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## Architectural ungrammaticality: the case of Book Building in the center of Tirana.

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The Book Building (BB) tower, along with other towers, was also discussed in another article I published in issue 26 of Forum AP titled “Vertical Tirana 2023: When an Elephant Enters into a Glass Shop” (Kumaraku, 2023). In that article, I criticized the violence and insensitivity with which these projects are introduced into a fragile urban context such as the center of Tirana. Considering the issue of urban violence addressed in the aforementioned article, where I referred to BB as a “garage tower” due to the first impression it gives from a formal perspective, we will continue in this article with the architectural analysis of the building. We will not analyze the functional and structural aspects. We will focus solely on the geometric/formal analysis of this work, listing a series of critical points it presents.

First, we will begin by quoting the studio that designed it, which on its official website states about this building:

*“In the absence of a restrictive set of urban rules, this project is an opportunity to engage in an open dialogue on how we envision densifying the centre of Tirana.*

*The project bears a responsibility in showing how this future can be envisioned. We have identified some of the important as-*

*pects that make Tirana a unique and high-quality metro-politan centre. The project idea translates these different aspects into a prototype for the future Tirana.”* 51N4E. (n.d.).

Paraphrasing what has been written on the official website of 51N4E, Johan Anrys and Freek Persyn, or someone else on their behalf, it can be briefly stated that the architects claim that, due to the lack of urban regulations in Tirana, they can do whatever they want to densify its center. The representatives of 51N4E, or whoever else for them, continue to say that they have identified a series of important aspects that make Tirana unique, without specifying what they are, and have translated them into a new tower prototype.

In my area, we use the expression “Me hengert mortja mua” or simply “u mortja mua,” which is difficult to translate into English because it fundamentally embodies the skepticism of a people who cannot be easily mocked.

When everyone starts using empty words that say nothing except for a rhetorical discussion, which is as stable as a ship on top of the Himalayas, the discussion loses its value and becomes useless. Everyone uses empty words to say nothing. What are these “some of the important aspects that make Ti-

*rana a unique and high-quality metropolitan centre*” and how have they specifically translated these into “a prototype for the future Tirana”? The leaders of 51N4E do not say this. They write empty words to deceive a people who do not analyze concrete details but prefer dogmas. After all, they may have left some trace of 45 years of dictatorial communist ideology, where it was enough to be loyal to the party to do anything. You could be a cowherd, but loyal to the party, and still lead the parliament or even be an architect or engineer. As it is said in movies, “Any reference to existing people or actual events is purely coincidental.” In such realities, skill is not necessary. Loyalty, yes.

All architects, especially those from abroad who are unfamiliar with the context when they come to Albania, use empty and meaningless language. Artistic criticism, and particularly architectural criticism in this country, if it ever existed, currently shows no signs of life. Intellectuals are silent, and critics are biased, especially when it comes to works by the party. There is no criticism of the language or architectural style of a series of towers that say nothing and do not engage in dialogue with each other. These towers, with a narcissistic and self-affirming attitude, are detached from the context in which they are placed. They do not engage in dialogue either typologically or morphologically. Where is in these towers what “*make Tirana a unique and high-quality metropolitan centre*”?

The towers with arch ornaments and rigid curtains in the center of Tirana: it seems as if nothing happened in the 20th century regarding architecture. Adolf Loos would have killed himself if he were alive today and had seen the Book Building; surely he is turning in his grave in Vienna. If Loos had not written about 115 years ago “Ornament and Crime” and if we had not had the Modern Architecture Movement, which still echoes in the way we design, the intervention with useless decoration in the BB tower or in other works by 51N4E would be justifiable. It is a fact that Loos (1908) wrote, and so did Le Corbusier (1923), as well as Hitchcock & Johnson (1932), about an architecture where useless and non-venustas decoration has no place in contemporary architecture. Surely these books mentioned above have passed through the libraries of Brussels. If 51N4E have not had time to browse them until now, they should try to take a look because it won’t hurt them.

The reader might argue that a lot of time has passed since the architecture of the Modern Movement and that we are in postmodernism, which in a way rehabilitates decoration. They might bring into discussion Charles Jencks, Robert Venturi, or Charles Moore, bursting into the apotheosis of Guy Debord’s society of the spectacle (1967). The reader might justify these interventions as a critique of modernist sterility. All of this is rhetoric. 51N4E should answer the question: What are these “some of the important aspects that make Tirana a unique and high-quality metropolitan centre” and how have they con-

tinued these into “a prototype for the future Tirana”? How are these aspects translated into towers with arches cut into chords and not diameters, or into windows with “rigid curtains”? These displays are expressions of a superficial and mocking attitude towards the culture of the context in which they are intervening. “Let’s make some towers with arches and Ottoman curtains for the Albanians because they like them a lot”: this could be a hypothetical mocking expression of foreigners towards our context.

From the perspective of architectural composition, the tower presents a series of problems. In architectural composition, the repetition of a serial element and hierarchy are two essential instruments. The arch element does not appear as serial, as it has at least three different dimensions, and at this point, they become three serial elements instead of one. These three serial elements, combined with construction errors, have resulted in the arches of the tower having different dimensions. These differences are so small that they make the appearance unappealing to the eye. The eye prefers regular and serial forms because it can control them more easily. At this point, the BB arches are all different due to the construction, whereas in the rendered image, the arches appear all the same.

As Loos teaches us again with the Chicago Herald Tribune project, the type of tower – which has the column as its archetype – is divided into at least three sections: the base (ground connection), the development, and the crown (sky connection). This lesson and division, a direct influence from Semper (1851), is not expressed in the Book Building. The tower with arches in Tirana has a higher arch base on the ground floor, higher arches again on the fourth floor, thus repeating the base, and also higher arches on the ninth floor where it begins to narrow. In the project, the arches are then repeated uniformly to the end, while in the realized version, the last floor brings higher arches again, creating a kind of “crown” for the sky connection. In this case, the realization improves the project, which closed at the top without any distinction from the body of the tower.

Another architectural flaw is the fact that the side abutments of the upper arches of the tower do not fall on solid parts but fall on a “random” point of the base arches, both in the project and in the realization. Someone might bring as a precedent example the column on the first floor of the Cor-tile di Bramante in Santa Maria della Pace, which discharges in the center of the base arch to justify the Tirana Tower, but it is not enough because Bramante still discharges the small column in the center of the arch, in a well-defined point and not in any point. One might also bring as a justifying example the column in the center of the entrances of Jože Plečnik’s projects, such as the National and University Library in Ljubljana and Plečnik House, but again the column is in a well-defined and not anonymous point.

The last point I want to address in this article re-garding the architectural flaws of the Book Build-ing is what is called the corner problem. This problem is as old as architecture itself. In classical Greco-Roman architecture, this problem affected the corners of Doric temple buildings, which had an interplay between triglyphs and metopes and was solved in various ways.

The problem always affected the side triglyph, which had to be ad-justed to the column to provide an aesthetically acceptable solution. The same problem is present with the arches of the 51N4E tower in the center of Tirana. The abutment of the side arches is thinner than the abutments of the central arches, thus showing a lack of care from the designers. The corner problem was solved 2000 years ago in architecture, but it seems this problem has not yet reached Brussels, or at least the designers from Brussels do not recognize it as a problem. Some lessons in the history of classical architecture would not hurt to ensure similar problems do not recur.

In conclusion, the Book Building project is weak and has a series of unresolved architectural problems. Third-year architecture students with such a project would not pass the class because they lack solutions to classical architectural problems, as mentioned above.

This whole issue contains only one good aspect. The arched facade is not structural and can be demolished and redrawn with more appropriate architectural solutions. There are many cases of facade modifications. The 15-story building is an example (without discussing whether the Pistol project or the current one was better). The principle of the Free Facade in modern architecture is still operative.

At this point, we have only one suggestion: to redraw and rebuild the facade of the Book Build-ing. A national competition could also be organized. Those arches are an international architectural disgrace.

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