Changing Context in Urban Regeneration: How the Post-Socialist City of Tirana Failed to Affirm the Legacy of Socialist Realism.

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Abstract

After World War II, no other Eastern European countries succeeded in controlling urbanization to the same extent as the communist Albania did. As a largely non-industrialized country its capital city was perceived as the focal point for the implementation of the aspired modernisation. While the process was inspired by the Soviets 'five-year plans of encompassing targets for construction and services', the architecture of Socialist Realism was used to convey the regime's clear political agenda and its monumentality endeavored to impose a clear sense of hierarchy.

Transitioning from communism, Tirana as the capital city became westernized in appearance and its cultural-political core continued to be developed around the center. By architects and planners alike it once again was perceived as a "sublime space" that this time would represent the democratization of the Albanian nation, state and society. Furthermore, with the introduction of capitalism and market economy the city experienced a rapid and dramatic population growth. But, as housing became increasingly commodified and regarded as an asset, rather than a social good, the new buildings began to replace the socialist ones, and while expanding and occupying the remaining vacant spaces a compact yet unplanned city started to emerge.

This paper argues that the contemporary Tirana is silently erasing its socialist legacy. Soviet-era Socialist Realism architecture added the last layer on the history of authoritarian design before capitalism taking it over and doing probably more harm than all previous regimes taken together. Rather than increasing the city's liveability, the 21st century urban densification process is transforming Tirana to a vivid monument to capitalism.

Introduction

The establishment of socialism in Albania found Tirana city center composed by the monumental department building around the Skanderbeg Square and its Neo-Renaissance style echoing the fresh legacy of Fascism. The newly set regime found itself unprepared to act against a classic case of "clean" architecture, but, however, tried to blend it by vividly implementing an amalgam of styles swiftly borrowed by the USSR. As there was no neoclassical legacy and even less an attempt to embrace any values from the Ottoman Empire which during the last decades saw the development of a new architectural style called neo-Ottoman or Ottoman revivals, the return to neoclassical architecture was a clear product of USSR cultural exportation which were neither justified nor confronted with any present-day style. Later on, as Albanian communism crushed any opposition in its path and paved its way unbothered by equally strong ideologies, leaving no room for others to emerge, it found it easy and presumably necessary to let the aesthetics of Soviet Socialist Realism blossom.

As the move to neoclassical architecture was never questioned, Viktor Kokorin[1] in citing Lenin stresses: "Far from rejecting the most valuable achievements of the bourgeois epoch, Marxism has on the contrary assimilated and refashioned everything of value in the more than two thousand years of the development of human thought and culture; our architecture like all socialist culture, is the direct heir, and successor of the best in the historical legacy of past eras", its embracing intended to unite the various schools of literary though and define a movement that would act as a socio-political umbrella for all the socialist societies.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

2.1 Socialist Realism's necessary evil

Being physically distant from the center of the empire and having no strong gravitational pull, cities in the Western Balkans were defined by what the twentieth-century historian of Croatian and Dalmatian art Ljubo Karaman called the freedom of peripherality (Blau & Rupnik, 2007). Described as a cultural condition that is radically different in terms of its relation to the center, the freedom of periphery helped the formation of urban territories that maintained a more indigenous authentic expression. As the founding of the modern states in the Balkans revealed cities characterized by the imperial duality of the Ottoman Empire which throughout its reign did not invest much in the infrastructure within its lands, up to that moment, no major movements in architecture had managed to penetrate the country. Ottoman Empire dissolution exposed the country's immaturity to carefully evaluate complex aesthetics associated with political movements. But, As the *Sublime Porte* had already been in decline for centuries, its contribution in the fields of art and architecture after the Renaissance appeared locked within the Turkish carpets, decorative calligraphy, painted ceramics and religious ornaments. Since the mosques and külliyes had been the most representative monuments of its architecture, the monumental department building around the Skanderbeg Square in its Neo-Renaissance style was a winner without fighting.

According to Alfred H. Barr Jr. (Soby & Alfred H. Barr, 1949), "twentieth-century Italian art has produced two movements— Futurism and the *scuola metafisica* — which have made vital contributions to the international mainstream of art in our time". In this respect, according to Walter Benjamin, Fascism was merely exploiting widespread aesthetics, and deemed as the "the Church of all heresies[2]" , in Albania it saw fertile grounds where its ideas could be easily implemented. As Mussolini attempted an assimilation to fascist culture of all manner of representations from the Roman empire to rationalist architecture (Merjian, 2018), in the case of Tirana the aesthetics which were imposed had no occasion to be confronted. However, Fascism in Albania had simply no physical time to install a fully comprehensive ideological reign. Neither Futurism nor the scuola metafisica were put forward or embraced the cultural domain. As a consequence, after the war, when socialist realism began to be implemented and came into effect, it did not confront any equivalent ideologies already active. Whilst in the USSR the turn to neoclassical architecture was part of the socialist endeavor to adopt certain successful stages of its cultural legacy, in Albania, its implementation had no strings attached to the country's cultural past. Additionally, the reductive rationalism of Gherardo Bosio and Neo Renaissance of Florestano Di Fausto was considered as a given, unavoidable and too obvious to be submerged, but never part of its developing narrative. The first regulatory plan during communism tried to intervene onto the Skanderbeg Square which was previously designed through the principles of "Decorative Novecento Architecture", a movement that was erected in Italy by the beginning of 1920s.

Meanwhile, in 1947, there was established the country's first institute of urban design and planning, including Town Planning design (later to become the Institute of Town Planning and Architecture). Albania had little experience in the planning field at that time and the enterprise was assisted by the Soviet counterparts. The Institute of Town Planning and Architecture introduced its first Regulatory Plan of Tirana in 1957. As the socialist city grew primarily by expanding outwards to as yet unused areas, periodical regulatory plans were drawn up to direct the urban expansion. The drafting of the first socialist regulatory plan for Tirana city center in 1947 applied erasure and a specific demolition-based urban reconstruction strategy, where the clearance of the old bazaar was among the first imperative measures. As the formal center of a typical feudalistic town, the bazaar posed a viable antithesis of the centralized economy – one of the pillars of communism. However, rather

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[1]*Zubovich, K., (2021), Moscow Monumental: Soviet Skyscrapers and Urban Life in Stalin's Capital, Princeton University Pres*
[2]*The fasci were not to be aligned with any political party and explicitly rejected "creeds" and "dogmas," describing themselves as the "church of all heresies." - The History of the Twentieth Century, Episode 197, "1919 – Italy I" Transcript*

than underlying the points of friction between communism and the city's Ottoman legacy, the multifaceted character of the post-war reconstruction policies aimed at transforming the city to a concrete spatial agenda for Marxism. As there was a clear political paternalism on town-planning which developed primarily on the idea of manufacturing the socialist society, it also aimed at clearly showcasing its contradiction with the Ottoman past, as an essential representation of the new beginning.

The perpetual politization of aesthetics

Communism in Albania as elsewhere in Eastern Europe aestheticized its supposedly strong elements, and against the fascist strategy of rendering politics aesthetic it responded by politicizing all the fields of art. While in the USSR, the attempts to control the content of art and literature goes back to the Tsarist government, in Albania, during the first decade of the totalitarian regime, the political aspect of socialist realism had no similarities with any previous long-running features of the cultural life. It was not a continuation of any pre-communism state policies and therefore its introduction rather than something to be tested was seen as a significant step towards de-Ottomanization and further modernization.

Socialist realism in USSR's philosophical aesthetics relied on Maxim Gorky's enunciation which was revealed as a doctrine in 1934 at the Soviet Writers Congress. However, it was fundamentally related to neoclassicism and the Russian tradition of realism in literature during the nineteenth century. As it served as the basic method of Soviet Literature and Literary criticism, according to Nelson (Cary & Grossberg, 1988) its purpose was to limit popular culture to a specific, highly regulated faction of emotional expression that promoted Soviet ideals. However, according to Wojciech Lesnikowski (Lesnikowski, 1992), "communist belief develops on the ideal that object making should have no role in a truly socially motivated society, and socialist realism's desire for order and character in architecture rather for a style speaks for a way of living". According to Walter Benjamin (Benjamin, 1935) the aestheticization of politics is a key ingredient to fascist regimes, and probably, as Desmond Manderson (Manderson, 2018) notes, "it is misleading to take this contrast between fascism and communism at face value". Speaking about the politicization of aesthetics, Emilio Gentile (Gentile, 1990) considered fascism a form of political religion, which was largely influenced by Marinetti's futurist manifesto as a national rebirth from decadence. In the case of Albania, Fascism lasted for approx. four years and much of its effort was invested on producing architecture. The same goes for socialist realism which did consider the capital as the leading city in their presumed process of modernization, and speculative approach fostered by similar case studies would have equally exposed the Socialist Realism vision of total planning and total design. For instance, the ideology-driven conception of Nowa Huta in Poland showcases a classical example where Socialist Realism was thoroughly materialized.

But, is there any theoretical contradiction in Social Realist architecture? What would have been the future of town planning in Tirana had there been no Fascist legacy? These are questions that rather than speculating "on the possibility of an absolute architecture[3]" try to understand to what extent was town planning subject to subsequent political paternalism. As Robert Venturi (Venturi, 1966) stresses, "architects can no longer afford to be intimidated by the puritanically moral language of orthodox Modern architecture", socialist realism in architecture was all about maintaining its morality which was initially posed by Modernism but in communist countries forged and mastered by Marxism. Focusing on architecture, Anders Åman (Åman, 1992) notes that "socialist realism as it applied to building throughout eastern Europe and the Soviet Union derived in no small measure from the example of Russian neoclassicism. Architects in each of the six countries encompassed by Anders Aman's book-Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, Rumania, Bulgaria and DDR assimilated Soviet models in various stylistic approaches that included approved local "traditions." According to Robert Venturi (Venturi, 1966), "it is a characteristic of the twentieth century that architects are highly selective in determining which problems they want to solve". But, which problems did Social Realism in Albania solve? A thorough analysis of the built environment shows that more than massive rationalizations for simplification, problem solving was not principal in its agenda. Communism replied to fascism's aestheticization of politics by politicizing art and its architecture functioned as monumental representations of the regime, adhering to the socialist-realist dictum: 'socialist in form and national in content'. Rather than a work of beauty, harmony and good proportions, the aesthetics of communism were meant to appeal to a general public. The architecture proved to be a powerful tool of propaganda and the failing to affirm the Socialist Realism legacy after the 90s came also as a reaction precisely to its politicization of its aesthetics.

According to Desmond Manderson (Manderson, 2018), "the problem of the relationship between aesthetics and politics is essentially one of time—a problem not of vision but of transition". Additionally, for the historian Emilio Gentile the aestheticization of politics and politicization of the aesthetics are not mutually exclusive, and have a large degree of the other[4]. When the Albanian–Soviet split occurred in the 1956–1961 period, Albanian communist leaders profoundly condemned Nikita Khrushchev's subsequent de-Stalinization and retained the Soviet Union's initial aesthetic-political influence. In the meantime, even though socialist realism was already imposed throughout Communist Europe, Yugoslavia applied a mild form of it and remained committed to a more international modernism.

METHODOS:
Superimposition and Speculation: The impossibility for a Pruitt-Igoe Myth [5]
Among others, the global failure of communism exposed the weaknesses of its housing program. Since it did function as a national project designed to meet the pressing need for public

housing, the intense processes of parasitism and informality that started after the 90s once again proved the validity of Frederick Engels quote (Engels, 1872) that "the housing question can only be solved when society has been sufficiently transformed". The intended eradication of classes did not resolve the class struggle and neither Socialist Realism resolved the Albanian society housing question. On the contrary, it exposed the financial deficit of a country that had just embarked on the journey to functioning as an independent society.

According to Vladislav Todorov (Todorov, 1991), "communism created ultimately effective aesthetics structures and ultimately defective ones. That is what empowers its strong presence and durability in the world". A post occupancy evaluation of socialist housing would have exposed the failure in providing favourable housing conditions and in eliminating the housing shortage. According to Kazimierz Zaniewski (Zaniewksy, 1989), "while in most Western countries the goal of matching housing units with households has been achieved, in most communist countries the shortage of dwellings in relation to the number of households is still the main problem that overshadows all the others". So, to what extent was socialist realism able to expose its deficiencies and undergo a process of internal purification? As Friedrich Engels called to turn the society into collective owners, prevented Socialist Realism from being maintained from within.

Architectural historian Charles Jencks cites that much-seen dynamiting of Pruitt-Igoe as the moment "modern architecture died"[6] . As a relatively quick response towards its failures the dynamiting of Pruitt-Igoe speaks for a functioning democracy able to act in case of urgency. As Pruitt-Igoe became a symbol of modern architecture's failure, it also showed the ability of the West to reflect upon its mistakes and undergo a catharsis process which eventually gave birth to Postmodernism. In this respect, what would be actual chances for 'Social Realist Pruitt-Igoe'? *At 'No Accident, Comrade: Chance and Design in Cold War American Narratives',* Steven Belletto (Belletto, 2012) explains how the denial and eradication of chance became symptomatic of Soviet tyranny. As totalitarianism denied the very existence and operation of chance in the world, it would have been naïve to believe that a theory proclaimed to be infallible, both scientifically and morally, would admit any design failures. On the contrary, any grave error or lasting damages would have been explained as missteps or temporary difficulties. So, this association of chance with democratic freedom can accept and reflect upon the emergence of Pruitt-Igoes, as it already did. According to Belletto, the objective world is governed by "absolute chance" which is a sign of true reality, and intellectuals across disciplines agree with that. Having said that, all possible ideologies can be subject to dysfunctionality imposed by unforeseen circumstances. But, quoting V. I. Lenin, "The teaching of Marx is all-powerful, because it's correct" (Lenin, 1913), Marxism does not accept absolute chance, but, on contrary, it tolerates the "narrative chance", which is rather tied to planning and design. So, the only way a Pruitt-Igoe could have been accepted was as a scripted accident

showcasing a design task turned into a problem of how, and to what ends, was an appropriate synthesis of cultural continuity with 'the latest innovations of science and technology'.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
POST-SOCIALISM DISTORTED

The introduction of socialist realism was alien to the Albanian cultural environment but faced practically no contestant. Further, the other political opponents had no affiliation with any art movement, and so did the monarchic regime. This made it easier for the Socialist Realism to gain territory after more than two decades of mass implementation in the USSR. However, as it did succeed to avoid a *God's Own Junkyard*[7], its false consistency prevented the city to grow on its roots. Eager confrontation with the monumentality inherited from Fascism, the newly set regime redesigned the center fully aware of its contradictions in scale, rhythm and texture, which similar to Piazza S. Marco in Venice, as Venturi explains (Venturi, 1977, p. 54), "the varying heights and styles of the surrounding buildings violate its consistent spatial order". Even though the newly established regime saw town planning as a leading instrument towards crystalizing its ideas, it was practically impossible to avoid responding to the Italian legacy. But, in order to prove the accuracy of Socialist Realism doctrine on town planning, cases where town planning was not subject to any previous political ideology should examined.

According to Catherine Cooke (Coke, 1989), "Socialist Realism core principle was critical assimilation of the heritage". But, as Socialist Realism died with the fall of the Berlin Wall much of its own heritage became subject to aesthetic alienation. In the case of Albania, the capital's center was previously built under foreign domination, and the mass eradication of communist heritage delivered a false consistency which after the fall of the regime left the city completely exposed to foreign influxes on planning and design. As the post-socialist urban landscapes grow as per socialist city principles but try to maximize the regained freedom through a pressing acquisition of "the competence to build"[8], by their own nature

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[3] *In The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture, Pier Vittorio Aureli proposes that a sharpened formal consciousness in architecture is a precondition for political, cultural, and social engagement with the city (Aureli, 2011).*

[4] *https://rayvenndclark2015.myblog.arts.ac.uk/2015/11/05/political-aesthetics-a-new-beginning/*

[5] *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth. The film provides an alternative to the popular explanations of Pruitt-Igoe's demise.*

[6] *According to Charles Jencks, the very beginning of Postmodernism corresponds to a destructive event: on March 16, 1972, the first out of 33 buildings of Saint-Louis's Pruitt-Igoe neighborhood explodes and collapses to the ground (domus, n.d.).*

[7] *Blake, P., (1979), God's Own Junkyard: The Planned Deterioration of America's Landscape. The book contains many black and white photos of the desecration of the U.S. landscape in the late 50's/early 60's (Blake, 1979).*

[8] *Theorizing patrimoine: reflections on Françoise Choay's textes instaurateurs - LAUREN M. O'CONNELL. arguing that the very survival of rooted human cultures depends on the prolongation of our "compétence d'édifier" –our ability to innovate, to imagine new forms and architectural frames for our lives in community.*

they evolve against the doctrine of Socialist Realism. The promotion of the rational and utilitarian use of the resources available gets replaced by a pervasive aim of attracting external investment. A creative engagement of political instability combined with rapid densification manufactures the 'naturalization' of ever-changing the collage city.

CONCLUSIONS

As an inescapable burden, the Italian legacy served as a solid starting point for all the regulatory plans that emerged during the past century. Eager to challenge it but unconfident to inflict any precarious modifications, for these plans the Italian legacy was the necessary evil upon which their scholar narrative emerged. Further, to a certain degree it excused the socialist-realism dysfunctionality which hid behind the urgency to integrate what Fascism had left unfinished.

After defeating the socialist vision of 'total planning' and 'total design', the post-socialist city radically challenged the traditional urban guidelines. The instant eradication of socialist grand urban rules strangled the emergence of a resilient city which quickly got engaged in a neoliberal post-socialist endeavor which was characteristic of new democracies that emerged after the 90's. However, as an ease of motion unknown to any prior urban development was being experienced, the neoliberal city grew on the existing infrastructure while reinforcing its existing spatial urban structures. The transition from a state-controlled command economy to market-driven capitalism lacked ideology at core allowing for an exuberance of incoherent paths of development. The failing of socialism left its dwelling legacy at the mercy of decentralized models of governance, which combined with new forms of individual freedom eventually incepted informal settlements and extensive parasitism in architecture.

As neoliberalism created the conditions for capitalist class formation, any form of 'after urban regeneration' principally adopts the neoliberal frame of unrestricted development. As a consequence, post-communist capital cities' real estate consistently outperforms national averages. The socialist city over-exploited the architectural content as a propaganda tool. The digital age offers new ways of mass communication making the power less evidenced in the buildings. As manipulating architecture as Socialist Realism no longer manipulates ideas about reality, the post-socialist city learnt to adopt and quickly embrace the features of the neoliberal economy. All forms of state intervention aiming at substituting the collective judgment produce entanglement of public and private property and use. As institutions of contemporary capitalism are designed to facilitate this process, neoliberalism in post-communist countries might as well be a destructive force.

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