

Punctuating Gjirokastra's Modernism

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In one of the most poetic passages of Ismail Kadare's *Chronicle in Stone*, the youngster – the main character of the novel – sends a handful of sky to the water cistern of the house through a mirror, only to receive a pale, fleeting reflection. Or he would send a sound – 'AUU', only to receive a muffled echo (and sometimes nothing, when the cistern was full of water...). The interaction with the cistern is a metonymic figure, which stands for the way the youngster communicates with his home, his homely environment, his very own town which he knows very well; that sloped town which looked like "prehistoric creature stuck to the face the mountain;" a town, where, if a drunkard "were to fall on the side street, he would fall on the roof of tall house, instead of a ditch,"¹ The youngster's communication with his home takes place in a familiar way, through gestures, looks, and feelings, rather than with words, not unlike those signals exchanged with the dark cistern. His home in an expanded sense – the old city, the castle with its labyrinthian tunnels (real or imagined), the houses with stone 'scales', the steep streets, the supercilious neighbors, the old women that never slept..., drinking coffee and looking at other people's houses with binoculars – often feel rather strange and opaque, not unlike the dark void of the cistern beneath the house. This is not simply a feeling of the uncanny or unheimlich bound to arise by the proximity

of the too familiar; it is also triggered as a result of the youngster's (and through him, our) encounter of an irresistible wave: that of modernity.

The book is, indeed, formed by the resonance between the youngster's coming of age and the arrival of modernity. A certain structural proportionality is discerned: the youngster's home is to his coming of age what the old town is to the modern times. The youngster is the link between the old and modern world. The latter, however, revealed its cruelest face: the war. The airport, the planes, the bombing, the foreign languages of soldiers entering and leaving town, and of course the brothel in 'support' of the war effort – they all trouble the imagination of the youngster. An exceptional town under a state of exception: on the one hand, the old, impenetrable stone city, on the other hand, the sweeping and eroding wave of modernity, without boundary or form. Such rupture is reenacted in peace time: while the old city is frozen into an historical monument protected under UNESCO, the rest of the city is left to unbridled urban sprawl. If urbanization were the "instrument in which life is to be spent"² – that sprawling life that clings to the earth like a "disease...",³ then the historic city would be a shell drained of life.

Is such shell a utopian island, a non-place of history to be consumed as a commodity? Or is it a place both within

¹ / Ismail Kadare, *Kronikë në Gur*, (Tiranë: 1978),

² / Arturo Soria Y Puig, Ed., *Cerdà: The Five Bases of the General Theory of Urbanization*, Trans. Bernard Miller & Mary Fons I Fleming, (Madrid: Electa, 1999), 86

³ / "The Earth (he said) has a skin; and this skin has diseases. One of these diseases, for example, is called 'Man.'" Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, (London: Penguin Books, 1969), 153.

and yet not a part of urbanization, a kind of extra-urban heterotopia? Foucault defined heterotopia as “places that are written into the institution of society itself, and that are a sort of counter-emplacements, a sort of effectively realized utopias in which the real emplacements that can be found within culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted; a kind of places that are outside all places, even though they are actually localizable.”⁴ If Gjirokastra were heterotopic, then how and what would it represent, contest, invert?

One of the things Gjirokastra contests, inverts and destabilizes is precisely the myth of being an old, ‘traditional’ town, a monument of a past destined to remain frozen, reminiscent of a time that no longer exists, before modernity. Walking in the very heart of the historical town of Gjirokastra, one finds a distinct and varied modern texture, which consists of modern buildings of different periods, from the early twentieth century to the late 60-s and 70-s. The ‘Varosh’ neighborhood, particularly ‘Doktor Vasil Laboviti’ Street, is an open-air museum of different modern houses (Fig. 1, 2 & 3). Their style ranges from an early eclectic modernist style to a more rationalist modernism like that of the old Radio Station, which consists of a distinct cubic volume articulated with thin reinforced concrete balcony slabs (Fig 1). Preliminary research, which is still in its

nascent phases, indicates that these early modernist buildings were built by master builders and architects both from the local and surrounding regions, in Albania and from nearby Ioannina, as well as Italy. What is particularly striking is how distinct these modern structures are from the older architecture of the town. Their volume is rather cubic and contained, unlike the vernacular structures that often have one or two wings coming out from the basic unit of what is termed as the “perpendicular style.”⁵ The modern buildings often have a shallow cantilevered balcony (built with reinforced concrete) instead of the traditional loggia or the ‘çardak’ of the vernacular style. The roof of the former is made of clay tiles rather than stone slates; it does not project as much as that of the latter and does not have the traditional collar beams. The volumes and façades of the modern structures are either distinctly articulated with pilasters, or are simply left as plain, finished with stucco. What is even more striking, is the ‘naturalness’ with which the modern ‘fits’ into the old, so much so that it is easily missed. Yet such ‘fitness’ is not a synthesis but rather a juxtaposition of two different things.

What makes Gjirokastra heterotopic is the proximity and combination of a vernacular, about which a lot has been written in the official historiography, with a disavowed

⁴ / Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” in *Michel Deheane, Lieven De Cauter Ed., Heterotopia and the City: Public Space in a Postcivil Society*, (New York & London: Routledge, 2008), p. 14, quoted in *Christophe Van Gerrewey, Choosing Architecture: Criticism, History and Theory since the 19th Century*, (Lausanne: EPFL Press, 2019), 232-233

⁵ / Isuf Sukaj, Vera Bushati dhe Pirro Thomo, *Historia e Arkitekturës Shqiptare, 1912 – 1944, 1987*

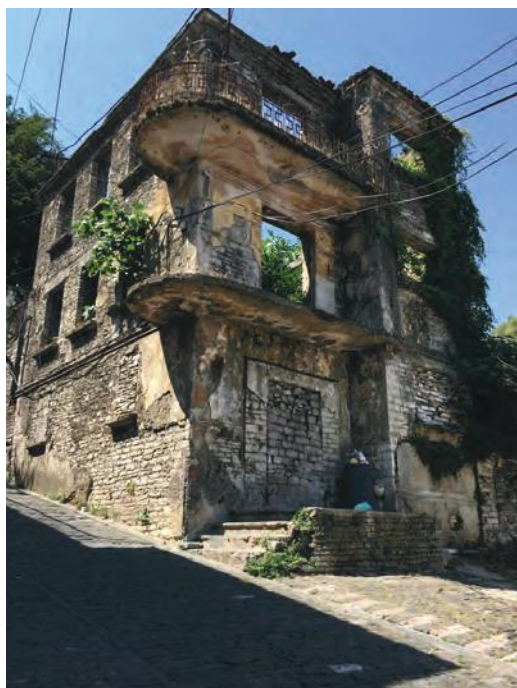


Fig. 1 / The old Radio Building.



Fig. 2 / House in "Doktor Vasil Laboviti" Street



Fig. 3 / House between "Doktor Vasil Laboviti" Street and "Ismail Kadare" Street

modernism, about which nothing is written yet. What makes Gjirokastra heterotopic is the juxtaposition of the vernacular and the modern, which are neither opposed nor synthesized. They take place in under the same castle, in the same neighborhoods, across the same slope, more often than not adjacent, juxtaposed, and intertwined with one another. We often think of modernity as monolithic and as a rupture with the past. A closer look reveals, however, that modernity is characterized by a stylistic multiplicity, which is structurally connected to economic, social and cultural distributions that go well beyond the physical and imaginary confines of the old town.

One of the most distinct modern structures in Gjirokastra is the Zigai's House, right behind the "Çajup" Square (Fig. 4, 5 & 6). Preliminary research suggests that it was probably built in the late twenties and early thirties, while its architect remains to be found and researched. The house has a strange shape: a stepping or terraced tower that culminates with a sort of roof gazebo at the top. It is quite unlike any other house or structure in Gjirokastra. It is like a lighthouse from another place and another time that, from certain viewpoints, seems to cryptically communicate only with the tower of the castle. The whole structure is built with reinforced concrete. This fact alone is



Fig. 4 / Zigai's House, View from Çajupi's Sqaure



Fig. 5 / Zigai's House, Exterior "I. Kadare" Street



Fig. 6 / Zigai's House, Interior view of the fenestration and the concrete structure.

sufficient for the house to be qualified and classified as a first-class monument to be restored and preserved. One should keep in mind that at this time, even in developed countries, it is very hard to find houses built completely with a columns system in reinforced concrete. Yet the formal and stylistic attributes of the house are as significant as the structure. The latter is shown both in the interior and exterior in terms of a series of pillars and pilasters stripped of any ornament. The windows of the first-floor span between the pillars, while in the upper floor the windows are narrower and alternate with plain wall surfaces, while pillars alternate with pilasters. The first floor is a double height

space, which is reflected in the façade with taller openings below and a sort of clear story above. Throughout the width of the façade the floors are clearly marked and demarcated by shallow, cantilevered balconies. The façade is reminiscent of the modern architecture of the 20-s and 30-s and particularly the work of Auguste Perret, both in its structural and formal sensibility.

Past Zigai's house in "Ismail Kadare" Street is "Asim Zeneli" High School, a rather long building visible from different peaks in the city (Fig. 8, 9, 10 & 11). This building was designed by Italian Architects in the mid 20-s (Fig. 7). It was restored and partially rebuilt, after a fire, in the late thirties. The

rebuilding and restoration project was designed in 1939-1940 by the architect Skënder Kristo Luarasi (1908-1976). While the new building is rebuilt on the same foundations and keeps more or less the same walls, important differences between the two can be identified by referring to photographs of the former building. The side projections of the façade of former building have three windows, while the current one has only two, thus contributing to the perception of a more solid corner. In the former building, the central façade projection runs through the whole height of the building, culminating with a hip roof, which, together with the hip roofs of the side projections of the façade, forming a rather classical tripartite motif. In the actual building the middle hip roof is eliminated, thus emphasizing the horizontality of the main roof, and contrasting with the verticality of the side projections and that of the houses of the city. The central portico, on the other hand, goes only up to the second floor and ends, quite in an unorthodox way, with a flat architrave.

The lower floor and the central façade projection are finished with a granulated concrete, which creates a connection with the materiality of the castle, while the contrast between the granulated concrete and the stucco of the rest of the façade evokes the vernacular architecture of the town. The cornice is articulated with what seems like an exaggerated or scaled up dentil, which creates a dialogue with the battlements of the castle.

Skënder Kristo Luarasi's work on Gjirokastra is a unique case of modernist interventions within (what later would be categorized as) an historical city⁶. The buildings designed by Luarasi in Gjirokastra anticipate what, in the mid-seventies, would be called a critical regionalism⁷. His buildings frame and punctuate the vernacular town across different locations of the topography and from different viewpoints. They also furnish the old city with a different scale and texture, which does not negate or oppose but rather contrasts and enriches the old city. Let's take the 'Çajupi' Hotel as an example. If we stand on the hill of the City Court and look in the direction of the hill of the Castle, we encounter a vertical panoramic narrative

that consists of three elements, the Castle on top of the hill, the hill and the "Çajupi" Hotel at the edge of the hill. There is a clear and explicit relationship between the volume of the Castle and the volume of the Hotel (Fig. 13). The façade of the hotel is articulated into twelve shades or values through a stratified shift of façade plans, openings and distribution of materials (Fig. 12 & 13). The volume of the hotel rests on a stone plinth.

This plinth does not have the same height along the facade of the hotel; small steps reciprocate with the slope of the square in which the hotel is located. The horizontality of the plinth is broken by the volume of the main entrance with a stone ark. The façade above the plinth is articulated through the loggias, the balcony on the second floor with wide glass openings, the entrance shallow volume or portico, and three parts with punched openings in the wall. The façade articulations have a triple role: they create a reciprocity with the Castle, the hill and the tower-texture structure of the city. The castle is not just a large volumetric block that stands on the hill. Its volume is marked through slight fractal planes corresponding to the topography of the hill. The vertical articulations of the hotel's façade create a dialogue with the Castle's fractals.

At the same time the façade articulations reciprocate to the scale and proportion of the houses of Gjirokastra. These reciprocities are re-experienced differently as one approaches the hotel and stands or walks on the sidewalk along the façade. The building is transformed into a textural sequence that alternately directs our attention sometimes towards the interior of the hotel, sometimes towards the external context that surrounds it. Also, since the building is organized asymmetrically, one is predisposed not to remain in one place but rather walk along the façade and across the sloped plaza. During this walk, one is drawn by with the eastern part of the façade together with the cantilevered cornice of the roof, which are slightly bent to point to the clock tower of the Castle (Figs. 15 & 16). The hotel creates the impression that it has inevitably always been there, silently and slowly 'dialoging' with the Stone City.

⁶ What follows is a revision and translation into English of a part of my former article at Forum A+P: Skender Luarasi, "Empathizing Sisyphus: A Moment from the Oeuvre of Skënder Kristo Luarasi," Forum A+P No. 13, (Tirana: Polis Press, 2013), pp. 174-188

⁷ For a theoretical and historical account of the concept of 'Critical Regionalism', see Kenneth Frampton, "Towards a critical regionalism, six points of an architecture of resistance," in Hal Foster Ed. *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983), pp. 16-31. Also see Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*, Fifth Edition, (London: Thames and Hudson, 2020).



Fig. 7 / Gjirokastra's High School, before the fire, probably circa 1930



Fig. 8 / Photo of Gjirokastra's High School today



Fig. 9 / Skënder Kristo Luarasi, Perspective rendering of Gjirokastra's High School, 1939



Fig. 10 / View toward the Castle

The Hospital of Gjirokastra is another important building designed by Skënder Kristo Luarasi (Fig. 17, 18, 19, 20 & 21). Built before the "Çajupi" Hotel, in the late 40-s, it stands on what used to be the edge of town. Not having the urban



Fig. 11 / Entrance Detail



Fig. 12 / Skënder Kristo Luarasi, Elevation Drawing of the "Çajupi" Hotel, 1961



Fig. 13 / Panoramic View of the "Çajupi" Hotel from the Court's Hill (Photo by author).

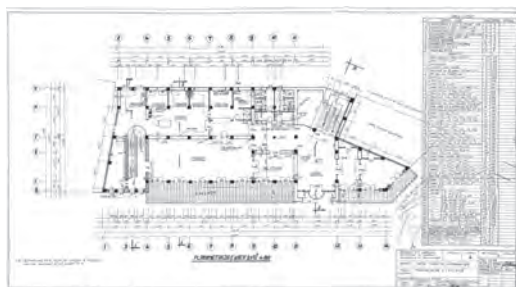


Fig. 14 / Skënder Kristo Luarasi, Elevation Drawing of the "Çajupi" Hotel, 1961

and topographical restrictions of the Hotel, the Hospital building has a more dynamic L-shaped volume. The hospital rooms are arranged linearly through a partially one-sided L-shaped corridor, which allows lighting on both sides of the



Fig. 15 / View of the "Çajupi" Hotel and the Castle Source / the author.



Fig. 16 / View of the "Çajupi" Hotel, Entrance Detail. Source / the author.

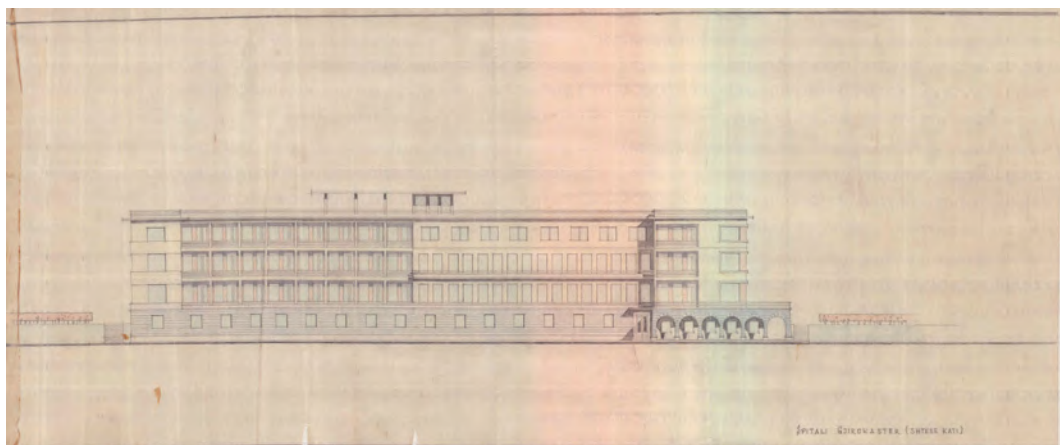


Fig. 17 / Skënder Kristo Luarasi, Elevation Drawing of the Hospital of Gjirokastra, 1949

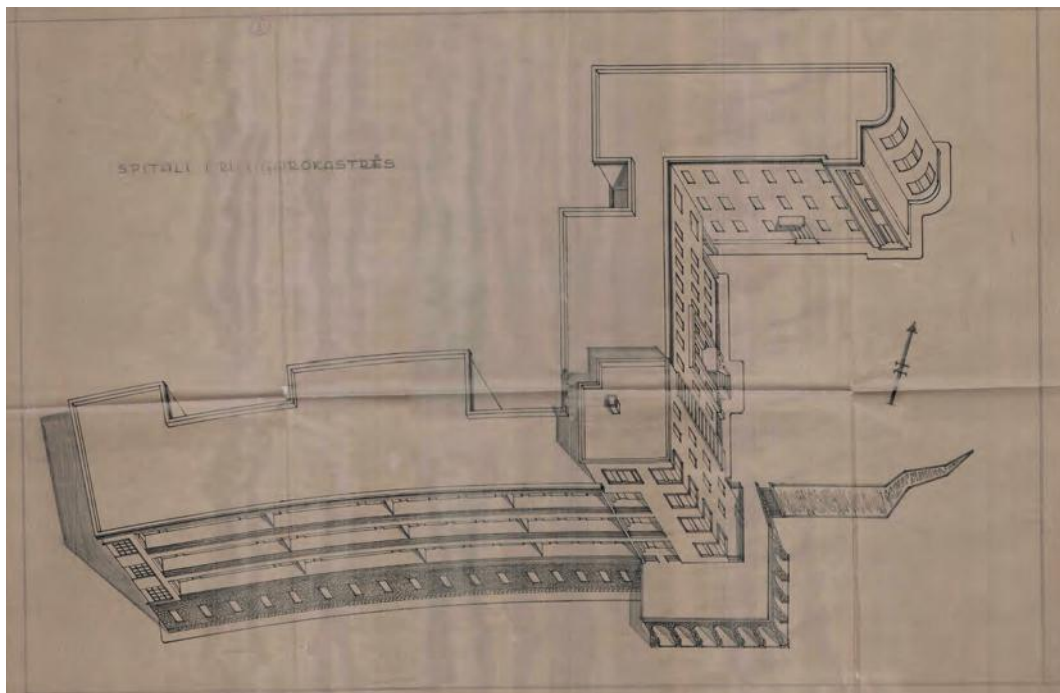


Fig. 18 / Skënder Kristo Luarasi, Axonometric Drawing, Hospital of Gjirokastra, First Version, 1949

building as well as transverse ventilation. This functional solution is treated as an aesthetic advantage in designing a long and dynamic volume and façade. (Fig. 17, 20 & 21). The three corners of the L-shaped volume are highlighted and emphasized volumetrically as 'offsets' of the volume's corner.

These fractures define a connection to the context by referring to the scale of

the vernacular architecture. The first floor of the corner volume is redefined as an arcade similar to those of De Chirico's paintings, or like stone arches that have 'descended' from the city. This arcade then returns to the plan of the façade of the building and continues along the entire length of the building as a plinth.

Between these corner volumes, the

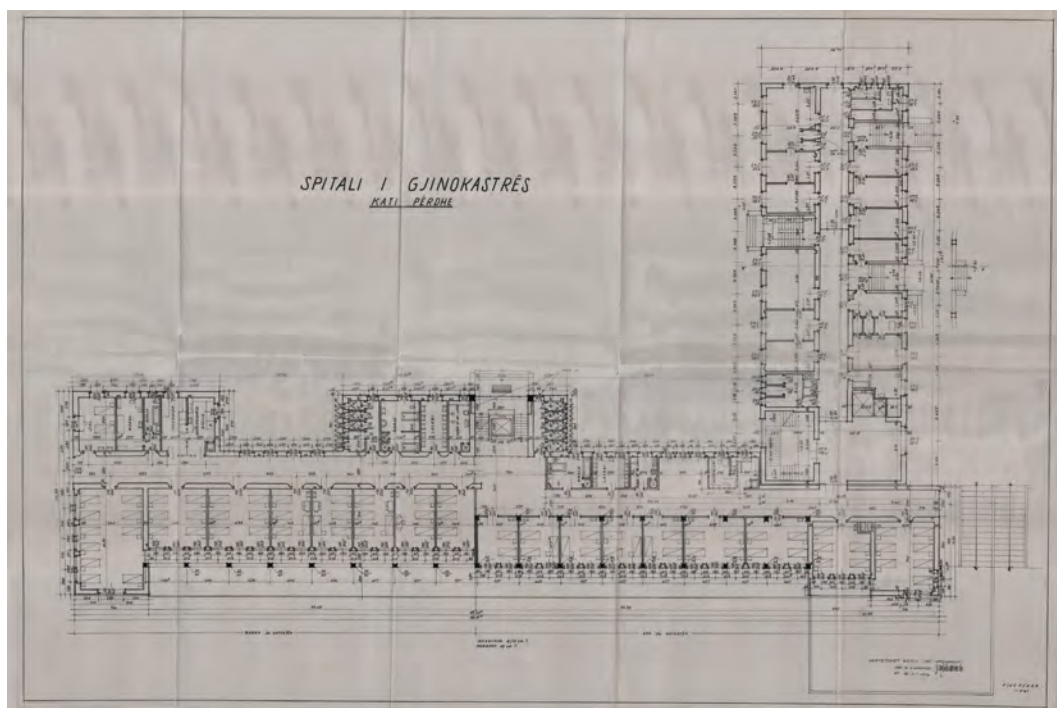


Fig. 19 / Skënder Kristo Luarasi, Ground Floor Plan of the Hospital of Gjirokastra, Final Version, 1949



Fig. 20 / The Hospital of Gjirokastra, 1950

façade is articulated with loggias, windows, balconies, plinth and cornice, creating a layered and sculptural effect that materializes from the play of light and shadow. The orientation of the volume and the façade direct our attention toward the city on the hill. This reference is reinforced by a series of horizontal reveals of the façade that turn the corners of the volume and thus continue the horizontal motif of the loggias.

The whole building can be imagined as a series of house-towers assembled into a single volume and then wrapped in a modern dress, articulated calmly and with variation, I would even say, in a cheerful way. This cheerful quality stands out at the level of details and finishes, where ceramic tiles are combined with plaster and stone, and window frames intersect the horizontal ornaments of the façade.

Gjirokastra is a unique city where the vernacular is combined with the modern. Research on the latter is still in its initial stages. Different archives need to be



Fig. 21 / The Hospital of Gjirokastra, today

consulted and explored. The genealogy of different structures – their form, style, and history need to be traced and investigated. The specificity of the city of Gjirokastra begs new ways to read both history and modernity and their complex relationships and intersections, in their aesthetic, social, political and institutional dimensions. Finding facts and objects that would help us discover such dimensions would not be unlike catching a glimpse of the dark cistern...