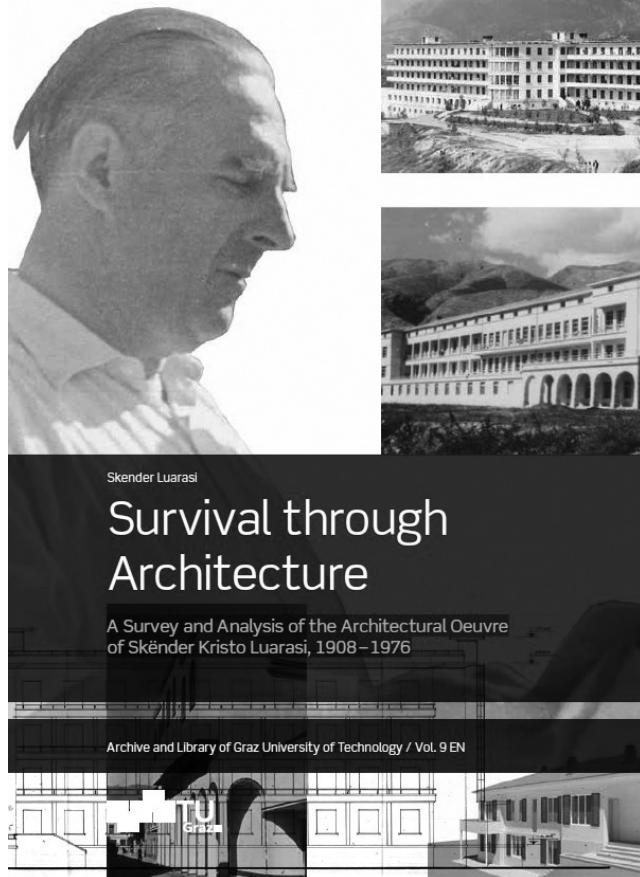


Survival through Architecture. A Survey and Analysis of the Architectural Oeuvre of Skënder Kristo Luarasi, 1908 – 1976 by Skender Luarasi

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The book "Survival through Architecture," written by Skënder Luarasi—an architect educated in the USA where he completed his doctoral studies—and published in 2023 by the Verlag publishing house of TU-Graz in Austria, analyzes the life and professional work of Skënder Kristo Luarasi (SKL), 1908–1976. It would be easy to label him "an Albanian architect," but it is more accurate to consider him "an architect of Albanian origin" with international training. This fact positions Skënder Kristo Luarasi as an architect with international training, and while it is true that he was educated in Graz, it is equally true that he is more of an "Austrian" architect than an Albanian one. His Austrian training is evident in the works listed in the book, where traces of modern architecture are visible, which, although in its embryonic stage throughout Europe at that time, are displayed from student projects to those of the last period of SKL's professional life.

Before moving on to the analysis of the book, it is important to analyze the book's title, "Survival through Architecture." From the title itself, the author combines architecture with survival, making us think about how these two words placed together can be interpreted. The first meaning of these words relates to the difficult context in which SKL operated, where the only way to survive was to immerse oneself in the professional world and work as an instrument to "forget" the difficult reality lived by a people "imprisoned" within national borders. The second meaning these words take when placed together can be interpreted in the Heideggerian sense of the word, that to survive through work, through the result achieved, and the final work. This interpretation leads us directly to the third meaning, which sees the work of architecture itself as an instrument for the perpetuation of personal experience into eternity. The work of art, which includes architecture, has the main role of reify-

ing the experience of its author, including the context in which he operates, into eternity. Through the "reification" of the author's work in different periods, the value of that work is determined: the more it is reified in different periods, the greater its value as a work of art. In this way, architecture, like a work of art, becomes an instrument for the survival of its author and the context in which it was built. Survival through architecture must be understood through this threefold reading.

The book opens with forewords by Pirro Thomo, Andi Papastefani, Gary Huafan He, and Adil Mansure, who emphasize the importance of this monograph in the field of history and theory of architecture in Albania. The testimonies of Thomo and Papastefani, who knew Skënder Kristo Luarasi directly, are vivid testimonies that speak of a period that now seems very distant, but which is still operative in the consciousness of a people who tend to forget more easily than to document the past in detail. At this point, the book's author offers a detailed reading of the work of architecture at the architectural level, reading in a formally detailed manner the projects and constructions authored by SKL. This detailed reading of architecture seems today to be surpassed by a superficial reading with characteristics different from the formal one. The forewords of Gary He and Mansure emphasize the book's importance at the international level.

The introduction offers a detailed framework for understanding SKL's work within the broader context of modern architecture. It emphasizes the interaction between local tradition and modern influences, setting the tone for the detailed analysis that follows. This analysis, as mentioned a few lines above, touches on the architectural and formal details of SKL's various works. From this point of view, this detailed reading is a value that has now been lost in readings influenced by the fashions of the time.

The first chapter unfolds SKL's origins and initial work. This part details Luarasi's formative years, especially his education in Graz and his early projects. It examines the evolution of what the book's author calls "vernacular modern" in Albania, comparing it with the "Balkan" vernacular and architectural influences during the Italian occupation. This part is important because it shows us the "vernacular" as a continuation of the traditional building practice, while the epithet "modern" shows us the consciousness that the designer and builder have of the action they are performing. Generally, this consciousness in architecture is expressed by the presence of a project. This part is important because it shows a kind of "vernacular" formal identity influenced by modern thought and architecture.

In the second chapter of the book, the focus shifts to Luarasi's residential projects, represented by individual houses. The analysis shows how SKL integrated modern principles with local building traditions, creating a unique architectural idiom that resonated with the Albanian context. This part emphasizes Luarasi's architectural identity influenced by his education in

Austria, but also by the context in which he intervened. The chapter is important because it documents at the iconographic, altimetric, and scenographic level not only the undamaged buildings but also those that are no longer part of the urban repertoire. After all, they are no longer there due to the destructive surge of new constructions.

The third chapter explores SKL's contributions on an urban scale, including collective housing, hotels, hospitals, and other important projects. It emphasizes his ability to scale his architectural vision from individual houses to large urban complexes, maintaining a consistent design philosophy. The reading that the book's author gives to these projects and constructions goes from the large urban scale through morphological analysis to the detailed reading of the architectural dimension at the level of compositional elements, such as that of the balcony of the Agimi buildings on page 124 (image 3.1.12).

Luarasi's work in Gjirokastër is examined in the fourth chapter through the prism of critical regionalism. This chapter provides a detailed overview of key projects such as the Çajupi Hotel, the Court, the Asim Zeneli Gymnasium, and the Gjirokastër Hospital, illustrating how SKL's projects responded to the city's historical and modern contexts. Another aspect that the author emphasizes in this chapter is the relationship that these buildings have with the urban and natural context of Gjirokastër.

The conclusions synthesize the insights from previous chapters, reaffirming SKL's place in the ranks of modern architects not only in the Albanian context but also internationally. This is shown through his diverse work and refined sensitivity to the context in which he was intervening. He reflects on his lasting legacy and the importance of his work in contemporary architectural discourse. The book concludes with a complete catalogue of Luarasi's projects, providing a chronological overview of his architectural work. This section serves as a valuable resource for researchers and practitioners interested in the evolution of modern architecture in Albania.

"Survival through Architecture" is a research monograph that offers an in-depth analysis of the life and work of Skënder Kristo Luarasi. It documents in detail his architectural achievements but also places them within the framework of modern architecture in Albania. The analysis and documentation that the author makes of SKL's work are detailed at the architectural level, touching on the syntactic and epistemological plane of the constituent elements of the discipline of architecture. This "close-range" analysis of architecture makes this book an essential value for all those who are interested in the art of building dwellings.

This book is an essential read for all university students and anyone interested in the intersection of local traditions and the modern architecture movement. It serves as a didactic book to understand how to move within a local context using international theoretical and intellectual ideas and instruments.