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The formal, the temporal and the modern

A historical view on the unfinished urban transformation of the city of prishtina

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Abstract

Following Walter Benjamin's thinking of "the modern" – which is an important theoretical contribution to the study of form – one could understand that the term designates both a formal temporal structure and the diverse range of its historical instances, past and present, whose reinterpretation and critical reading can stimulate possible future scenarios for urban spaces, or the understanding of specific developments related to them. For Benjamin's theory to be applicable in the discipline of architecture, particular knowledge and methods are required, through which unfold the processes of modernity in relation to the temporal and formal phenomenon. Thus, the aim of this essay is to re-read Benjamin's modernity within the discussion on temporality, by using architectural form and language as tools.

Temporality and modernity are widely discussed topics of scientific research, particularly linked to the tradition of the Frankfurt School. However, we are interested in deciphering these two topics through a historical category, as an object through which the scientific architectural research is crafted. And in order to connect this category to a practical level contextualized within an urban setting, this essay studies the urbanization of modernist cities, the historical events impacting it, and the stages of modernity, focusing on the city of Prishtina in Kosovo. Prishtina is used as a case-study on account of its particular history in the course of the twentieth and twenty-first century. It is the capital city of a post-socialist state that experienced a radical shift in ideological and political systems, characterized by a complex architectural and urban form with distinguished modern features.

This paper will study the unfinished modernism in Prishtina (1945-ongoing), – interrupted by politico-ideological instances – which led to a fragmentation of the urban form and the presence of multiple urban realities. In so doing, this paper will decipher specific events from different time periods, to be defined as critical junctures of Prishtina's modern history, which had a particular outcome in architecture and its urban setting. The study of the temporal and the formal in modern architecture and city planning will focus on two plans: 1) The political and economic context in Prishtina, within former Yugoslavia, which produces an ideological condition within which architecture becomes ideological; 2) The discipline of architecture, which impacts the form and aesthetics of buildings and cities through modern ideology and normativities.

Keywords

Architecture; Urban Form; Temporality; Modernity

Introduction

Architecture is not an isolated discipline but is one of the manifold manifestations of the human activity. It is effectively capable of embodying different ideological meanings and can provoke various social and cultural responses related to a temporal and spatial context. Within this context, architecture uses its formal and aesthetic modalities to participate in the organization of the city space and human life, by signifying historical events from the past, intervening into an existing condition and simultaneously structuring a vision for the future. Thus, architecture is a representation of the material existence of the society and the time of this existence, expressed essentially in a spatial dimension.

Changes in spatial organizations affect our understanding of time and place (Benjamin, 2000). Space is considered to be an order of coexistences as time is an order of successions (Benjamin, 2000). Following Kant, we understand that time has one dimension, in the sense that different times are not simultaneous but successive (Benjamin, 2000). Jacques Rancière (2018/2022) goes further by arguing that time is not simply the line between past and future, but is also a distribution of forms of life. While space, according to Gotfried Leibniz, is not only an order of things which exist at the same time, but furthermore of things which existed before and of possible future existences (Benjamin, 2000). Thus, we are using the term “temporality”, which, while it may denote an individual’s experience of time, it also refers to how the past, present and future are tied together in a particular narrative (Gokmenoglu, 2022). Temporality then, does not refer to simply being at a time, at one moment after another, but it is the unity of past, present and future, and its construction is based on memory, experience and vision.

Space and time are elements of social experience (Lefebvre, 1991) and are constructed on memory and vision. This makes space not only dependent on historical events, but fundamentally historic (Goonewardena et.al., 2008). Dealing with past, present and future, with heritage, intervention and (re)creation, architecture is in constant interplay with concepts of time and temporality. On one side, aspects of a building such as form, style/language and technology, which constitute the *material* in architecture, are exposed to changes and transformations imposed by the temporal phenomena. On the other side, the city – conceived here as an architectural work – is the spatial, formal and aesthetical outcome of political, economic, social and cultural forces which have operated before or are currently in play. This paper belongs to the fields of history and critical theory of architecture, rendering them as integral parts of scientific research. As an intellectual enterprise, architectural theory follows an inter-disciplinary approach. It draws upon the larger events of its time (or different time periods), seeking for their legitimation, objectivity and universality, and it often cannot be understood outside them. While the history of architecture in this case, is not simply related to the remembering of architectural works from the past, but it is a critical history of the social relations of production, exchange and consumption of ‘architectural products’. Thus, architecture is not only what

appears before the body and the eye; it is a complexity of relations, signs and representations, occurring in multiple spatial and temporal realities.

Setting the context

Temporality and modernity are widely discussed notions within the discipline of architecture, mainly at a theoretical level. The fundamental premise of this research is that these theoretical concepts are related to the practical level of the discipline of architecture, and have a distinct outcome in the (re)creation and development of urban and architectural form. In this context, this research will unfold ‘modernity’ through the study of twentieth-century architecture and city planning. Within this time period, we will analyze ideological-political concepts related to socialism, capitalism, modernism, postmodernism – as instances of modernity – and their impact on the architectural discourse. This will contribute to the understanding of how past events – by imposing what was novelty at the time – have shaped the conditions of our existence in terms of the organization of the city space and possible future scenarios related to it. The methodological approach is based on a mix of research methods, such as literature review, text-discourse analysis, and morphological-typological analysis. This research will take into account the theoretical concepts of *temporality* and *modernity*, as presented by Walter Benjamin, and interpret them through the case-study, Prishtina (the capital city of Kosovo). Benjamin’s legacy as a critical theorist – together with Theodor Adorno, Ernst Bloch and others – has been formative for authors such as Manfredo Tafuri, Joan Ockman, K. Michael Hays and Fredric Jameson, indicating that architectural theory as we know it today, is thoroughly informed by Western, neo-Marxist theories of the Frankfurt School and others (Heynen and Loosen, 2019). The critical theory of the Frankfurt School is inserted in the architectural thought presented here, for two reasons: 1) the aim to distinguish its own methods, theories and forms of explanation from standard understanding, both in natural and social sciences; 2) its claim that social inquiry must combine the poles of philosophy and social sciences: explanation and understanding, structure and agency, regularity and normativity (Bohman, 2021).

The discussion of all these concepts, is often limited to the context of western culture. By utilizing the findings in the case of Prishtina, this research extends the discourse on architecture, modernity (and its multiple stages) and temporality in the context of post-socialist states in former Yugoslavia and Southeast Europe. Prishtina is used as a case-study on account of its particular history in the course of the twentieth and twenty-first century, a period which is studied within the timeline of ‘modernity’. By bringing into discussion time-related notions such as interruption, fragmentation and unfinished modernization of urban settings, we will decipher the ‘architectures’ and ‘urbanities’ of the modern city.

Considering the impossibility to study architecture and city planning in Prishtina – or anywhere else – in a linear fashion through the entire period of the twentieth century, we are in-

terested in relevant particular moments in Prishtina's modern history, which are identified as 'critical junctures'. The term 'critical juncture' does not refer to a specific moment in time, but it implies a set of events that have left traces on architecture, the city's form and identity, and the memory of the individual which inhabits the city. Thus, we are looking to identify the moments of particular developments in architecture and the city, which represent the stages and expressions of modernity in the region. Within these junctures, we will analyze urban plans and architectures, which resulted in the construction of unfinished urban forms.

The temporality of the modern

Walter Benjamin provided a theory of time and modernity – a theory of the temporality of the modern – which could be interpreted in terms of the architectural and urban product. He developed a conception of time, which does not imply any distinction between past, present and future time, but is based on the temporal continuity of past, present and future, where different events are understood as connected (Osborne and Charles, 2021). Alongside this, Benjamin proposed an alternative image of modernity, which does not include a homogenous understanding of time (Mack, 2009). In *The Arcades Project* – the unfinished research on nineteenth century Paris – he interprets the architectures of modernity as "images in the collective consciousness, in which the old and new interpenetrate" (Benjamin and Rice, 2009). Modernity is rendered as a continuous, incomplete, process, that would not necessarily destroy the past which precedes the presence of the modern, neither it would be the temporal endpoint where history's long progress finds its culmination (Mack, 2009). Thus, we have a concept of history that is compatible with modernity.

Modernity has an architecture, in the sense that the elements of modernity have points of connection and coherence, and it is a genuine object of research which demands a necessary interdisciplinarity (Benjamin and Rice, 2009). The city was Benjamin's testing ground: "*Modernized city, the city realized in the Paris of the Second empire and afterwards...the city as the nexus of modern circulation, perception, cognition, experience and shock*" (Sussman, 2009, pp. 9-38). In *The Arcades Project* we face the experience of the capitalist metropolis through the construction of relations between its elements "then" and "now". The two terms, capitalism and modernity, are inextricable for Benjamin in the context of 19th- and early 20th-century Europe (Benjamin, 2009). Benjamin's thought combined the experience of the capitalist metropolis, with some fundamental elements of Marxist socialism, and the Romantic idea of the reconciliation between man and nature (Markus, 2009). Thus, we are faced with a multiplicity of modernity related to either socialist or capitalist contexts. In this regard, modernity – being continuous and multiple – necessitates forms of interruption. Benjamin's modernity is compatible both to the periodization of modern architecture introduced by Manfredo Tafuri, and the definition of Postmodernism by Friedrich Jameson. Tafuri formulates the entire cycle of modernism as unitary development

(Hays, 1989), where changes occur in terms of socialist and capitalist ideological and political systems, or in the function of an architecture. While Jameson defines postmodernism as a cultural production of late capitalism, emerging from the 1960s and onwards (Jameson, 1991). In this context, the Benjamin's modernity takes the form of a "pre-history" of both modern and postmodern architecture and city planning (Male, 2022, p. 347). Benjamin, as well as George Simmel, used the concept of the "metropolis" as an "expressive platform of modernity" (Abruzzese and Mancini, 2011, p. 19), and also as a phenomenon through which we can understand the development of a postmodernity that is contemporary to us (Male, 2022, p. 347).

4. Case-Study: The City of Prishtina

The concept of modernity in the case of Prishtina is interpreted through post-World War II urban plans and architectures, presenting them both as historical layers on pre-existing urban forms and unfinished visions of the future. The modernization tendencies in Prishtina emerged as early as in the late nineteenth century, during the Tanzimat Reforms enforced by the Ottoman Empire, mainly introduced in architecture and street infrastructure (Navakazi and Jerliu, 2019). However, the urban development during the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, was based on a spontaneous evolution of a town (Sadiki, 2019), with distinguished oriental morphological and stylistic features.

After WWII Prishtina became an administrative centre and later the capital city of the former Autonomous Socialist Province of Kosovo, within the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. In socialist Yugoslavia, modernist architecture and urbanism were critical in the construction of socialism, being means for differentiating new typologies from the capitalist form of urbanization, aiming at the de-Ottomanization of the urban space (Jerliu, Navakazi, 2018). The socialist Yugoslav city was the field where political power intended to express the social progress by destroying the former – capitalist/bourgeoisie system, spatially represented by Ottoman buildings and public spaces (Gjinolli, 2019). The dominant ideology of the period was that of "Brotherhood and Unity", built on the idea of social unification, political and economic centralization. It aimed at transcending all forms of ethnic, religious or regional identity in order to develop a 'Yugoslav identity'.

Starting from the late 1960s, development in architecture and urbanism occurred simultaneously with wider social, political, economic, cultural and constitutional changes, that somehow allowed the fostering of a sense of identification of each entity within Yugoslavia, leading to the idea of 'national identity', which would contribute to the general image of the former federate. Prishtina experienced the most significant urbanization and architectural modernization between 1970 and 1980, a process which was interrupted with the revocation of Kosovo's autonomy by the Republic of Serbia in 1989 (Hasimja, 2016). In order to unfold the phases of modernity in the case of Prishtina, we have identified two critical junctures in the city's modern history:

1) Post-World War II modernization tendencies 1945-1968:

Planning the 'New'

2) The episteme of (modern) architecture 1968-1989

Within these junctures the concept of modernity and its temporality is studied by focusing in two contexts characterized by the ideological and political conditions in Prishtina and former Yugoslavia, whose outcome is an interrupted and unfinished urb-architectural product. First, we have the political and economic plans which impacted the form of the city and its architectures, and produce an ideological condition within which planning becomes ideological. The second context is the discipline of architecture, impacting the form and aesthetics of landmark buildings and the urban fragments they create, through the modern ideology and normativities.

Planning the 'NEW'

Starting with "voluntary" deconstruction-construction activities from 1947, the focus of modernist interventions was the core of the city centre, where the old bazaar, mosques and other structures from the Ottoman period were demolished (Jerliu and Navakazi, 2018). Actions taken during this period were referred to by modernist planners as "urban activities...operative works necessary for preparing a study on the development of Prishtina City" (Jerliu & Navakazi, 2018). This period is characterized by a strong ideological expression through architecture and urban planning. As impacting forces are identified the political and economic plans of the state (i.e., of former Yugoslavia), aiming the construction of socialism.

Following these activities, the first spatial document of post-WWII, the General Urban Plan for Prishtina, was drafted in 1953 [Fig.1]. The most important contribution of this plan was the reconstruction of the pre-existing north-south axis in the type of a boulevard with avenues on the sides – reminiscent of late nineteenth-century layouts – where the principal administrative and cultural buildings would be located alongside collective housing blocks (Sadiki, 2019) [Fig.2]. Such planning was a contradiction of large public spaces for the mass, represented through urban squares, promoted by socialist modernism [Fig. 3]. Reading this plan, we understand that there was a fragmented urban development. The plan included only few areas within the city center which underwent radical transformation, and provided the general framework for some new constructions distributed in fragments. The plan did not project a 'new' city, as it was the case with the extension of existing cities in Belgrade or Skopje (Jerliu & Navakazi, 2018), nor did it create a vision for the future, as the modernist architectural ideology indented (Tafuri, 1976).

This type of planning document – the General Urban Plan (GUP) – is characterized with a lack of scientific analysis in terms of both socio-cultural and territorial context, being presented in the form of maps showing land use, projected functions and the volumetry of the buildings (Hasimja, 2016). GUP's were designed-led plans that had no relation with other disciplines and had very little or no support for the existing physical strata. Those were addressed through other types of policies that fell under the economic development domain, the

outcome of which had totally disregarded the complex problems connected to space (Hasimja, 2016). A similar methodology was followed in later plans, drafted for specific areas within the city, as it was the case with the 1962 plan entitled "*The program for the urban solution of three residential neighborhoods and the centre of the region of city's new part*".



Figure 1. Dragutin Partonić, General Urban Plan of Prishtina, 1953 (Source: Prishtina City Archive, Fund SO-KK, Box 1/1-21, No.587-589)



Figure 2. Modernist buildings along former Marshal Tito Boulevard, Prishtina, 1950s (source, Sadiki, 2020)



Figure 3. Skanderbeg Square in Tirana and Socialist Landmarks, Tirana, 1960s

The episteme of (modern) architecture

After 1968, the discipline of architecture is characterized with an expression of different stages of modernity, from the Existenzminimum promoted by CIAM, to the emergence of other modernist languages such as regionalism, metabolism and brutalism. Thus, the avant-garde architecture in Yugoslavia was a direct representation of the avant-garde status of Yugoslav socialism, conveying the image of a socially, economically and politically progressive state. An important contribution of the time, is the plan “Conceptual and Urban Solution for the University of Prishtina Centre”, drafted in 1971 by the Urbanism and Design Institute in Prishtina [Fig.4]. The main author was the Kosovo Albanian architect Bashkim Fehmiu, who collaborated with the architect from Belgrade, Bogdan Bogdanović, both being regular CIAM delegates.

Fehmiu designed a network that would accommodate all the faculty buildings, the Academy of Sciences and Arts, the Rector’s Office, the Art Gallery, the Amphitheater and the public squares with green spaces, while at the center would be the National Library [Fig.5]. To avoid the transformation of the complex into an isolated island within the city, the ground floors were open spaces treated as interconnected yards (Sadiki, 2020). All the buildings inside this complex form an urban structure completely accessible to pedestrians, positioning them at the centre of this planning strategy (Sadiki, 2020), what reminds us of Le Corbusier’s layouts.

Fehmiu’s plan could be considered as the architect’s vision for creating the new city of Prishtina, that started with the heart of the modern city, the University Centre. Dealing with concrete works of architecture, in particular with the National Library, the plan aims at the (re)creation of the city of Prishtina through landmark architecture, positioning architecture as a determiner of the destiny of the city (Tafari, 1976). This approach was also followed in all construction activities in Prishtina – defined by

an ideological background based on the concept of identity, – in which we distinguish a strong presence of landmark public architecture and a lack of an overall plan for the vision of the city as a whole.

Architectural works of this time, were constructed in unbuilt and undeveloped urban plates, by creating new centralities in the city and forming separate urban fragments, leading to the reproduction or recreation of the city through architecture. Large scale architecture landmarks were constructed almost spatially autonomous from each other, but having a strong character of space formation (Papa, 2019). In this conception of space, unity is given by the sequence created along the path which works as a system made of elements in contrasts and interruptions. Examples of this phenomenon are the National and Library of Kosovo, the Palace of Youth and Sports, Rilindja Publishing House and former Ljubljanska Bank. These buildings are expressions of different modernist stylistic/linguistic and technological features, unfolding multiple layers of modernity. The National Library is an example of regionalism by using the combination of cubes and domes, representing layers of Islamic and Byzantine architecture to be found in Kosovo and the region [Fig.6]. In addition, the hexagonal metallic grid covering the façade, reminds us of the grid used by Frank Lloyd Wright in the plan of Hannah House. The Palace of Youth and Sports is similar to Metabolist architecture and the idea of megastructures, which became popular in Yugoslavia through Kenzo Tange’s masterplan for Skopje (Jerliu and Navakazi, 2018) [Fig.7]. The brutalist style is embodied in the Rilindja Publishing House, while the former Ljubljanska Bank is associated to the curved glass facades of postmodern architecture [Fig.8 & Fig.9].

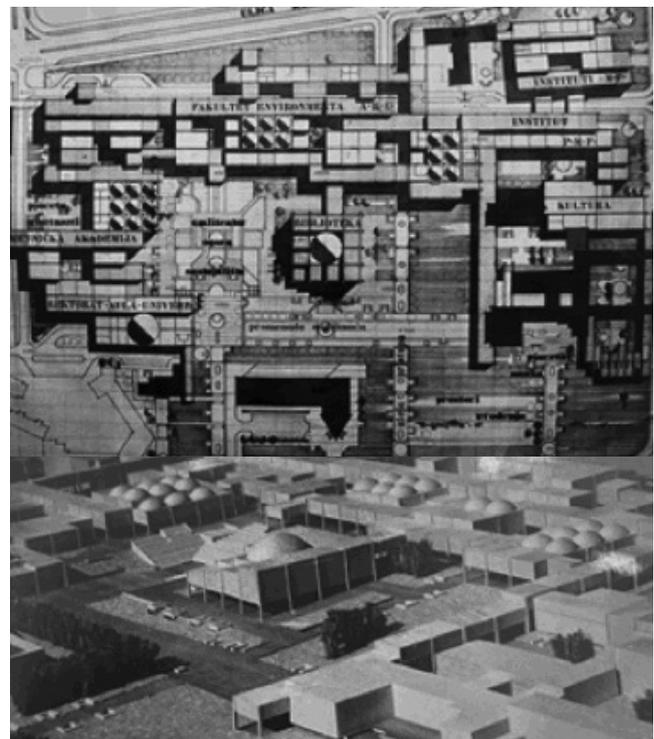


Figure 4. Bashkim Fehmiu, The University Center, Ground Plan, Prishtina, 1971/ 3D Model, (source: Sadiki, 2020, p. 35)

Modernity in prishtina: fragmented, interrupted, unfinished

The lack of a vision to project the future from the present, which according to Tafuri (1967), has to be the main objective of ‘the plan’, led to the recreation of the city through landmark architecture, differently put, the construction of landmarks “without” a city (i.e., without being part of an overall urbanization). The city in this case is constructed by a spatial concept made up of various episodes, determined by singularities and peculiarities of place, related to a particular object or spatial configuration. Being connected to each other in a formal continuity as urban patterns, these episodes contribute to the formation of the image of the city as a whole. (Papa, 2019). Yet, it is important to note that modernist landmarks in Prishtina are quite dispersed in spatial terms. A system of public spaces that would allow for spatial integrity, and unhindered mobility between landmarks located in close vicinity, was never considered (Jerliu, 2013).

Despite the criticism, the examples presented above are the most visible signs of progress and have contributed to the construction of the image of Prishtina as a capital city of an autonomous state. They represent different phases of the modernization the city of Prishtina, interrupted by the installment of the parallel system after the revocation of Kosovo’s autonomy in 1989 until the Kosovo War in 1998-1999. This led to the creation of parallel urbanities within the city, determining a reorganization of the urban space.

The interruption of the city’s modernization resulted in the unfinished modernist urbanization of Prishtina. The urban space, time, architecture and the state are manifested in fragments, which are developed between the influences of socialist, capitalist, or nationalist forces. At some times these fragments represent the great narratives of socialism and modernism, while at other times they abandon them in favor of a conception of the city as a simple collection of architectures (small narratives), and not a whole and coherent organism.

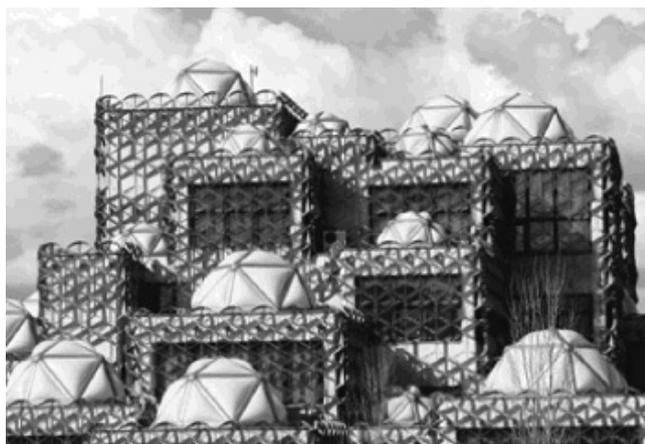


Figure 6. Andrija Mutnjaković, The National Library of Kosovo, Prishtina, 1971-1982 (source: Facebook page “Socialist Modernism”);

Figure 9. Zoran Zekić, Former Ljubljanska Bank, Prishtina, 1984 (source: Sadiki, 2020, p. 90)



Figure 7. Živorad Jankovic, Halid Muhasilovic and Srecko Espak, The Palace of Youth and Sports, Prishtina, 1974-1981 (source: <http://hiddenarchitecture.net/sport-and-recreation-centre-boro-and/>)



Figure 8. Georgi Konstantinovski, Rilindja Publishing House, Prishtina, 1972-1978 (source: <https://architectuul.com/architecture/priting-house-rilindja/>);



Conclusions and Further Studies

By defining the ‘critical junctures’ in Prishtina’s modern history and their urban and architectural outcome, we have introduced a set of events as different time sequences, which represent a past connected to the present and the future, and unfold multiple layers of modernity in the city space. Thus, we are introducing a temporal structure, in which different stages of modernity and different ideologies are put in play in the unfinished process of the city’s modernization.

First, the modern image of Prishtina is informed by the architectural works presented in this research, each conveying specific (at times, different) modernist architectural languages, occurring simultaneously and reflecting the multiplicity of modernity as introduced by Walter Benjamin. In this context, re-reading modernity through Prishtina’s architecture, also confirms Rancière’s thesis that “there is no one modern time, only a plurality of them”, introduced in his recent work *Modern Times: Temporality in Art and Politics* (2018/2022, p.7). Secondly, modernist architecture and urban spaces in Prishtina reflect the character of modernity as a temporal continuity of past, present and future, being an interrupted and incomplete process, and not a temporal endpoint. What was presented as novelty in the socialist city of Prishtina is today an unfinished vision for the future of the city.

The problem of unfinished urbanization remains the greatest challenge for the city of Prishtina, which can be regarded as a specific case to comprehend and interpret. The modernity and the form are unfinished. The space is informed by filling the fragments without integrating them. What follows in the aftermath of socialism, – with the installment of democracy and capitalism, and replacement of modernism with postmodernism, – is an overlapping of fragments, with the same methodology. Due to this fragmentation and unfinished modernization, the city is impossible to be planned as a continuous and unitary whole. Therefore, the fragments – landmark buildings and urban settings – can be used as a tool to regenerate the city, by promoting diversity and multiplicity, and stimulating the development of the surroundings.

At this point, we can suggest a comparison to the concepts regarding the image of the city, introduced by Aldo Rossi (1984). What Rossi argues that is compatible to the case of Prishtina, is that the city is made up of fragments with a principle of individuality, which evolve in time and can be brought back to autonomous facts, to evoke a “*past we can still experience*” (Rossi, 1984). To this extent, it would be important to develop a multi-dimensional relationship between the city and the architectural works. Using the multi-scale concept in Prishtina allows for the discovery of a new sustainable design approach concerning the relationship between architecture and urbanism, in the framework of modernity as a continuous historical process.

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