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Vertical Tirana 2023: When an elephant enters into a glass shop

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“Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.” (Orwell 1948: 34)

«There is no end to bad things and laugh today because tomorrow will be worse»

The above expressions may seem pessimistic and cynical, but unfortunately, it seems to represent the real architectural panorama in Albania. In fact, these expressions are very optimistic about the current situation and want to make the reader aware that tomorrow will be worse than today and that yesterday was better.

Let's understand each other. I am not at all pessimistic and not at all nostalgic for the past. On the contrary. For some things, I think that the future will be much better, and these things include services, medicine, traffic, maybe food, and others, while I have my personal doubts about architecture. These doubts arise from the comparison of buildings that were designed and built in the past with those that are designed and built today. Especially in Tirana and all of Albania.

Let's start to analyze the case of the composition of vertical buildings in Tirana with what was designed or built in the past by international architects. The comparison is very valid because the projects of the towers of Tirana are also made by international architects who are supposed to have finished their studies in architecture before making projects. The fact that these projects are made by international studios that have built all over the world is not a guarantee for their architectural quality or for the innovation they bring. On the contrary, when architecture

becomes a mass product, like all other products, then its quality reaches the mass level. Let's understand once again. I have nothing against the mass. I like the ordinary "middle" man of the mass as much as Orson Wells liked him in Pasolini's *Ricotta*.

Here we will talk about architecture and mass architecture. Mass architecture is what is done the same for everyone, in all countries as if it were an industrial design product. Like all low-quality products with which the mass is "fed", the architecture of the mass becomes the same for everyone wherever, and in general it is done badly and violently.

Let's go to the comparison better. In this writing, we will compare an unrealized project and some built projects of towers or skyscrapers with the towers built in Tirana.

The unrealized project is that of Maurizio Sacripanti for the Peugeot Skyscraper competition in Buenos Aires in 1961 (Fig. 1). Sacripanti's project is composed of a highly articulated structure with suspended blocks, detached from each other, which carve out the spaces between them and the gardens. The skyscraper project appears so innovative and combines the needs of Peugeot offices with the natural aspects that are very fashionable in recent times. From this point of view, the Bosco Verticale Project in Milan and all its embarrassing imitations made in the world do not constitute innovation. Even the concept of "facciata mutevole" through greenery is preceded by the "mutevole" that we find in the



Figure 1. View of the model of the Peugeot skyscraper in Buenos Aires 1961. (Source: collezione-MAXXI-Architettura-Fondazione-MAXXI-Roma)

moving panels of the Peugeot tower and greenery voids.

The built projects are Torre Velasca designed by Studio BBPR in 1950 (built from 1956-1958. Fig 2) and Pirelli skyscraper by Gio Ponti built from 1956-1960 in Milan.

For the design of the Velasca tower, BBPR was inspired by the Italian medieval tower, re-interpreting it according to a modern design. In this way, they guarantee the continuity of the building tradition even in the modern period. Torre Velasca enters the Milanese urban reality in an almost natural way, conveying the modernity of the post-World War II era and keeping its freshness even today.



Figure 2. Torre Velasca Milano Designed by BBPR 19250 (Source: Photo by Paolo Monti in 1973)

The case of the 127-meter-high Pirelli Skyscraper is even more emblematic. A very elegant skyscraper with all the supporting structures in concrete. In fact, the four main columns start with a width from the ground of 2 meters and end at the top of 50 cm. Pirellone's design is an expression of the modernity of Milan not only in the 60s of the last century but also today.

In fact, if we want to make a comparison of the three aforementioned projects designed by the architects of the Italian school with the towers built in Tirana in these 10-15 years, we immediately notice a degradation of the "competence to build" even though more than 60 years have passed since the above projects. How is it possible that more than 60 years later, the projects mentioned above, are built in Tirana towers that have no relation to the context and the urban reality of this city? Tirana is and has been a city of towers, minarets, and bell towers. All vertical elements could have been interpreted to have a continuity with the local tradition. But no. In Tirana would be built the Intercontinental (fig. 3), which brings facades and colors that even a weak student, even among those who do not pass the class, in the second year in the weak schools of architecture, could do better. The reader can say that my criticism is very harsh and that there could be worse cases. I agree that there are worse cases and that it can be even worse.

Even seeing how the construction is going in Tirana, *it can be said there is no end to bad things and laugh today because tomorrow will be worse.* In fact, in Tirana, it is built very badly, and it can be built even worse than the Intercontinental as shown by the tower with arches that have climbed above the clock tower and the mosque. The arched tower out of proportion (Fig. 5) clearly shows that you can design a tower very badly,



Figure 3. View of Intercontinental (Photo by Author: 2023)



Figure 4. Photo of Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana (Photo by Author: 2023)

except in the wrong place. You can build an office or residential tower that also resembles a *Parking* building. Yes, in Tirana you can do it because the permission to build if you have more than 15 floors is given directly by the prime minister's office or the prime minister himself according to some "not official" sources. If we are getting into the not official sources, they say also that a part of these buildings (20-25%) belongs to ... it is better to leave this topic because we don't know where it will end.

Let's go back to the analysis of the "parking" tower with arches. The arch in itself is not an "architectural crime". Modern architecture has used the arch as in the compositions in the layout - the stairs of LeCorbusier, the Tugendhat villa has stairs and a part inside with an arch, Gropius' Total Theater or the spiral of the Guggenheim Museum - but also in the facade as in the case of the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana alias "Colosseo Quadrato" (Fig. 4) in EUR-Rome (1939 - 1953) by architects Giovanni Guerrini, Ernesto Lapadula, and Mario Romano. These architects, even though they were not international architects or the most skilled in the Italian panorama, nearly a century ago designed the *square Colosseum* in Rome which is incomparable to the "parking" building of the center of Tirana in 2023. Compare Figure 4 with Figure 5 and make your personal evaluation because I can also be accused, unfairly, of professional jealousy. Compare by yourself the regularity and proportions of the square colosseum with the parking building of Tirana, which has no two arches the same or in relation to each other. All the arches of the parking building are badly made, without relation to each other, some higher and some lower, some wider and some narrower. A building without metrics. Architectural disgrace and a crime against the city. A crime that, unfortunately, once it is built, will prove the violence and ignorance of those who gave the permission to build it and those who built it. A shame that we will have in front of our eyes for years to come and that will remind us how fragile we are as a people and as builders.

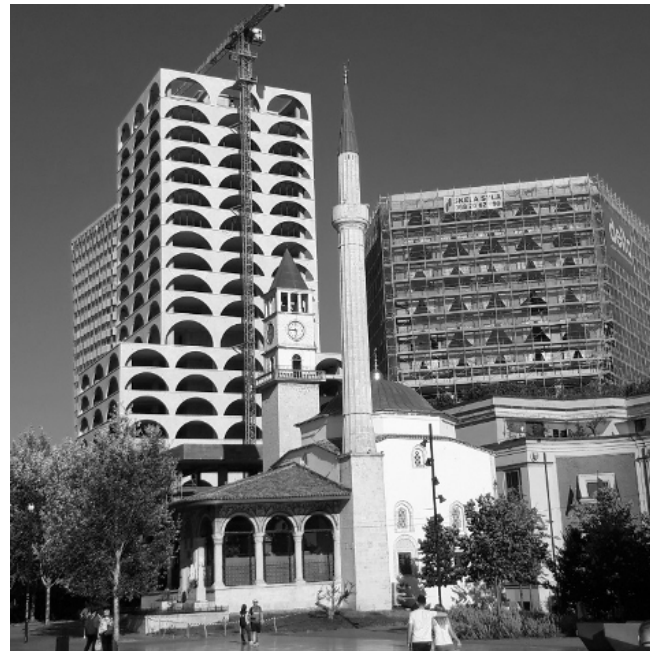


Figure 5. Photo of the tower with arches in Tirane (Photo by Author: 2023)

But you think that the worst came out and now we are cured of this evil that had drowned us. Yeah. Enjoy the moment because it will get worse. From the scaffolding of the tower next to the parking, some triangular "openings" windows can be seen, which I hope are not real. What do you think, if they are real, they will be better than the parking? I have my doubts and most likely they will come true. When a building with triangular windows will "appears" in the city, we will say "We have blamed in vain the plaza, downtown one, the Intercontinental, or the parking" There was even worse"

All these towers built in the center of Tirana have been aggressively inserted into the urban fabric of a fragile city. It seems like a kind of perverse urban rape where found an empty "hole" is inserted into a tower. It is not the unbridled imagination of the author of this writing. The above statement is based on the desire to insert a tower in the courtyard of the Historical Museum. Empty "hole", we insert a tower.

From this point of view, the old, delicate Tirana no longer exists and it is broken as a glass shop. Inside it, elephant towers have been inserted and will be inserted to destroy it even more and to make a Tirana that has nothing to do with the past and, consequently, with the future. It's like an elephant that moves inside a glass shop and destroys everything, and the towers of Tirana today are destroying the past, thus erasing the future of this city.

