Scientific Committee

Daniel Göler (Bamberg)
Sonila Sinjari (Tirana)
Dhimitër Doka (Tirana)
Gruia Bădescu (Konstanz/Paris)
Matthias Bickert (Würzburg)
Michael Gentile (Oslo)
Zaiga Krišjāne (Riga)

Table of Content

Megaprojects as Ruins-in-Waiting
A Postmodern Reading of Incompletion in Tirana

MSc. Kejsi Veselagu,

Department of Architecture and Engineering, POLIS University, Albania,
kejsi_veselagu@universitetipolis.edu.al
ORCID: *0000-0001-5249-9710*

Abstract

In Tirana, the unfinished has become an architectural condition in its own right. This paper investigates the socio-political and aesthetic logic of the incomplete, over-promised and speculative megaprojects, framing them as "ruins-in-waiting" that reflect the deeper ideological structures of postmodern urbanism. Engaging with Jean-Francois Lyotard's critique of grand narratives and Frederic Jameson's analysis of late capitalist spatial production, the paper argues that incompletion functions not as a flaw in the system, but as a defining expression. The projects of the high-rise towers become visual and material manifestations of a city governed by deferred futures and aestheticized promises. To further contextualize this phenomenon, the paper draws a conceptual parallel with the surreal etchings of Giovanni Battista Piranesi. His visionary ruins are employed as a critical lens through which Tirana's contemporary landscape can be read: monumental yet suspended, intricate yet devoid of use. By analysing this visual language and political economy of the megaprojects, the paper proposes that Tirana offers a paradigmatic case of post-socialist urbanism in which the ruin is no longer a remnant of the past, but a permanent placeholder for futures that never arrive.

Keywords:
Incomplete, postmodern, towers, visual

Tirana and the Dichotomy of the built and unbuilt

Walking through the city of Tirana today is to navigate a space that is organized by a pervasive opposition: the built and the unbuilt, the material and the promised. Cranes punctuate the skyline while banners advertise photorealistic renders of soon-to-be towers, their foundations lie dormant for months or years or finished buildings stand unoccupied, their interiors awaiting programs that never arrive. The city manifests an urbanism of anticipation, a choreography of fragments both emerging and stalled.

This condition is not peripheral but central to Tirana's contemporary identity. The speculative architecture that dominates the cityscape comprised of luxury high-rises, mixed-use megaprojects, and branded landmarks, forms an urban grammar in which incompletion becomes normalized. The city's "architecture of becoming" is a stable condition, wherein the incomplete is not a defect but a mode of existence.

The paradox of this environment is evident: the city appears to be perpetually under construction, yet the trajectory toward completion is constantly deferred. Whereas in traditional urban development the unfinished denotes a temporary stage en route to completion, in Tirana it often signals a prolonged suspension. This prompts a key question: what is the meaning of this incompletion, and what does it reveal about the ideological structures governing contemporary urbanism?

Postmodernism, Late Capitalism and the Architecture of the Unfinished

The architectural and urban condition of contemporary Tirana cannot be adequately understood through conventional paradigms of development, progress, or urban growth. The proliferation of megaprojects where some are rising, some stalled, some completed yet curiously unoccupied, reveals a deeper structure of meaning that transcends technical explanations of construction cycles or market fluctuations. Instead, Tirana's urban reality invites an interpretation grounded in the theoretical legacy of postmodernism and its associated critiques of representation, capitalism, and cultural production.

Jean-François Lyotard's diagnosis of the postmodern condition as one defined by the collapse of meta-narratives provides an epistemic framework for understanding why contemporary architecture often appears unmoored from cohesive ideological direction. Without unifying legitimating stories, legitimacy shifts toward efficiency, performance, circulation, and market logic (Lyotard, 1984). Fredric Jameson complements this perspective by interpreting postmodern cultural production (including architecture) as a direct expression of late capitalist economic structures. For Jameson, architecture becomes a site where financial abstractions manifest spatially, resulting in a built environment dominated by spectacle, commodification, and pastiche (Jameson, 1993).

These theoretical tools expose how the logic of incomplete or speculative megaprojects in Tirana is a product of deeper ideological mecha-

nisms. The "unfinished," the "over-promised," and the "ruins-in-waiting" are symptomatic expressions of the postmodern collapse of narrative and the capitalist drive toward immaterial accumulation. When these forces converge in a rapidly transforming post-socialist capital city, the result is a unique urban landscape in which the future is constantly announced and never fully materialized and thus a city governed by deferred promises.

To illuminate this condition, it is necessary to engage in a double reading by first analysing Tirana's incompletion through the lens of Lyotard's performative legitimation and Jameson's late-capitalist spatial production and then situating the aesthetic logic of these megaprojects in a conceptual dialogue with the visionary ruins of Giovanni Battista Piranesi. The comparison between Piranesi's etched past and Tirana's rendered futures demonstrates that both operate through fantasy, spectacle, and the production of images that exceed material reality. In Tirana, however, this spectacle pertains not to ruins of the past but to ruins-in-waiting, objects whose destiny is in perpetual suspension.

Lyotard and Jameson' postmodern problem
The problem of Legitimacy

Lyotard's conceptualization of postmodernity as the epoch in which meta-narratives have collapsed offers a powerful interpretive entry point. In The Postmodern Condition, Lyotard argues that the legitimating stories that once anchored knowledge and action, such as the Enlightenment belief in human progress or the Marxist vision of collective emancipation, have ceased to function (Lyotard, 1992). With their collapse, society no longer possesses shared criteria for determining what counts as true, valuable, or legitimate.

In architecture, modernism exemplified an era of strong narratives. Functionalism, rationalism, technological progress, and social improvement served as legitimating frameworks that structured architectural production. The modernist claim that form should follow function provided a normative anchor that aligned aesthetic, social, and moral criteria.

Postmodernism, by contrast, operates without a unifying story. According to Lyotard, in a world deprived of grand narratives, legitimacy shifts from epistemic or moral criteria to performativity (ibid). What matters is what functions efficiently, circulates effectively, or produces value which can be economic, symbolic, or political.

This shift is highly visible in today's architectural culture, especially in rapidly transforming cities such as Tirana. Here, buildings are not primarily evaluated according to their functional utility or social purpose, but by their:
- Market performance (investment return, branding value)
- Symbolic Capital (visibility, iconicity)
- Political utility (signaling modernity, supporting governance narratives).

Legitimacy becomes tied to spectacle, circulation, and the promise of fu-

ture capital accumulation. In this framework, incompletion irreversably becomes a performative gesture. A megaproject under construction can already generate financial transactions, symbolic presence, and political messaging. Its value circulates long before its walls solidify. Its renderings, announcements, and speculative imagery contribute as much to its legitimacy as its eventual architectural form. The building "works" even before it exists. Thus, the unbuilt tower wrapped in its glossy render is an operative image and a performative node in a wider apparatus of legitimation.

Late Capitalism

If Lyotard identifies the epistemological crisis that shapes postmodernity, Jameson on the other hand reveals the structure underpinning it. In Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism he argues that postmodern culture emerges directly from the dynamics of late capitalism, in which financial abstraction becomes the dominant organizational force (ibid). Architecture, for Jameson becomes one of the most visible representations.

Architecture serves as the medium through which the abstractions of capital become material. Real estate development is a prime example: the value of a building lies not in its materiality but in its status as a financial instrument, a vessel for investment flows, debt structures, and speculative revenue and as such building is treated as mere assets.

In Tirana, this dynamic is heightened by its post-socialist transformation. In the decades following the collapse of state socialism, property markets opened rapidly, regulatory frameworks struggled to keep pace, and foreign investment became a primary engine of urban change. Under these conditions, architecture becomes commodity, moslty a brand, also a sign-exchange system and a speculative instrument.

Jameson's concept of pastiche further showcases the aesthetic dimension of this process where pastiche refers to the imitation of styles without underlying depth or historical grounding. His comparison between Van Gogh's Peasant Shoes and Warhol's Diamond Dust Shoes is emblematic: Warhol's work, emptied of existential content, circulates as a glamorous surface detached from material or existential experience (figure 1).

Applied to architecture, this explains why buildings like Steven Izenour's "Duck" once epitomized postmodern semiotics: they openly displayed their rhetorical and symbolic function. But when compared to Tirana's Skanderbeg Tower by MVRDV, a semi-abstracted image of Albania's national hero translated into a skyscraper façade, the Duck appears almost sincere and entirely realistic, shifting its position more closesly to Van Gogh's boots than Walhol's flatness. The Skanderbeg Tower represents a new intensity of symbolic commodification, where national identity is rendered as a marketable skin (figure 2).

Figure 1. Comparison of Van Gogh's peasant shoes and Andy Walhol's Diamond Dust Shoes. Source: The Postmodern Condition

Figure 2. Comparison of Steven Izenour's "Duck" shed and MVRDV's Skanderbeg Tower. Source: Wikimedia Commons

This shift indicates that contemporary Tirana presents itself as a hyper-postmodern stage in which the pastiche has become fully naturalized, and symbolic forms serve as instruments of capital circulation.

Ruins-in-waiting
Aesthetics and Piranesi

Vitruvius' triad: firmitas, utilitas, and venustas, provides a classical lens through which to understand the emergence of the ruin as an aesthetic object (Pollio, 2018). Ruins are buildings that have lost their stability (firmitas) and their use (utilitas), preserved only through their aesthetic expression (venustas). As such, the ruin is architecture reduced to its image.

Giovanni Battista Piranesi's 18th-century engravings of Roman ruins exploited this condition. In the etchings of collapsed temples and fractured walls, Piranesi simultaneously recorded material reality and injected imaginative grandeur. His ruins were real and material but also simmulatenously imaginary and fantastical. His drawings blurred the line between the historical fragment and the speculative reconstruction. (Wilton-Ely, 1988)

Crucially, Piranesi's work demonstrates that the aesthetic experience of ruins is not passive but projective. It requires imagination. The observer must envision what once stood or what the fragment signifies. This projective element makes the ruin a fertile metaphor for the architecture of the incomplete.

Tirana's Renders as "Ruins-in-Waiting"

In Tirana, Piranesi's speculative imagination finds its contemporary analogue of the drawings of the past into the renderings of the future. The photorealistic 3D renderings that circulate on billboards, social media, and planning announcements actively shape urban perception, influence capital flows, and produce their own legitimacy. These renders share key characteristics with Piranesi's etchings in the fact that they both exceed material reality which they embellish and exaggerate. They rely on fantasy to produce symbolic appeal and to project a reality that is not (yet) present.

But unlike Piranesi's ruins, which depict the past, Tirana's renders depict a future that may never arrive or it id does it is not entirely compatible with what was exactly promised. They are images without substance, architectural fantasies awaiting materialization. Their aesthetic beauty often surpasses what is ever constructed, creating a speculative layer that hovers above the physical city. This makes the renders "ruins-in-waiting": visions of buildings whose material futures remain uncertain, whose eventual decay begins even before completion, because their primary function is to perform a circulatory economic role rather than a utilitarian one.

The formal parallels reinforce this conceptual link. When one places Piranesi's Hadrian's Villa alongside ODA's proposals for Tirana, or compares the stacked, arch-like geometries of the Via Appia ruins to the CHYBIK + KRISTOF tower, the resemblance is striking. The eroded crown of the Cecilia Metella Mausoleum finds its aesthetic echo in the perforated top of the MET building. These similarities reveal that Tirana's architectural imaginary draws from the same grammar of spectacle and monumentalization that animated Piranesi's visions (figure 3).

Virtuality and Materiality

Giovanni Battista Piranesi embellished the material ruins of Rome, extending fragments of stone into visionary worlds through the force of his imagination. Tirana's speculative architecture reverses this dynamic. Instead
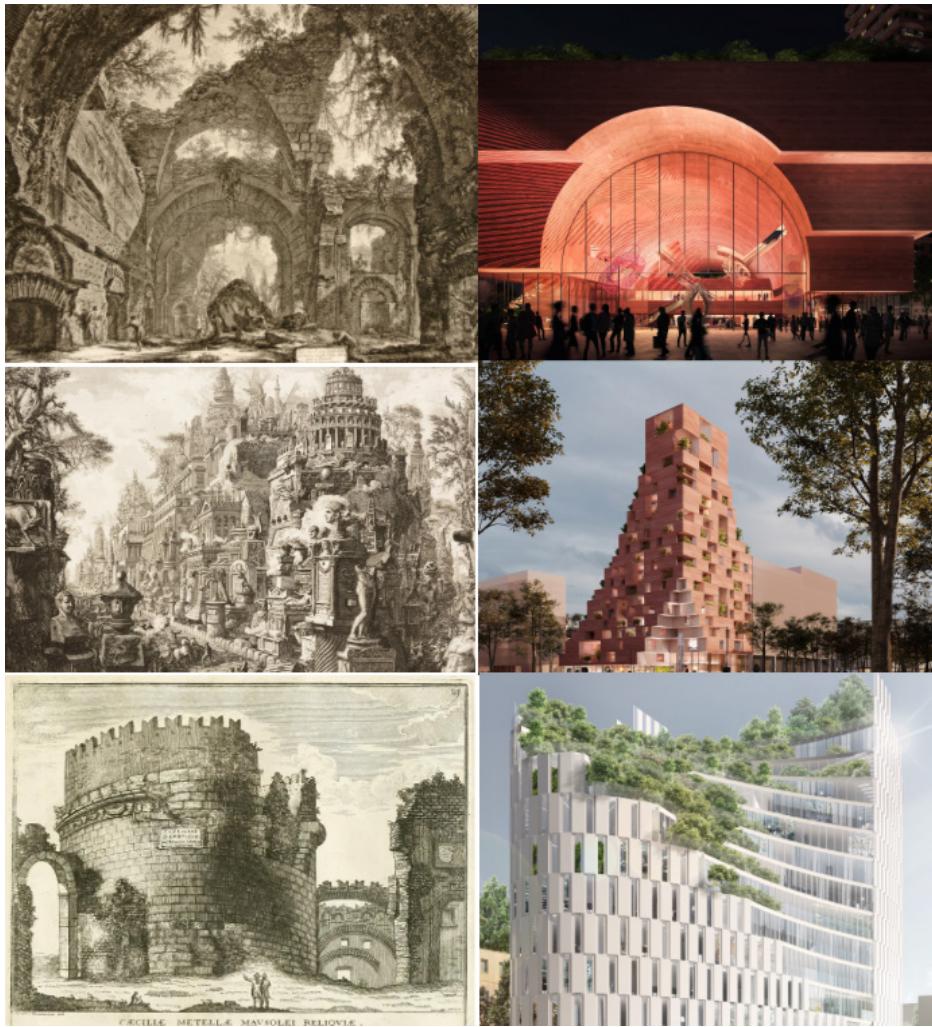
Figure 3. Comparison of Piranesi's drawings with the renderings of Tirana's towers. Source: Author

of elaborating what already exists, contemporary development embellishes futures that have not yet materialized. Renderings, virtual fly-throughs, and polished promotional images precede and often overshadow construction itself. These images fabricate the promise of a future. In this sense, the city's architectural culture moves through anticipation rather than memory.

Although these speculative projections gesture toward a virtual horizon, they do not float freely above the city. Their authority depends on material and the tactile residue of ongoing urban transformation. Tirana's urban reality emerges through

the interplay between these two registers. The city is shaped through the labor of cranes and concrete, but also through the continuous circulation of alluring images, political declarations, and commercial narratives. The speculative sphere influences perception as strongly as the physical one, creating a hybrid environment where architecture unfolds simultaneously in digital and material form.

This interdependence becomes particularly visible when examining Piramida, Skanderbeg Tower, and Downtown One, three emblematic projects (figure 4) whose renderings and built forms diverge in revealing ways. Each project involves an atmosphere constructed digitally: perfect light, idealized vegetation, curated skies, and an urban cleanliness that no inhabited city can sustain. The shapes presented in the renderings often correspond closely to what is eventually built, yet the emotional register of the renderings rarely transfers into reality. The fantasy evaporates once the building acquires weight, texture, and the contingencies of everyday urban life.

In the case of Piramida the visualizations present a luminous cultural hub infused with transparency and lightness. Circulation appears effortless; the heavy socialist monument seems reborn as a frictionless creative space. Once encountered materially, the renovated structure behaves differently. The concrete retains its density; its edges remain sharp; its mass does not dissolve under the glow of digital skies. The visualization imagined a building in continuous suspension, but the physical structure reasserts its gravity and its historical residue. The atmospheric qualities of the renderings (vibrancy, purity, an almost utopian openness) never fully translate into the completed work.

A similar tension emerges with Skanderbeg Tower. In the images distributed prior to construction, the tower appears sculptural, luminous, and monumental without heaviness. Its façade seems to absorb light and radiate it back into the square. Once built, the same façade reads differently. The structure dominates the space through mass rather than radiance; the protruding forms cast shadows more forcefully than in the renderings; and the building settles into the urban fabric with a gravity that the polished visuals actively suppressed. The draws convey an object liberated from context; the physical building participates in the context more bluntly.

Downtown One provides an even clearer example. Its renderings present a tower with crystalline precision: a pixelated façade gleaming against an ideal sky, framed by a cityscape stripped of disorder. In the built version, the surfaces lose their digital brilliance. Real glass behaves differently from its virtual counterpart. The tower becomes a part of the city's complexity rather than a purified symbol of futurity. The distance between representation and materiality becomes unmistakable: the building adopts the mood of Tirana rather than reconfiguring Tirana into the mood of its renderings.

Figure 3. Comparison of Piranesi's drawings with the renderings of Tirana's towers. Source: Author

Results

The comparison across these three cases reveals a consistent pattern. Renderings and buildings form a dynamic relation, each shaping the other in specific ways. The digital images generate a momentum where they stimulate desire, attract investors and frame public expectations long before the first concrete pour. The images circulate through media ecosystems (billboards, marketing campaigns and the press) and their momentum establishes cultural legitimacy by constructing an aesthetics of progress that precedes the actual experience of the urban environment.

At the same time, the material structures constrain and recalibrate these

digital imaginaries. The foundations and frames provide the necessary evidence that the projected futures might eventually take shape. Construction gives the speculative images a foothold in reality, even if the final product diverges from their atmospheric promises. Materiality interrupts the seductive smoothness of the renderings, introducing texture, imperfection, and the lived rhythms that digital environments cannot fully simulate.

This interplay produces an urban condition where incompletion becomes a sustained mode of existence. A building generates its greatest symbolic, political, and financial energy in the period between announcement and completion. During this interval, the project is both present and absent, both visible and invisible. It occupies a liminal status that enables it to carry maximal speculative charge. Once the building is complete, the speculative horizon closes; its symbolic potency begins to stabilize and often diminishes. The project becomes ordinary, subject to the friction of daily life rather than the excitement of projected possibility.

This dynamic reshapes how legitimacy functions in Tirana's architectural culture. Rather than deriving authority through material endurance, functional necessity, or civic embeddedness, many projects rely on performative gestures. Announcements, visualizations, and ceremonial groundbreakings operate as crucial acts that define the identity of the project more powerfully than the completed building itself. The image of futurity becomes a primary urban tool. The virtual plane accompanies the built environment while it also actively directs it.

The consequence is a city composed of dual temporalities: one experienced physically and incrementally, and another encountered through promises, projections, and aestheticized futures. Tirana becomes a landscape in which architecture is constantly in the process of arriving. The city asserts itself through ambition, through images and through speculation. Materiality alone cannot explain its transformations; nor can digital representation. Only the entanglement of the two captures the full scope of its evolving urban condition.

Conclusion

Tirana offers a paradigmatic case of post-socialist urbanism in which the unfinished becomes a defining spatial and ideological category. The megaprojects that populate the city's skyline whether built, unbuilt, or perpetually under construction, express not only the pressures of global capital but also the collapse of architectural legitimacy into performativity.

Through Lyotard, we understand the loss of shared narratives and the rise of performative legitimation. Through Jameson, we recognize the commodification of architecture and the intensification of pastiche under late capitalism. Through Piranesi, we see how speculative imagery shapes the aesthetic and affective dimension of the city.

In this triangulation, the contemporary high-rise towers of Tirana emerge as

ruins-in-waiting: objects suspended between material solidity and virtual fantasy, between political projection and economic speculation. They are placeholders for futures that remain perpetually deferred and in this sense, Tirana institutionalizes incompletion, making it the core logic of its urban condition.

References

Jameson, F. (1993). Postmodernism, or, The cultural logic of late capitalism. London: Verso.

Jean-François Lyotard (1992). The Postmodern Explained to Children. Power Publications.

Lyotard, J.-F. (1984). The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Pollio, V. (2018). The Ten Books on Architecture. Createspace Independent Publishing Platform.

Wilton-Ely, J. (1988). The mind and art of Giovanni Batista Piranesi. London: Thames And Hudson.