction plan of Moscow appeared in 1935, with monumental axis, the sheer size, regular geometry and the "super-blocks"³⁸ as a basic compositional tool. The architect refused the urban planning solutions of the Italians (who by the same analytical tools, can be considered radical as well), as they couldn't be acceptable according to the Socialist order. Strazimiri in his planification, closed the access towards the city center from the two historical streets, - "Dibra" street and "Kavaja" street, - and made them converge in a perimetral circulation ring that encloses the hygge central district. He also created a green corridor between the city center and the rest of the city, which would connect the center of the blocks by creating a series of parks with different geometry and dimensions. His concept would entirely separate the monumental center with the rest of the city to define a net separation between public space which had to become political space and the leaving neighborhoods. So the new socialist vision of space, looked more like the utopian drawings of Brasini³⁹, than the modern vision of Bosio's⁴⁰ who also dealt merely in the same way with the city center. However, the crucial difference between the two proposals, was that while Brasini proposed his monumental axis in an undeveloped area of the city as a tool to connect the new with the old, Strazimiri, influenced by the Soviet method, suggested the total substitution of the existing city center by a completely new urban reality, similar to the cities of the "soc-

realism" planned 'ex-novo'⁴¹, in the Soviet Republics. In this plan, the optimization of the new order to completely transform the old reality to a new urban concept that followed precisely the standard rules of the socialist realism was pretty clear. For the realization of this, it was hoped for a Soviet financial help, which was actually not fulfilled. As a consequence the urban interventions of that period (as also occurred during Fascism) were reduced in some distinct areas, which at that time couldn't create the homogeneous conglomerate that characterized the other cities of the "Stalinist soc-realism". However, the whole

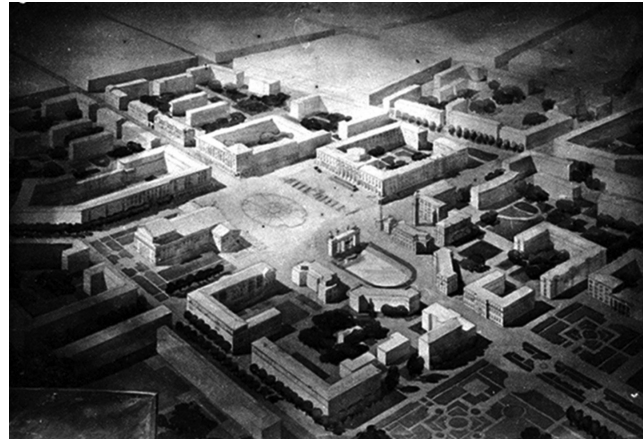


Figure 6. Axonometric urban design for the center of Tirana of Gani Strazimiri's proposal, where the replacement of the Bank and Municipality buildings is noticed.

scene was completed in the next years of the totalitarian system by following similar urban principles, thus making Tirana have today's image of a former socialist city.

At this point, we recall the efforts to represent in the Albanian context the native modern architecture with a regional accent and with a special caution towards the continuity with tradition. This started directly after the Announcement of the Independence in 1912, thanks to the background and the Western influence of some remarkable personalities of that time. Shkodra, as a city with a tendency and admiration towards the Western culture, cultivated an intellectual elite which left its footprints in architecture and urbanism.

The process of modernisation and urban requalification of the city started during the First World War under the influence of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, when the first commercial and residential streets inside the separate nucleus from the binomial "Bazaar-Residence" of the Ottoman city were noticed. These premises that showed the enlargement and the modernization of the city, created the background for important urban developments were together with austrian architects were involved also some albanian artists and architects like Kolë Idromeno⁴².

He was educated as a painter in Venice in 1875 and in Shkodër near the Franciscans priests, especially by the Italian architect and photographer Pjetër Marubi. He accomplished some important works, mainly in the pre modernist 'Eclectic style of the Italian '900s'⁴³. According to M. Prenushi: «As an architect and autodidact urban planner, he overcame the boundary of the residence as a creation. He aimed for the urban planning of the ensembles with architectural and urban value for the city»⁴⁴. A product of this period where Idromeno was involved is *Rruga e madhe* ("The great street"), which is today named



Figure 7. "Kafja e Madhe" (The Great Coffeehouse), Kolë Idromeno.

after him. In this famous street for the city of Shkoder, it can be noticed some kind of fusion with Mediterranean architecture of Venetian baroque, bringing in a very mild and humble human dimension the fusion between Ottoman and Venetian architecture.

In the direction of modernizing tradition, important efforts were also done by other architects, especially during the period of the Monarchy of King Zog I, like: Qemal Butka, Skënder Luarasi, Anton Lufi, etc. But these individual initiatives were immediately stopped by the settlement of communism which closed the architecture in a collective regime. In the following years gradually every expression and representation was eliminated and only one context, the ideological one, was allowed.

Despite a continuous political campaign regarding the usage of the so-called "national style", the efforts for that were almost blank because the overcome of the related socialist tradition was never possible, especially in the conditions of a cultural isolation that prevailed during the whole socialist period. Among a few documents to which it can be referred to, while the critical thought of the architects was completely suppressed, it can be mentioned the book of Mosko & Sukaj⁴⁵, which was written in the last years of the regime and in a vocabulary compatible with the political ideology. There is noted their interpretation of the directives and the political critics as an obligation for the architects who had to be in a continuous tentative for the creation of a "national style" which had to coincide with the traditional

characteristics of the Albanian state. In fact the realization of this crucial objective resulted in utopian and almost impossible, considering the actual cultural conditions and the necessary predisposes for the creation of an architectural identity. In the first years of the socialist state, almost all the great projects for the construction of the new cities in Albania were imported, together with the fundings from the Soviet Union and so they rigorously referred to the official style. In these projects, also as in the ones of the native architects of this period, the integration of the national elements in the architecture was limited only in the decorative part of the architecture, as a superficial way, only sufficient to be easily noted from the outside and not as a deep reconception of it. Normally, this could not have been done in the condition of the lacking of the professional debates or the influence of the important movements of that time.

It existed as a famous postulate which served as a premise for the "Stalinist architecture" and which had to be accepted without any polemic. It stated the idea that the new architecture had to be: "Socialist in its content and national in form." This also expresses the status of the Soviet architects in 1936, where it was said that: "In the field of architecture, the socialist realism means the inner union of the ideological expression with truth of the artistic one..."⁴⁶. As Molnar⁴⁷ explains in her book, practically that meant the revitalization of monumentalism and the formal repertory of the historic architecture (specifically by drawing over the national traditions) completed with topics that glorified the everyday life of the laborers and peasants.⁴⁸

This philosophy was also applied, together with its specifications in the Albanian socialist reality. In one of his last speeches, Enver Hoxha recommended: «The Party has continuously

³⁷ Tafuri, M. (2007). *Progetto e utopia*. Roma: Editori Laterza pg. 17.

³⁸ Area of urban land bounded by arterial roads in the size of multiple typically-sized city blocks; where the local road network is designed to serve local needs only. (Author's note)

³⁹ Armando Brasini (1879–1965) – Italian architect of the Italian '900s, famous for his eclectic and visionary style. He was appointed by King Zog I to design the new kings palace and government buildings of the new monarchy (Author's note)

⁴⁰ Gherardo Bosio (1903–1941) – Italian architect, member of Tuscan Group, served as chief architect in Tirana Municipality during Fascist Invasion of Albania (Author's note)

⁴¹ From latin: completely new, completely from the beginning. (Author's note)

⁴² Kolë Idromeno (1860 - 1939)- painter, sculptor, architect, photographer, cinematographer, composer and engineer during the Albanian Renaissance in the XIX-th century, widely regarded as a precursor of both realism and landscape art in Albania. (Author's note)

⁴³ Original: 'Novecento Italiano'; an Italian artistic movement founded in Milan in 1922 to create an art based on the rhetoric of the Fascism of Mussolini. (Author's note)

⁴⁴ Prenushi, M. (1984). *Kolë Idromeno - jeta dhe vepra. Shtëpia Botuese "8 Nëntori"*. pg. 67.

⁴⁵ Mosko, S. & Sukaj, I. (1986). *Ndërtesa për veprimtari shoqërore – kulturore (Buildings for social - cultural activities)*. Tirana: Mihal Duri.

ordered that us not only should be supported in the local tradition, but should also cultivate it, because the tradition for us is also the rich tradition of the socialist realism [...] In all the fields - literature, architecture we need to create works that are beloved, understandable and felt by the people»⁴⁹.

According to this, the dictator intended that the local Albanian tradition should have been eliminated from the official architectural style and there should have existed only the “tradition of the socialist realism” and this was obvious only in the last years of the socialist regime in Albania.

After 1961 and the separation from the Pact with the Soviet Union, those socialist politics were refused by being considered imperialist. The communication with the Eastern architecture of that time took place indirectly, like it happened during the '70s with the import of the para fabricates technology from China, while in the other countries of the East, the para fabricated technology “Camus” developed in the '50s in France had already been exhausted by that time.



Figure 8. Eled Fagu, photo from the plaza of the National Museum of History, Tirana (2019)

Conclusions

The socialist city is the most important archive of the principles and the views of totalitarian politics in the fields of architecture and urbanism, due also to the longer lasting period coverage. Within its self-proclaimed realization, the city knew how to be selective in its content while giving priority to the reflection of the political ideology and propaganda. The fiercest opponent of the socialist city was the historical one. The socialist city continuously referred to the historical one, sometimes this was done by objecting it, like in the case of the expression of its priority towards the industry and the collective production instead of the trade economy and private property; while on the other hand, he tried to imitate its components also as visual aspect and often decoration. While the historical city gradually started creating a symbiosis with the village by being complementary of it, the socialist city through the industrialization tried to “turn the village similar to the city.” From this point of view, the theories of the deurbanization found place as they aimed

for the urbanisation of the territory. The large scale of the interventions in the territory became the main evident characteristic of the urban socialist landscape. The landscape of the socialist city gets its meaning when it is valued in a large scale, while remaining wanting in the aspect of interpretation in a smaller scale and in the direct contact with the resident. With the passing of time, the objective for the total urbanization proved to be unrealizable, just like the utopian Marxist concept of deurbanization which reduced in just a few reasons the existence of the whole city.

In the conditions of the inability for the generation of a culture connected to the tradition, which was referred and was orientated towards the local culture, architecture and context, the process of the planification went through the ‘alienation’ and the intentional style impersonalization. Meanwhile, the decoration served as a simple unifying element for the society and as a means for the transmission of the propaganda of the regime. In Albania, a modern tradition represented by some well-known architects of that time already existed by the time of the lining by the side of the Eastern bloc., but it was suppressed by the canons of the official style. The project of that time sought to transform the urban area by reformatting it with respect to the official stylistic rules, by neglecting the history and considering the present as the only history that’s ever existed. So, the urban transformations which took place during the dictatorship were imponent and finally made Tirana have today’s face of an ex-socialist city. To the other side, the problematics of the past can be the opportunity of a new future. The controversy of totalitarian architecture has amplified curiosity of research study, often using the totalitarian urbanism as an antithesis to the today's chaotic development of transitional cities but not only. It is very important in this case to understand the limits of the theory and the beginning of practice. As the above analyses tries to make clear, there is a very hygge gap between theory of reforms and the every days challenges in the life of a city, challenges that if not confronted with the necessary knowledge and means, urbanism and development can become a question of propaganda.

Today, the Albanian city landscape remains indifferent to this theoretical debate, and the proposed changes to their urban and architectural realm, often takes place without reflecting the lay-

⁴⁶ Kopp, A. (1987). *Citta e rivoluzione. Architettura e urbanistica sovietiche degli anni venti*. Milano: Feltrinelli Editore. pg. 234.

⁴⁷ Virag Molnar – Ph.D. in Sociology from Princeton University; her research explores the intersections of culture, politics, social change and knowledge production with special focus on urban culture and transformations of the built environment. (Author’s note)

⁴⁸ Molnar, V. (2013) *Building the state: architecture, politics and state formation in post-war central Europe*. New York: Routledge.

⁴⁹ Mosko, S. & Sukaj, I. (1986). *Ndërtesa për veprimtari shoqërore – kulturore*. Tirana: Mihal Duri. pg. 3.

ers and richness carried over by past conflicts. The demand for modernization, the pressure of capital development in an increasingly global and competitive world, endangers the built context and individuality of Albanian cities if we do not develop a rich and in-depth academic debate in this regard.

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