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to Identity of the Saint Procopius Church

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## A Second Clarifying Article on the Non-Return to Identity of the Saint Procopius Church

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At the top of the Grand Park of Tirana, the new Saint Procopius church is coming to completion, looking very much like the renderings posted along the construction fence: a white, concrete building with a waving silhouette and a dome over the crossing of the nave and transept. The building contrasts sharply with what used to be originally there, the former Saint Procopius church designed by Skënder Kristo Luarasi (the author's grandfather) in 1940 and completed in 1945. This church replaced the old Saint Procopius church that was built in 1787, right where today is the President's office, but which had to be relocated where it is now in the late thirties, due to its proximity to the new boulevard and the city's urban expansion. The Saint Procopius church was closed in the late sixties by the communist antireligion campaign and then modified into a restaurant in the early seventies, almost to a point of nonrecognition. The only parts that remained from the former church were the north aisle wall and the remnants of four piers of what used to be the original three tall arches of its west façade, an architectural element that would be the subject of much misinformed contention and prejudice with regard to its supposed religious symbolism, namely, whether they represented the orthodox architecture

of the catholic one, a matter that this paper aims to elucidate, among others.

The new church has been compared to Santorini's touristic adobes and a concert hall, while many decry the fact that it betrays the identity of the former church. The Albanian Historical Society claims that the architecture of the new Saint Procopius church, supported and financed by the National Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania, has "clear alienating Greece-isation tendencies in comparison with the original church."<sup>1</sup> One of the strongest voices against the new church is the architect Artan Shkreli who, in January 2023, publicly demanded to "stop this perversion of Saint Procopius Church [...] before it is too late," by arguing that the new church "relates neither to the original iconic project of the architect Luarasi (senior), nor to the stylistic and ecclesiastical age-long tradition of the southwest Balkans."<sup>2</sup> The keyword here is "perversion" (in Albanian, "*përçudnim*"): the problem is not just that the new church is different from the original, but that it *falsifies* the latter by modifying or deleting certain parts – like the west façade - that presumably do not conform to the orthodox ecclesiastical architecture.

In reaction and in direct opposition to Shkreli's comments on the new Saint Procopius Church, in an interview for Radio Ngjallja [*Revival Radio*] – a media of the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania, Father Ilia Mazniku preempts any possibility of someone criticizing the Orthodox Church in the first place, insofar as the latter is “a heavenly institution that is not influenced from and does not give account to any external national or international agency or association,” and that “the Saint Procopius Church will be rebuilt according to the Orthodox rite as we want and decide.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, the Orthodox Church is infallible. Yet Father Mazniku is certainly fallible when he claims that the previous Saint Procopius church designed by Luarasi in 1939 was a “conqueror's architecture,”<sup>4</sup> of a Roman Catholic style, imposed on Tirana's orthodox community by Fascist Italy, and that the new Saint Procopius church is “a clear model of byzantine architecture, with modern stylistic elements that fulfill all the liturgical, spiritual, and aesthetic needs of the orthodox community of Tirana.”<sup>5</sup> While no evidence is given for the first claim, since, as it will be shown here, such evidence simply does not exist, plenty of evidence can be found to question the second claim, both in terms of its facticity and a presumed equivalence, isomorphism, or matching between an architectural style and a liturgical function.

Father Mazniku expresses surprise why the debate on the new church is “suddenly” happening only now instead of when this project was first published in the church calendar in 2022. But this is not quite correct either. It was in December 2017 that the Mayor of Tirana first declared that the “237-years old Saint Procopius Church and the Lake will return to identity:”

On this Christmas Eve, we also have news about the church located at the Lake, which was destroyed during the communist era. The famous Saint Procopius Church, turned into a restaurant, is now a church, but still looks like a Soviet bar-buffet from the 70s-80s. We have decided to restore the church as it was, to ensure that not only the communities of faith, but also the Lake that was built around the church of Saint Procopius, returns to its full identity.<sup>6</sup>

The article in the *Tema* Journal where this claim was first posted also showed the renderings that would later be published in the church calendar and are now shown along the construction fence. Right after this claim was published, I sent a private email to Mayor Veliaj, where I suggested to him to correct some of the facts in his statement, and to say in particular that the new Saint Procopius Church does not represent a “return of the church as it was” or in “full identity,” and that it is a modification of the church designed by Skënder Kristo Luarasi in 1940. But disregarding such a suggestion, in the *Panorama* Journal, six years later, on April 30, 2023, Mayor Veliaj reiterated exactly his former statement, by claiming that after a 30-year ordeal with property and usage issues, we have finally

solved the problem, and all the faithful will soon have a new Church of St. Procopius, to return to it as it was, with the same capacity, but of course, now as a restored building as a Church, no longer as the improvisation we have had these 30 years,<sup>7</sup>

Such a claim motivated me to publish “A clarifying article on the non-return to identity of Saint Procopius Church [*Artikull sqarues mbi mos-kthimin në identitet të Kishës së Shën Prokopit*],” in *Gazeta Shqiptare* on May 4th, 2023, where I reiterated in more detail my earlier concerns.<sup>8</sup>

It is rather comical that both Father Ilia and Mayor Veliaj – both the Church and Politics – claim that the Saint Procopius church is returning to its identity, but they mean different identities: the religious identity that Father Ilia claims the church is returning to is predicated on the *non*-return to the architectural identity that Mayor Veliaj claims the church is returning to. What motivates this “Second clarifying article on the non-return to the identity of the Saint Procopius Church” is an obligation to say things as they are, that is, *tel quel*, that in both cases we have a *non*-return to identity, even if the non-return is different in each case: the new Saint Procopius Church does *not* return to the former architectural identity, while the religious identity of the new project is in no way “more orthodox” than the former Saint Procopius. Such a demonstration leads to a theoretical argument supported on historical facts: that the architectural identity is *not identical* with the liturgical, functional or typological one.

Another motivation behind this second clarifying article relates to the predominant tendency in Albania to *not* mention or recognize the authorship of this church in particular and other modern architectural works in Albania in general, especially when the authors are not Italian, or foreign..., and to not accurately describe of the architectural and professional nature of their authors' oeuvre. This might seem like an exaggeration, but the fact is that as I was writing the first clarifying article back in April 2023, I discovered, by chance, that the plaque near the entrance of Saint Procopius church stated that Saint Procopius church was designed by the “Italians” and Gherardo Bosio in particular. I am not kidding... The plaque read:

## Background

The Saint Procopius Church, martyr of the Christian religion, who is considered the patron saint of Tirana and is commemorated every year on July 8, dates back to 1780. It was the Ruler of Tirana, Inbrahim bey Bargjinolli, who supported the building of this church, as a sign of gratitude for the contribution of Orthodox families. The church was a simple and low building. In 1886, several other buildings were erected around it, giving it the shape of a monastery. The complex remained like this until 1937, the year when it was demolished, as the main promenade of Tirana, now the capital, was planned to pass there.

In this place, where it is still today, *the Church was erected*

*by the Italians in 1939 as part of the large boulevard complex. The project bears the signature of the famous Florentine architect Gherardo Bosio.* In 1967, Saint Procopius Church also had the fate of all other cult objects. She was mutilated, having her bow parts removed. In its place, the cafe-restaurant "Liqeni" was built. What remained of the Church of St. Prokop returned to its previous function, only after almost 30 years, in 1993, but with a mutilated appearance. Very soon, the Church of St. Prokop will be reconstructed, returning it to its former glory (my emphasis).

[Historiku

Kisha e Shën Prokopit dëshmor i fesë së krishterë, I cili konsiderohet si shenjt i mbrojtës i Tiranës dhe përkujtohet çdo vit në 8 korrik daton më 1780-n. Ishte Sundimtari i Tiranës, Inbrahim bej Bargjinolli, që përkrahu ngritjen e kësaj kishe, në shenjë falenderimi për kontributin e familjeve ortodokse. Kisha ishte një ndërtim i thjeshtë dhe i ulët. Në 1886 perreth saj u ngritën disa ndërtesa të tjera, duke i dhënë formën e një manastri. I tillë mbeti kompleksi deri në 1937, vit kur u shemb, pasi aty u planifikua të kalonte shëtitorja kryesore e Tiranës, tashmë kryeqytet.

Në këtë vend, ku është edhe sot, *Kisha u ngrit nga Italianët në vitin 1939 si pjesë e kompleksit të bulevardit të madh. Projekti mban firmën e arkitektit të famshëm florentin Gherardo Bosios.* Në vitin 1967 edhe Kisha Shën Prokopit pati fatin e të gjitha objekteve të tjera te kultit. Ajo u gjymtua, duke iu hequr pjesët harkore. Në vend të saj u ngrit kafe-restorant "Liqeni". Çka mbeti prej Kishës së Shën Prokopit iu kthye funksionit të mëparshëm, vetëm pas gati 30 vjetësh, në 1993-shin, por me një pamje të gjymtuar. Shumë shpejt Kisha e Shën Prokopit do të rikonstruktohet duke i kthyer lavdinë e dikurshme. (theksimi im)]

That "...the Church was erected by the Italians in 1939 as part of the large boulevard complex [and that] the project bears the signature of the famous Florentine architect Gherardo Bosio" is simply not true. First, the Church itself was founded in 1940, the project was delivered in 1940-41, and the construction was finished in 1945. Second, Saint Procopius Church was designed and directed by Skënder Kristo Luarasi and not by the "Italians" in general or Bosio in particular, while the construction company Ing. Lucca & C. Milan was, indeed, Italian. In fact, the original project's archival drawings, are not signed by any person, but say "Under the auspices of the Construction Ministry," in which Skënder Kristo Luarasi exercised his professional activity at the time. The sheets have a stamp that says "*Approvato, Ufficio Centrale per L'Edilizia e L'Urbanistica dell'Albania,*" which appears in many other projects of the time, but there is no indication whatsoever that Gherardo Bosio was the architect of the church. That the architect of the church is no other than Skënder Kristo Luarasi is confirmed by several construction documents found in the Albanian State Archive, like the one shown in Figure 1, signed by the "director of the project" – Ing. Luarasi, by a well-known

period photo showing Luarasi himself working on a model of the church (Fig 2), but more importantly, by the original marble plaque of the Saint Procopius Church, currently at the disposal of the Albanian Orthodox Church (Fig. 3). This plaque was nobly saved and preserved by a worker when the Church was demolished in 1967, who gave it to my father, Pavllo Luarasi, who handed it, in turn, over to the Church in 2001. For this handover there is also an attestation (Fig 4). The plaque reads:

**ESTABLISHED IN 1940  
IN THE TIME OF THE ARCHBISHOP OF ALL ALBANIA  
MONSIGNOR CHRISTOPHER  
WITH PARTICIPATION AND COOPERATION  
OF THE ELDERS OF THE CHURCH AND THE CARE-  
TAKER OF THE CHURCH OF TIRANA BUILD WITH  
THE PROCEEDS OF THE DISPOSAL OF THE OLD  
CHURCH TO SAINT PROCOPIUS AND WITH THE  
HELP OF THE ORTHODOX PEOPLE DESIGN AND  
MANAGE BY ING. ARCH. SKANDER PLAYERS  
IMPLEMENTED BY THE ENTERPRISE ING. LUCCA  
& C. MILAN.**

**[THEMELUE NË VITIN 1940  
NË KOHËN E KRYEPISKOPIT TË GJITHË SHQIPNIS  
IMZOT KRISTOFORIT  
ME PJESËMARRJEN EDHE BASHKËPUNIMIN  
E PLEQËSIS KISHËTARE DHE TË KUJDESTARIS SË  
KISHËS TË TIRANËS  
NDËRTUE ME T'ARDHUNAT E ÇPRONËSIMIT TË  
KISHËS SË VJETËR  
TË SHËN PROKOPIT DHE ME NDIHMËN E POPUL-  
LIT ORTHODOX**

<sup>1</sup>Newsbomb, January 13, 2023

<sup>2</sup>Koha Jonë, "Artan Shkreli: Ndalojeni këtë përcudnim të Kishës së Shën Prokopit! Ndërhyni para se të vonë!" January 13, 2023. <https://kohajone.com/politike/artan-shkreli-ndalojeni-kete-percudnim-te-kishes-se-shen-prokopit-nderhyni-para-se-te-vone/>, accessed on September 13, Translated by author

<sup>3</sup>Radio Ngjallja, "Kisha e "Shën Prokopit" do të rindërtohet sipas ritit Orthodhoks ashtu siç ne e duam dhe vendosim!" January 21, 2023, <https://radingjallja.org/kisha-e-shen-prokopit-do-te-rindertohet-sipas-ritit-orthodhoks-ashtu-sic-ne-e-duam-dhe-vendosim/>, accessed September 13, 2024.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid

<sup>5</sup>Ibid

<sup>6</sup>Gazeta tema: <https://www.gazetatema.net/2017/12/19/veliaj-kisha-237-vjecare-e-shen-prokopit-dhe-liqeni-do-te-kthehen-ne-identitet/>, accessed 2024

<sup>7</sup><http://www.panorama.com.al/nis-rindertimi-i-kishes-se-shen-prokopit-veliaj-rikthejme-historine-ne-vend-qyteti-perfiton-nje-hapesire-publike-per-komunitetin/>, accessed in April 2023 (my emphasis)

<sup>8</sup>Skender Luarasi, "Artikull sqarues mbi mos-kthimin në identitet të Kishës së Shën Prokopit," *Gazeta Shqiptare Journal*, May 4, 2023, <https://gazetashqiptare.al/2023/05/04/artikull-sqarues-mbi-mos-kthimin-ne-identitet-te-kishes-se-shen-prokopit/>, accessed August 2024.

**PROJEKTUE DHE DREJTUE PREJ ING. ARCH.  
SKËNDER LUARASIT  
ZBATUE PREJ SIPËRMARRJES ING. LUCCA & C. M  
LANO.]**

To rectify the current plaque, I contacted Miriam Koliqi at the Agency of the Parks and Recreation, who swiftly corrected and changed the description of the plaque, according to the information of the old plaque (Fig #), whose description is cited above. I would like to publicly and heartily thank Miriam for her professionalism in correcting the plaque and for understanding the importance of such rectification. While the rectified plaque is not yet available for the public since it is within the construction area of the church, the new corrected description is also available online, on the website of the Agency of the Parks and Recreation.<sup>9</sup> It now reads:

### Background

Saint Procopius Church originated about two centuries ago and is the first Orthodox church in Tirana, after the Ottoman occupation. It was dedicated to Saint Procopius, martyr of the Christian religion, who is considered the patron saint of Tirana and is commemorated every year on July 8.

The first Saint Procopius Church was built where today is the courtyard of the Presidency and it functioned until 1938, when, based on the regulation plan of New Tirana, it was expropriated and demolished.

The new Saint Procopius Church was built with the proceeds of the expropriation of the old church and with the help of the people of Tirana. The church was designed and directed by Eng. Ark. Skender Luarasi and was implemented by the enterprise Lucca & C. Milano. The construction started in 1940, the year when the foundation stone was laid, and was inaugurated on May 20, 1945, by Archbishop Monsignor Kristofori, with the participation and cooperation of the church elders and under the auspices of the church of Tirana.

In 1967, the Saint Procopius Church also suffered the fate of all other cult objects. In its place, the cafe-restaurant “*Liqeni*” was built. What remained of the Saint Procopius Church returned to its previous function only after almost 30 years, in 1993, but with a completely changed appearance.<sup>10</sup>

### [Historiku

Kisha e Shën Prokopit e ka origjinën rreth dy shekuj më parë dhe është kisha e parë ortodokse në Tiranë, pas pushtimit osman. Ajo iu kushtua Shën Prokopit, dëshmor i fesë së krishterë, i cili konsiderohet si shenjti mbrojtës i Tiranës dhe përkujtohet çdo vit në 8 korrik.

Kisha e parë e Shën Prokopit u ngrit aty ku sot është oborri i Presidencës dhe ka funksionuar deri në vitin 1938, kur në bazë të planit rregullues të Tiranës së Re u shpronësua dhe u prish.

Kisha e re e Shën Prokopit u ndërtua me të ardhurat e shpronësimit të kishës së vjetër dhe me ndihmën e popullit të Tiranës.

TIRANË, JANAR 1941-KIT

P.T. Kisha Ortodokse Autografale e Shën Prokopit

SHËNJA I. I-28

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121) Materiali dhe	m2.	22.123	x	35 =	774,30
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137) Materiali dhe	m2.	22.123	x	35 =	774,30
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147) Materiali dhe	m2.	22.123	x	35 =	774,30
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162) Materiali dhe	m2.	22.123	x	35 =	774,30
163) Materiali dhe	m2.	22.123	x	35 =	774,30
164) Materiali dhe	m2.	22.123	x	35 =	774,30
165) Materiali dhe	m2.	22.123	x	35 =	774,30
166) Materiali dhe	m2.	22.123	x	35 =	774,30
167) Materiali dhe	m2.	22.123	x	35 =	774,30
168) Materiali dhe	m2.	22.123	x	35 =	774,30
169) Materiali dhe	m2.	22.123	x	35 =	774,30



Kisha u projektua dhe u drejtua nga ing. ark. Skënder Luarasi, dhe u zbatua nga sipërmarrja Lucca & C. Milano. Ndërtimi nisi më 1940, vit kur u vendos guri i themelit, dhe u përfundua më 20 Maj 1945 nga Kryepeshkop Imzot Kristofori, me pjesëmarrjen dhe bashkëpunimin e pleqësisë kishtare dhe nën kujdesin e kishës së Tiranës.

Në vitin 1967, edhe kisha e Shën Prokopit pati fatin e të gjitha objekteve të tjera të kultit. Në vend të saj u ngrit kafe-restorant “Liqeni”. Çka mbeti prej kishës së Shën Prokopit iu kthye funksionit të mëparshëm vetëm pas gati 30 vjetësh, më 1993-shin, por me pamje tërësisht të ndryshuar.<sup>11</sup>

But why did the former plaque have the wrong facts, in the first place? Perhaps the person who first formulated the description did not know the history well. Probably. But what is hard to understand is how could the church authorities walk by the plaque every day and not be bothered by its erroneous description and not ask the Agency of the Parks and Recreation to change it, knowing full well that those facts were wrong, as Father Ilia’s interview, clearly indicates? Is it, perhaps, because such an erroneous facticity supports the Orthodox Church’s narrative that Saint Procopius Church designed by Luarasi reflected the “architecture of the conqueror,” and that it was of a Roman Catholic style, as Father Ilia himself claims in his interview?

Even though Saint Procopius Church was built during the Italian occupation, it was not of an “Italian” or Roman Catholic style, like the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania *arbitrarily* claims; I would argue that Saint Procopius was even more orthodox or byzantine-like than the new project. But beyond and *independently* from their stylistic belonging, Luarasi’s project is characterized by a formal sophistication that is hardly matched by the new project.

The Saint Procopius Church designed by Luarasi has a traditional basilica form with narthex, nave, dome, and apse (Figures 5-11). Including the narthex, the nave has four bays, followed by the dome inscribed on a square with a side twice as big as a typical nave’s bay. The dome establishes the vertical axis directly in front of the iconostasis. In line with the Orthodox architectural canon, the altar is positioned behind the iconostasis. On the lower level, all these elements are composed within a rectangular plan. It is only above the height of 3.5 meters, that is, on the second level of the narthex, that the church is spatially and volumetrically differentiated into two transepts and the upper nave topped with a gable roof, at the intersection of which the dome is positioned. It is on this level that the plan takes the form of a cross. The upper walls of the nave supported by a post and beam system, while those of the dome and the apse by an arched system; both systems form a colonnade of thin reinforced concrete columns that runs across the whole length of the interior. The Church of Evangelization near Kavajë Street, also designed by Luarasi in 1962, gives a

sense of how the interior of Saint Procopius might have looked like, with the exception that the upper nave walls in the Church of Evangelization rest on an arched system (Fig 12).<sup>12</sup> On the lower level, the interior colonnades reciprocate with two arcades that consist of five round arches on piers topped with a gable roof. There is a cascade of and scaling and transposing correspondences among the architectural elements along both the vertical and the horizontal axis. The roof of the arcade on the lower level corresponds to the gable roofs of the nave and transepts on the upper level. The round-arched windows at the base of the dome are reiterated below and along the upper wall of the nave and the transept and composed into three sets of three round-arched windows, and then scaled up into a rounded arches of the arcade below. Somehow the arcade is an “external iconostas” that mediates between nature and the church, between the physical and social space of the city and the closed interior of the church. The arcade becomes a sculptural, transparent layer or rather a void that partially wraps the sacred space within. Both the arcade and the cornice of nave’s volume are articulated with brick ornaments. Those of the nave’s cornice have an abstract trapezoidal shape that might evoke things as diverse as an inverted ziggurat in miniature or a fruit hanging from the vineyards, thus perhaps suggesting the bucolic landscape where the church is situated. The brick ornament in the arcade articulates the lower half of the arcade’s piers, in this way breaking the heaviness of the piers, but also suggesting a rhythmic horizontal band that plays the role of a base. Most of the volumetric articulation takes place happens between the brick base and the nave’s cornice. The dome, as the most sacred of all the elements and spaces, stands above

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<sup>9</sup><https://aprtirana.al/parqe-dhe-objekte-memoriale/kisha-e-shen-prokopit/>, accessed on August 30, 2024.

<sup>10</sup><https://aprtirana.al/parqe-dhe-objekte-memoriale/kisha-e-shen-prokopit/>, accessed in August 30, 2024.

<sup>11</sup><https://aprtirana.al/parqe-dhe-objekte-memoriale/kisha-e-shen-prokopit/>, aksesuar më 30 Gusht, 2024.

<sup>12</sup>A church that is like Saint Procopius in style and scale is the Church of Evangelization near Kavajë Street, designed by Luarasi in 1962, five years before religion institutions in Albania were closed. The church has the same basilica typology and nearly the same form and proportions as Saint Procopius’s. The differences lie in the way the upper nave wall is supported and in the open one-story arcade at the front, which morphs vertically into a bell tower on the north side. The tower anchors the church visually in relation to Kavajë Street vis-à-vis a narrow alleyway. The western façade and narthex, which includes a choir, are part of a one-bay-wide temple-like volume, which becomes a clear story structure in the bays that follow. Unfortunately, the renovation of the tower after the church reopened in the 1990s does not adhere to the original design. The arcade was closed in the late 1960s when the building was adapted for utilitarian warehouse functions, but it unfortunately remained closed even after the renovation in the 1990s. The original volume of the nave has also been covered over by later one-story additions. The interior is elegant and airy, and apart from the iconostasis, which is a later design, it provides a faithful sense of what Saint Procopius Church might have been and felt like.

such a volumetric articulation. The arcade stops before the narthex, just one bay before the western façade. This last bay is articulated as a separate architectural element - a pedimented entrance higher than the arcade but lower than the piers of the western façade's arches, which ties in and anchors the spatial and ordering sequences of both the north arcade and the façade. The western façade, which is also the most and memorable element of the church, consists of three tall arches, which reciprocate with the internal spaces of the church indexically but not proportionally: the middle, wider arch corresponds with the nave and the two side arches with the side aisles. The piers of the arches are clad in rough stone and the upper parts in smooth stone, while the wall inside the arches is finished with stucco. The piers slant toward the top, animating and perceptually emphasizing the verticality of the entire façade. The central arch is wider than the other two and has a cornice inside it and two openings: the round-arched main door and the window above it. The other two arches, which belong to the series of lower-level arches, have one window each and create a triangle with the upper window of the central arch. There is an ingenious compositional move here that is never mentioned in the analyses and descriptions of the Saint Procopius church: the three arches of the western façade are a scaled-up version of the three-arched window configuration along the upper wall of the nave, a characteristic typological configuration of byzantine churches, but more about it later.

Such a compositional density and coherence are hardly found in the new church (Fig 13-14). The first thing that strikes one when looking at the new church is the harsh flatness of the façade, and how its “wavy” curvilinearity is of a fundamentally different style from the round, more traditional looking curvilinearity of the vaults, the dome, the side arches, and the circular rosette, which, by the way, looks quite “catholic...” Such a stylistic “staccato” is also found in the front portico, where the inner arches are of a round type, while their outer silhouette belongs to the “wavy” “loose-like” curvilinearity of the façade. One is perplexed whether the façade should have been more differentiated elementally to reciprocate with the rosette and the vault, or even more “wavy” and abstract; whether there should have been only one rosette or an aggregate of fenestrations that would bring light in the interior, which is not uncommon in many byzantine churches. One almost feels an irresistible urge to take a pencil and correct the façade...

The real problem of the new church is that it is neither contemporary nor traditional enough: it feigns to look contemporary by “dressing” traditional forms with a seemingly contemporary “wavy” shape, which even in its very “waviness,” still maintains a “tactical” resemblance to the traditional vault and side volutes (which also end up looking quite “catholic” ...).

The architect has applied the same type of “wavy” curvilinearity to all the façades, to probably suggest a centralized, byzantine-like form, but the church evinces its basilic organization, insofar as the dome clearly does not occur at the center of the church. Instead of an in the round articulation of the volume, typical of byzantine architecture, the four façades look like

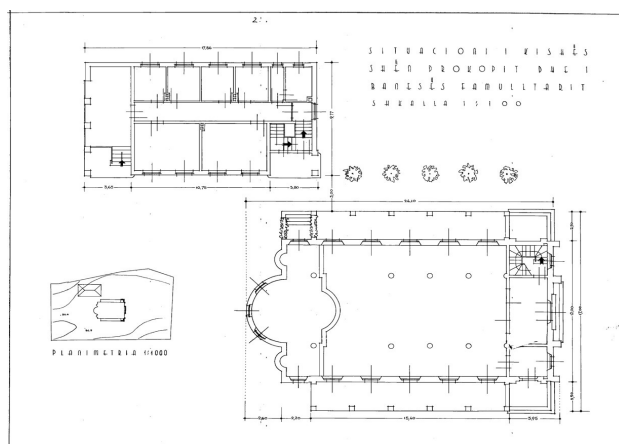
thins faces of a box, both inside and outside of which are placed traditionally shaped elements like the vaults, the dome, and the arches on the side aisles. One wonders what would happen to the overall design if these this “wavy” façades were removed: nothing; the traditional elements would be revealed as they really are. The façade’s “waviness” neither respects nor rejects tradition, but rather falsifies it, and even parodies it, in the same way that getting rid of the former church’s west façade erases the former project.



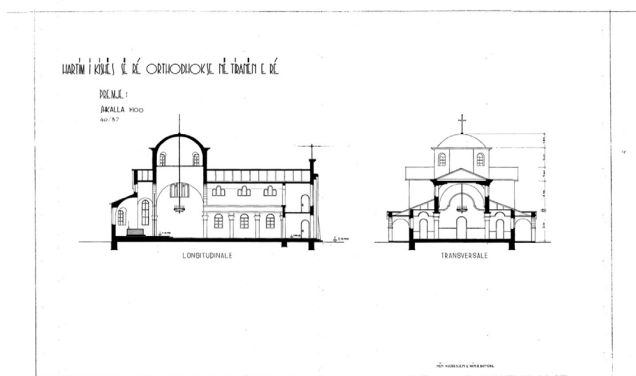
**Figure 5.** Skënder Kristo Luarasi, Saint Procopius Church, circa 1945, period photo (Author's Personal Archive)



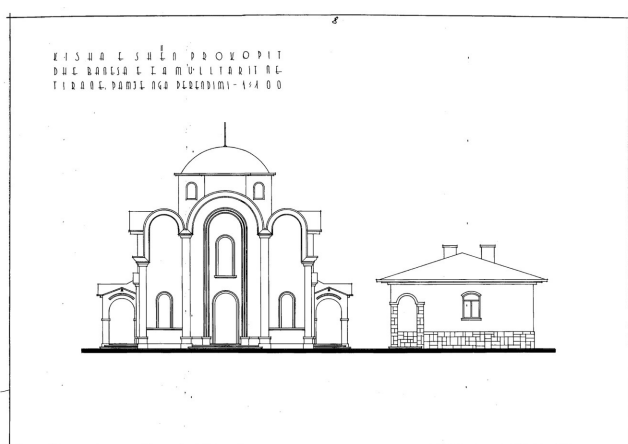
**Figure 6.** Skënder Kristo Luarasi, Saint Procopius Church, circa 1945, perspective drawing (Technical Central Archive of Construction)



**Figure 7.** Skënder Kristo Luarasi, Saint Procopius Church, circa 1945, Ground Floor Plan (Technical Central Archive of Construction)



**Figure 8.** Skënder Kristo Luarasi, Saint Procopius Church, circa 1945, Cross and Longitudinal Section (Technical Central Archive of Construction)



**Figure 9.** Skënder Kristo Luarasi, Saint Procopius Church, circa 1945, West Facade (Technical Central Archive of Construction)



**Figure 10.** Skënder Kristo Luarasi, Saint Procopius Church during construction, View of the north side, period photo. Luarasi is on the left (Author's Personal Archive)



**Figure 11.** Snapshots from the film Skënderbeu, 1952, with Saint Procopius in the background

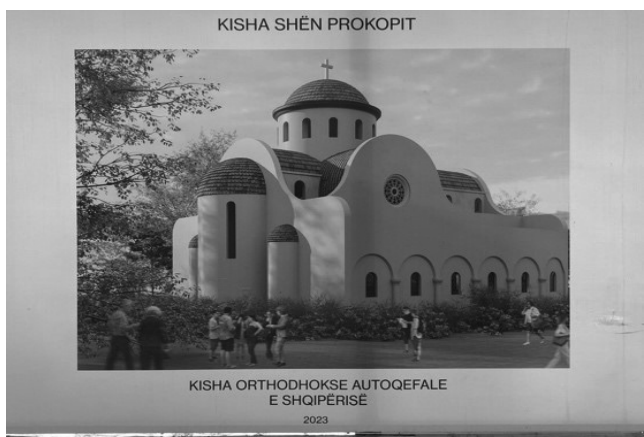


**Figure 12.** Skënder Kristo Luarasi, Church of Evangelization, near Kavajë Street, Interior view, photo by author, 2022. The iconostasis is not the original





**Figure 13.** The new Saint Procopius Church during construction, View of the south façade, photo by author, September 2024. (To the author's knowledge the name of the architect is not made public)



**Figure 14** The new Saint Procopius Church, Rendering posted on the construction fence, photo by author, September 2024.

In defense of the new church, one might argue that the church is characterized by a “collage” of disparate curvilinearities, and that its stylistic “staccato” is intentional, of “postmodern” sort (though I highly doubt that this is the case). If that were the case, it would not have been a problem at all: as I will argue later, style does not have to be isomorphic with the (liturgical) function of the church. Yet, the “staccato” would still need rigor and precision, even more so than in a more traditional approach, because new rules would have to be invented... The gap between style and content opens up many but not every possibility... Certain formal strategies could have been followed: the “wavy” curvilinearity could have continued inside the box and “infect” the dome and vaults; or it could have continued outside and “infect” the peripheral elements of the side arcade, the front portico, and even the serving building on the east side, while keeping the dome and vaults “traditional;” or the whole first floor, as a base or plinth, could be traditional-like, and the upper part completely different; or the inverse, the upper floor could remain quite traditional in its stylemes, while the base becoming quite untraditional.

The new church evinces other instances of non-articulation and non-coordination among its elements. Unlike the façade of the former Saint Procopius, both the west and east façades of the new church stretch horizontally to include the side arcades in their altimetric projection, with the west façade also stretching vertically to form a bell tower. This causes the façade to feel rather wide and undifferentiated in relation to the spatial and volumetric organization behind it. The apse feels quite narrow and tall in relation to the façade, almost encroaching on the upper vault. The former church, on the other hand, was characterized by a balanced sculptural façade, which consisted of a semicylindrical apse with a spacious width, almost half of the façade. In the new church, the dome has a cornice at the base, but this element is not repeated elsewhere. The former church was characterized by a wealth of different, specifically “tailored” cornices that contoured different architectural components, such as the dome, nave walls, arcade, and the façades. The new church has only one cornice, which feels almost like an afterthought given the fact that the other elements are bare of any cornice. The former church has a wealth of different materials, such as marble, stone, brick and plaster, which articulate and differentiate the architectural form. The new church has only one material, for now, only an elusive “white” (It remains to be seen whether it is concrete painted white or is it finished with stucco painted white; whether the same finish is applied in all the surfaces, like the renders show, or there is some differentiation.) The dome in the former church has an octagonal base with a spherical shape on top as well as markedly different windows from those of the nave, both in terms of their shape and their rhythmic disposition, distributed in every other face of the octagon. These attributes make the dome a unique, almost a real “teleological” moment in the church. This is not the case with the dome of the new church, insofar its base has the same geometry as that of the nave and transept vaults, and the windows are the same as those of the nave’s upper wall and the side aisle.

Regarding the latter, it is hard to understand why its arches are not left transparent or open like the original arcade but are instead closed with small openings. The same problem stands with the front arcade in the Orthodox Church of Evangelization near Kavajë Street, also designed by Skënder Kristo Luarasi in the early sixties: the original arcade arches were infilled when the church was closed in the late sixties, but they were not “liberated” from the infill walls when the church reopened in early ’90; instead, small arched windows were opened on the non-original infill wall, ending up looking exactly like the north and south walls of the new Saint Procopius Church. The transparent arches would have contrasted and emphasized the volumes of the church. And finally, a note on the relationship of the main liturgical structure with the adjacent supporting structure. In the new project, the latter is aligned with the main liturgical structure along the Park’s main street, and this alignment increases the perceived size of the whole church.

In Luarasi’s project, on the other hand, the supporting structure is of the same scale yet slightly smaller than the liturgical structure and is set back from the street, a picturesque disposition that respects the natural setting and creates a dynamic and cinematic experience of the church.

Different from what Father Ilia states in his interview, I would argue that the former Saint Procopius Church designed by Luarasi belongs and relates much more to the orthodox and byzantine architectural tradition than the new church. Such belonging is articulated through specific compositions and configurations of the architectural elements and details.

In his interview, father Ilia argues that the reason the former Saint Procopius is not faithful to the byzantine tradition is that it has a basilic form, that the basilic form is found only in the early Christian (Paleochristian) and post Byzantine period - influenced either by Catholicism in the former case, or imposed by the Ottoman empire in the latter, and that the true, authentic form of the byzantine architecture is that of the centralized church of the middle and late Byzantine period. Now, it is beyond the space and scope of this article to exhaustively deal with such vast historiographical arguments, except to bring a few counter examples. While the centralized church is the dominant form of the orthodox church – Hagia Sophia in Constantinople being the exemplar of such form, there are also basilic examples of the middle and late Byzantine period. A good example that comes to mind is the Panagia Chrysokephalos Church in Trabzon (in present day Turkey) - now Ortahisar Fatih Mosque, built in the Middle Byzantine period, 913-914 AD, being of a distinct basilic type. On the other hand, there are many centralized byzantine churches that have a rectangular elongated basilic-like shape, evincing a tendency of hybridization between the two typologies. In Albania, during the post Byzantine period, or that of the Ottoman empire, there are both centralized and basilic byzantine churches.

*There is no inherent attribute of the basilic form that makes it inappropriate for the Orthodox symbolism and liturgical functions, in the same way that there is no inherent attribute of the centralized form that makes it inappropriate for the Catholic*

*symbolism and liturgical functions.*

There are many examples of catholic churches in the Italian Renaissance with a circular and square plan – a Greek cross or centralized plans in general, like Brunelleschi’s Pazzi Chapel in Florence, Bramante’s Tempietto in Rome (though this is not exactly a chapel, even if it may certainly become one...), Sangallo’s San Biagio in Montepulciano, and of course Bramante’s first plan and Michelangelo’s second plan of Saint Peter, among others. For Rudolf Wittkower the underlying geometric organization of these projects symbolized the platonic cosmic order.<sup>13</sup> Saint Peter eventually was composed of two different typologies: Michelangelo’s centralized plan and Maderno’s basilic nave. Both the basilic and centralized plan enjoy, what I would call, a typological, or rather an archetypal availability that pre-dates not only Christianity but even the ancient Western culture itself. It should also be noted that the basilic form has a practical advantage for large congregations in comparison with the centralized plan, insofar as it offers much easier structural solutions for covering larger spaces than the centralized plan does. Of course, Hagia Sophia is a fantastic solution of a large dome cover but also a difficult and expensive one to build...

Of course, the Orthodox Church and its followers may still believe that the centralized plan is the authentic orthodox typology. And yet, while history demonstrates such belief empirically, through the sheer quantity of centralized churches, it does not exclude or falsify the fact that the basilic form is also a valid typology of the orthodox church. It is not quite clear, however, why is the basilic organization maintained in the new church of Saint Procopius, or why was the latter not built in a centralized typology, given the fact that it started from scratch, namely, there were no constraining existing condition, and that the Church, according to Father Ilia, seems to think that one of the “problems” of Luarasi’s design, is precisely its basilic form, which presumably is Catholic and not Orthodox? It is hard to answer such a question exhaustively, but I would bet that keeping the basilic form maintains the “political” alibi that the new church supposedly returns to its architectural identity, even if such a return, according to Father Ilia, would have been at odds with the return to the “authentic” orthodox religious identity.

Let us return now to the “hot” subject of the west façade of the former Saint Procopius Church, the one that the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania thinks is an “architecture of the “Italian conqueror” and of the style of the Roman Catholic Church and evaluate it not in terms of its compositional density, as we have already done above, but in terms of its typological and stylistic belonging. The west façade is neither of an Italian nor a Roman Catholic church style. I invite Father Ilia and the whole Holy Synod to open all the books of the history of architecture and find evidence of an Italian Roman Catholic church whose façade or volumetric silhouette consists of three independent giant arches. There simply isn’t. Yes, there are lots of arches in the Italian secular or religious architecture, but these arches typically do not span the whole height of the façade, and they are always either framed by a combination of a giant or smaller columnar and/or pilastric orders or are simply

part of a wall component, pedimented or not. Such idiom is almost didactically applied in the Italian 16th century mannerist architecture, such as that Carlo Maderno and especially Palladio. The façade of Saint Peter, for instance, has both arched and rectangular openings, but these are framed and subordinated under a giant and smaller order. Or in Palladio's Il Redentore the arched entrance is framed by a small pedimented order that is nested in a larger, giant pedimented order, which, in a typically mannerist tour de force, is nested in a larger pediment-like articulated "background." One might argue that there are tall, giant arches in Roman Catholic churches as in Leon Battista Alberti's Sant'Andrea in Mantua or Tempio Malatestiano in Rimini, but then again, these arches are framed by a pedimented columnar or pilastric order, indeed very much in line with the ancient Roman forms that Alberti was aiming to revitalize, particularly that of the Roman temples and triumphal arches. Even in Borromini's Baroque "hallucinations" such a classical idiom is never violated. (North of the Alps as well, where the classical radiation cools off, it is hard to find a church façade with independent tall, giant arches. When there are such giant arches, they are still part of a wall component culminating in pinnacles or sharply steeped gabled roofs.) Significantly, this also holds true for modern Italian architecture in general and *Architettura italiana d'oltremare* - the "conqueror's architecture" - in particular, that architects like Florestano di Fausto or Ghredero Bosio were major protagonists of. In the INPS-INAIL palazzo in Tripoli (1938) Di Fausto does, indeed, use tall arches, and in the Indigenous Market building in Dessie, Ethiopia (1939), Bosio also uses tall, double-story arches, but in both cases the arch is not an independent silhouette-defining element of the façade, and, in line with the classical idiom, is always subsumed or subordinated under the volumetric wall mass and/or the columnar/pilastric order. In Di Fausto's, Bosio's, or Giulio Berte's buildings in Abania we never find a motif like Saint Procopius's three-arched façade. One wonders, then, on what basis does Father Ilia, as a spokesperson the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania, claim that the architecture of Saint Procopius designed by Luarasi in 1940 is that of the "Italian conqueror?" On no basis at all.

But where could such claim originate from? There must be some basis, even if it is the wrong one or un-intentionally invented to support a particular narrative or thesis, such as that of the "conqueror's architecture." I have a cynical, but I'm afraid, correct answer. Saint Procopius was used as a set in the Albanian-Soviet film *Skënderbeu* (1954), when Skanderbeg goes to Lezha to form what is historically known as the Lezha Covenant. Scenes of Skanderbeg trying to convince the Albanian Princes to unite against the Ottomans alternate with scenes of the Albanian catholic clergy conspiring with a Venetian official and Hamza Kastrioti, Skanderbeg's brother, against Skanderbeg. Saint Procopius is in the background, and since, in the film, it is in Lezhë, then a territory of the Republic of Venice, it must be of the "conqueror's architecture," namely "catholic" (even if there is quite a bit of byzantine architecture in Venice, like Saint Mark's for instance...) And suddenly, the church "goes

over the rainbow:" it breaks the virtual barrier of the film and emerges as "catholic" on the other side, namely in reality... Even the French Nouvelle Vague could not invent such a surrealist blending of fiction and reality...

What style is Luarasi's Saint Procopius then? I would argue that it is of a modern style composed with Orthodox morphological components or stylemes. Let's unpack this proposition. As mentioned earlier, the three arches of the west façade are drawn from traditional Byzantine architecture. The latter is characterized by tall arched openings - either standalone or compositions of three and, in some cases, even more openings, located in various parts and components of the church, such as around the drum of the dome, and in the nave and transept walls. In the former Saint Procopius, there are two fenestration typologies: a singular vertical arch window located at the drum of the dome and the arcade's inner wall and a compositional motif of three narrow arch windows - with the two side ones being narrower and shorter than the middle one, located in the upper nave walls. It is this fenestration motif that Luarasi transforms into a whole façade by scaling it up and articulating it with three sculptural arched cornices, two stone corner piers that turn the corner, two central stone pilasters that taper toward the top, an arched molding inside the middle arch, whose inner surface is recessed in relation to the outer surface, and three vertical arched openings three of which are windows, and one is the main entrance. There is a convoluted play here: the piers and pilasters "obey" or are a function of the giant arched order, which inverts the classical idiom, while the arched openings are, in turn, framed by the piers and pilasters, which respects to the classical schema. The arch both contains and is contained by the pier-pilastric system. The door being larger than the other openings and standing out as the fourth element in a series of tripartite configurations emphasizes vertical axiality, which is further enhanced and multiplied by a stacking of arches: above the arched door there is an arched window framed under the arched cornice, which is framed, in turn, by the large central arch. Such a cascade of vertical arches is "pulled down" by the triangular composition of the three window openings which connect with the vertical arched windows of the inner wall of the side arcades, thus enabling a transition between the sky and ground, the sacred and the profane. The side arches of the façade, with the void between the upper arched cornice and the arched window below, offer repose and balance the vertical and horizontal vectors. Such a cascade of readings feels inexhaustible each time one looks attentively at the church.

To recap: the morphological and typological elements of Luarasi's Saint Procopius church are historical, namely, inherited from the Byzantine vocabulary; yet the methodology of composing them into form is unmistakably modern. One could even claim that such a methodology is super-modern or even post-modern, because it consists in detaching or suspending an element from its original context and transforming and transposing it in another context. Having studied in Graz between 1929 and 1936, Luarasi was certainly influenced by Otto Wagner's school, which was characterized by a free yet rigorous and



sophisticated interpretation of the classical idiom. Such an influence, however, has nothing to do with the architectural style of the Roman Catholic church (whether of Austrian or Italian origin), but with a modern methodology of design.

What is “modern (in) architecture?” The popular view is that modern architecture is the rationalist modernism of the 20-s and 30-s, characterized by “white” unornamented surfaces. But such a modernism is only one manifestation of modern architecture. Modern Architecture is a style that is not a style. More precisely: Modern architecture is not a particular style but an effort or methodology to not be a particular historical style. At the very heart of the modern architecture there is a negation regarding (a previous) style, or tradition. The concept of modern style, more precisely, that of the modern and style originates in enlightenment, in the second half of the 18th century, but matures only around mid-nineteenth century. It is around this time that from the two “competing” large styles of the Enlightenment - the neoclassical, which symbolized knowledge and progress, and the neogothic, which symbolized spirituality and tradition, emerged a plurality and multiplicity of historicist styles. But what also emerged was the concept of style in itself, without or autonomous from a particular referent (historical or otherwise); a concept of style that did not describe or symbolize a particular historical style but made the description and symbolization of any particular style possible. Such a meta-concept of style resembled a language or system of rules with an internal logic that combined different stylemes, be they classical Greek or Roman, gothic or renaissance, paleochristian or byzantine, and so forth... Such a concept of style as a compositional methodology was already announced by Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand in *Précis des leçons d'architecture*, in 1817. It is precisely this compositional methodology that makes the modern style.

It is not by chance that the Crystal Palace, which housed the Great Exhibition in London, in 1851, is considered the first modern building. It was modern not simply because it was built with iron and glass and with standardized construction methods (though these are certainly important, epoch-defining attributes), but especially because for the first time, there is an intentional gap between the architectural style and function. There is a weak relationship between the particular historical stylemes used, like the giant Roman-like vaults and baroque-like planimetric organization on the one hand and the building's exhibition function on the other: such an historical style could house different functions, and conversely, the exhibition function could be “clothed” with different historical styles. It is this non-equivalence that makes the Crystal Palace modern. To illustrate this point further, let us use an analogy with painting. The Crystal Palace is the first modern building in the same sense that Édouard Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* is the first modern painting (painted only twelve years later than the Crystal Palace, in 1863). Different from Delacroix's *La Liberté guidant le peuple*, where the seminude female figure symbolizes the noble and progressive ideals of the 1830 Revolution, the nude female figure in Manet's painting symbolizes nothing at all. There is anisomorphism or non-equivalence between ico-

nography – the system of images (in this case, the nude), and iconology – the interpretation of such images by the artist or viewer, to use Erwin Panofsky's framework. It is the autonomy of style from content (be it functional, symbolic, liturgical and so forth...) that inaugurates modern style.

A quite common misunderstanding must be immediately staved off here: that things may be autonomous from one another does not at all mean they are necessarily non-relational with one another, or that their relationship is arbitrary. The autonomy of one term is not necessarily achieved at the “expense” of the other. To stand on firm ground, let's illustrate such a claim with an example from mathematics: each coordinate of the point can be described parametrically, completely independently from another, each with a different parametric equation, and the three coordinative values –  $x$ ,  $y$  &  $z$ , can be conjoined or composed to form a point. The autonomy of the three coordinative values from each other defines or makes the point possible. Or in modern architecture, that the free façade is autonomous from the structure or function “behind” it, does not mean that the two are not related or disconnected; on the contrary it is the autonomy between the two that opens a space of relatability and reciprocity.

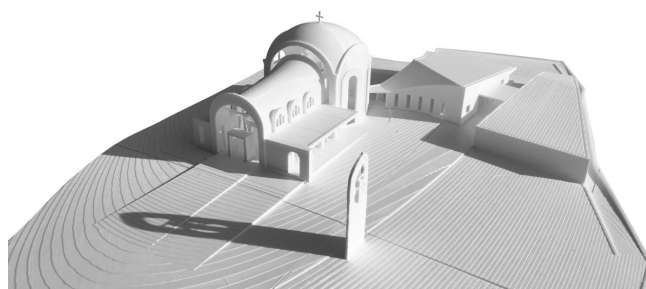
It is in such specific sense of the autonomy of style and content that the modernity of Luarasi's Saint Procopius church should be properly understood. The stylemes themselves are orthodox, but the methodology through which they are composed with one another is autonomous from the symbolic and liturgical function, yet without disregarding or undermining such function. On the contrary, such a methodology emphasizes and enhances the symbolic and liturgical function even more. For example, as already expounded earlier, the famous, or rather “infamous” three arched west façade originates from a typical byzantine fenestration motif, that of the three arched openings. But the way such a motif is transformed and transposed into a façade is thoroughly modern and unique. Such uniqueness yields from compositional process that has a style of its own, its own autonomous formal logic, yet one that is used to give shape to a particular liturgical function. The same thing can be said about the side arcades, the numerous surface details, and the basilic form, even though the latter's use in Byzantine architecture well predates modernity.

It is in relation to such autonomy between style and content that the architects of the new Saint Procopius, whom we still do not know who they are, should have positioned themselves. They had two alternatives: either to reproduce Saint Procopius as it was or refer to its modern spirit by adopting its design methodology, and in this way produce a different form. Instead, the new church maintains a political alibi of its former architectural identity by keeping some elements and removing others, a religious alibi by keeping some of its elements “traditional,” and an alibi of emancipation by introducing other “contemporary” elements. The non-return of this church to both the former architectural identity and the religious one is finally cast forever in concrete.

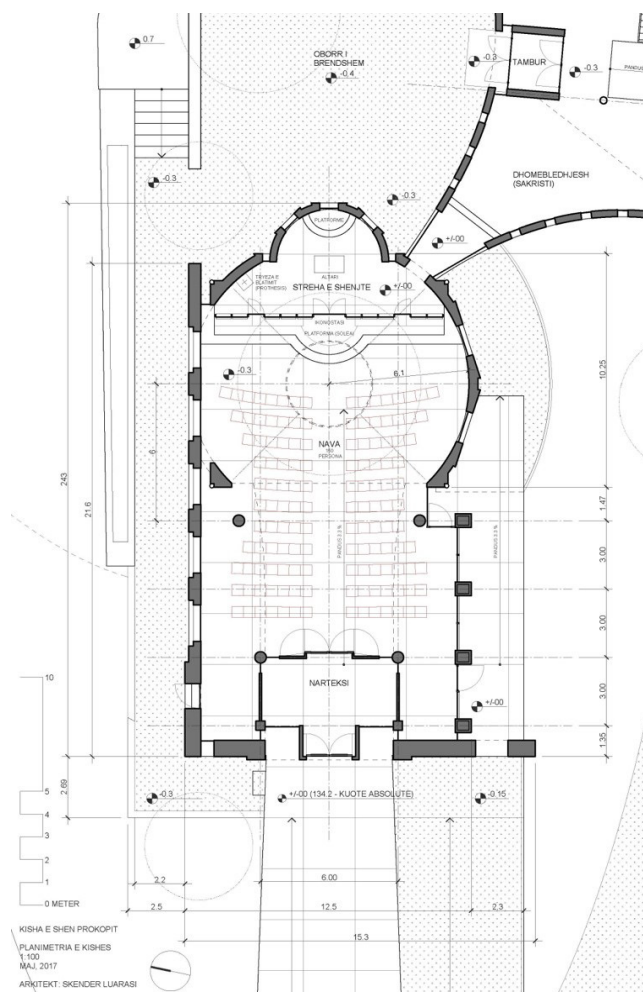


In 2016, I was commissioned by the Honorable Beatitude Archbishop Anastasios to design the new Saint Procopius Church. There were no particular architectural requirements for the new project except that it should not repeat in any way the former Saint Procopius's "infamous" west façade because of its "catholicism..." to which I agreed. Rather than reproducing the former church or imitating its form, I decided to imitate and reenact its design methodology. If Skender Kristo Luarasi had used and transformed certain key elements of Byzantine architecture, I used and transformed certain key elements of Luarasi's Saint Procopius church itself, primarily the dome, the façade and the nave (Fig 15-X). The dome is scaled up slightly wider than the footprint of the former church, to become not simply a moment in the liturgical space but that space itself. The arched openings of the dome yield from cutting the latter with the virtual planes of the existing footprint, and the other components of the church such as the apse and the nave vault. The three arches of the former façade merge into one which, then, becomes a nave vault leading and opening up to the dome, by widening both in plan and in section. The former arcade arches are maintained and articulated as transparent. There are only three main elements, the dome, nave and a base on which the first two stand, as well as a distinct façade and apse. The enlarged dome celebrates the airy, immaterial Orthodox space that hovers from the sky.

Eventually this project did not go forward, because the current project, that is, the one that is currently being built, was already underway and approved by the church. I don't know the reasons why the current project was chosen over my project, but probably it was because of those very agencies that Father Ilia claims the Orthodox Church is not influenced from.



**Figure 15** Skender Luarasi, Schematic Design of the Saint Procopius Church, Model, 2017



**Figure 16.** Skender Luarasi, Schematic Design of the Saint Procopius Church, Plan of the Main Liturgical Space, 2017



**Figure 17** Skender Luarasi, Schematic Design of the Saint Procopius Church, Render, 2017



**Figure 18.** Skender Luarasi, Schematic Design of the Saint Procopius Church, Render, 2017



**Figure 19.** Skender Luarasi, Schematic Design of the Saint Procopius Church, Render, 2017