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Author: LEDIAN BREGASI
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Reoccurring Novelties: Architecture Between the Promise of the New and the Repetition of the Familiar

LEDIAN BREGASI
POLIS University

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Architecture has always been caught between two opposing desires: the desire to create something new and the need to give form to something that already exists. Every architectural project emerges from this tension. It responds to a specific moment, a particular place, and a set of social, cultural, technological, and economic conditions, while inevitably drawing upon inherited forms, established conventions, and collective memories. The question is not whether architecture can escape repetition, but whether it can transform repetition into a meaningful act of creation.

The theme *Reoccurring Novelties,* proposed by Tirana Architecture Week (TAW) 2024, offers a productive framework through which to reconsider this fundamental contradiction. It invites us to question the meaning of novelty in contemporary architectural culture and to examine whether the continuous production of new forms necessarily corresponds to genuine innovation. At a time when architecture circulates globally through images, digital platforms, competitions, exhibitions, and rapidly changing aesthetic preferences, the distinction between what is new and what merely appears new becomes increasingly difficult to establish.

Perhaps the contemporary architectural condition is not defined by a lack of novelty, but by its excessive availability. New images, materials, technologies, formal languages, and design methodologies are constantly presented as evidence of progress. Yet the multiplication of possibilities does not automatically produce a corresponding transformation in the way we inhabit, construct, or understand the world. Architecture risks becoming trapped in a cycle in which novelty is continuously announced, consumed, and replaced before it has had the opportunity to acquire cultural or social significance.

The challenge, therefore, is to move beyond the superficial celebration of the new and reconsider innovation as a critical, situated, and enduring process.

The New as a Recurring Condition

The history of architecture can be understood as a succession of ruptures that are rarely as absolute as they initially appear. Architectural movements challenge established conventions, introduce new formal vocabularies, and redefine the relationship between space, technology, and society. However, what is presented as a radical departure often contains traces of previous ideas, transformed and reinterpreted under different historical circumstances.

Modernism, for example, positioned itself against historical imitation and decorative convention, advocating new relationships between form, function, construction, and the modern condition. Yet its own language eventually became institutionalised, reproduced, and transformed into a recognisable aesthetic. What once represented a break with tradition became a tradition in itself. The modern became historical; the radical became conventional.

A similar process can be observed in contemporary architectural culture, where once-experimental approaches are rapidly absorbed into professional practice and commercial production. Formal gestures initially associated with innovation can become standardised images, repeated across cities with little consideration for their particular contexts. The novelty of a building may consequently reside less in its spatial or social contribution than in its capacity to distinguish itself visually within an increasingly competitive landscape.

This does not mean that repetition is inherently negative.

On the contrary, architecture cannot exist without repetition. Construction depends on systems, typologies, standards, and accumulated knowledge. Cities develop through the reiteration and adaptation of spatial structures, while architectural languages acquire meaning through their relationship to existing forms. Repetition becomes problematic only when it loses its capacity for transformation.

The relevant distinction is therefore not between repetition and originality, but between repetition as reproduction and repetition as reinterpretation. The former confirms what already exists; the latter introduces difference into familiar structures. Genuine architectural innovation may emerge precisely from this difference—from the ability to recognise the potential of an inherited condition and to transform it in response to contemporary needs.

Architecture in the Economy of Attention

Contemporary architecture operates within a culture that increasingly values visibility, immediacy, and circulation. Buildings are conceived, represented, and evaluated not only through their material presence and spatial performance but also through their capacity to produce compelling images. Digital communication has expanded the reach of architectural discourse, allowing projects to circulate internationally almost instantaneously. At the same time, this circulation has intensified the pressure to produce recognisable visual statements.

The architectural project is consequently exposed to a paradox: it must appear unprecedented in order to attract attention, while remaining sufficiently legible to be recognised within an established visual culture. Novelty becomes a form of currency, and architectural expression risks being reduced to a sequence of images designed for rapid consumption.

Under these conditions, the question of architectural progress becomes inseparable from the question of architectural representation. Does a building contribute to the life of a city because it offers new possibilities for inhabitation, public interaction, environmental responsibility, and collective experience? Or is its success increasingly measured by its capacity to generate visibility and reproduce itself through images?

The distinction matters because architecture is not merely an object to be seen. It is an environment to be inhabited, negotiated, maintained, and experienced over time. Its significance cannot be adequately assessed through the first impression of a façade or the visual impact of a rendering. Architecture unfolds through use, through the changing relationships between people and space, and through its capacity to accommodate conditions that cannot be entirely predicted at the moment of design.

An architecture that prioritises immediate recognition may achieve formal distinction while failing to address the more complex dimensions of the built environment. Conversely, a project that appears restrained or familiar may introduce profound changes in the ways a place functions, connects, and evolves.

The challenge for architectural criticism is to resist the automatic identification of visual difference with conceptual depth. Not every unusual form constitutes an innovation, just as not every familiar solution represents a failure of imagination. What matters is the relationship between architectural intention and its consequences.

The City as an Archive of Unfinished Ideas

Tirana provides a particularly relevant context in which to examine these questions. Its urban transformation reflects overlapping historical periods, changing political conditions, evolving economic structures, and competing visions of modernity. The city is neither a completed composition nor a stable architectural image. It is an evolving field in which different temporalities coexist, often in tension with one another.

In such a context, novelty cannot be understood simply as the introduction of new buildings or the replacement of existing forms. Urban transformation requires a more complex negotiation between continuity and change. The city contains material traces, social practices, spatial habits, and collective memories that cannot be reduced to physical objects alone. These elements constitute an urban archive: a repository of experiences and possibilities that may inform future interventions.

To engage with this archive does not necessarily mean preserving everything that already exists. Nor does it imply that historical continuity should become an obstacle to experimentation. Rather, it requires recognising that every intervention enters into a relationship with an existing reality, whether consciously or otherwise. Architecture cannot begin from an absolute void, because even the most radical project is situated within a network of inherited conditions.

The task is to determine which elements should be preserved, which should be transformed, and which new relationships should be introduced. This process requires critical judgement rather than the automatic application of either conservation or replacement.

For Tirana, as for many rapidly transforming cities, the question is particularly significant because urban development is not only a matter of architectural form. It also concerns the distribution of public space, access to infrastructure, environmental quality, social inclusion, and the relationship between collective interests and private investment. A building may be formally innovative while contributing little to the broader urban condition. Equally, a modest intervention may generate substantial value by improving the accessibility, adaptability, or everyday use of a place.

The meaning of novelty must therefore be measured against the context in which it operates. A new architectural gesture acquires significance not simply because it differs from what preceded it, but because it establishes a meaningful relationship with the existing city and opens possibilities that were previously unavailable.

Beyond Trends: The Responsibility of Architectural Creation

If novelty is no longer a reliable indicator of innovation, architecture must reconsider the criteria through which it evaluates its own achievements. This reconsideration begins by acknowledging that the built environment extends beyond the moment of its production. Buildings consume resources,

structure patterns of movement, influence social relations, and remain embedded in the landscape long after the initial intentions of their designers have changed.

Architectural responsibility consequently requires a temporal perspective that exceeds the immediate demands of a project. It asks whether a building can adapt to changing uses, whether its materials and construction systems support a more responsible relationship with resources, and whether its spatial organisation accommodates the complexity of human life. It also asks whether the project contributes to the public realm or merely occupies space within it.

These questions do not diminish the importance of experimentation. On the contrary, they expand its field. Innovation can emerge through new materials and technologies, but it can also result from the reconsideration of existing structures, the adaptation of obsolete buildings, the reinterpretation of vernacular knowledge, or the development of more inclusive forms of public space. It may reside in an unexpected formal configuration, but it may equally be found in a construction detail, a spatial sequence, or a new relationship between a building and its surroundings.

The architectural act becomes transformative when it connects invention with consequence. Without this connection, novelty risks remaining an isolated aesthetic event, detached from the realities it claims to address.

This is also where uncertainty becomes productive. Architectural design cannot fully anticipate the ways in which spaces will be occupied, modified, or understood over time. Buildings acquire meanings beyond their original programmes, and users continuously reinterpret the environments in which they live and work. Rather than treating this unpredictability as a problem to be eliminated, architecture might understand it as an essential condition of its existence.

The most enduring projects are not necessarily those that impose the most complete vision, but those that establish frameworks capable of accommodating change. Their strength lies in the relationship between definition and openness, between the precision of design and the possibility of future reinterpretation.

To design for the future, therefore, is not simply to imagine forms that have never existed before. It is to create conditions in which future generations can continue to produce meaning.

Reoccurring Novelties: A Critical Position

Tirana Architecture Week 2024 places this discussion within a broader collective exploration of architectural culture. Founded in 2012, TAW has established a platform for dialogue among architects, researchers, institutions, students, and cultural actors, connecting local questions with international debates. Its biennial format creates an opportunity not only to present projects and ideas but also to reconsider the assumptions that shape contemporary architectural practice.

Within this framework, *Reoccurring Novelties* can be read as more than a reflection on the cyclical character of creative production. It is also an invitation to examine the mechanisms through which novelty is defined, circulated, and legitimised. It encourages architects to question the pressure to constantly produce the unprecedented and to reconsider the value of ideas that return in altered forms, acquiring new relevance through changing circumstances.

The recurrence of an idea does not necessarily indicate stagnation. It may reveal that certain questions remain unresolved, that previous solutions contain unrealised possibilities, or that familiar principles require reinterpretation under new conditions. What returns is never entirely identical, because the context in which it reappears has changed. The task of architecture is to recognise and work within this difference.

From this perspective, progress cannot be understood as a linear movement from the old to the new. It is better understood as a process of critical transformation, in which inherited knowledge and emerging possibilities are continuously brought into dialogue. The past becomes neither a model to be copied nor a burden to be discarded, but a resource through which the present can be questioned and the future imagined.

For architectural practice, this position implies a shift in emphasis: from the production of novelty towards the production of meaning; from the image of innovation towards its material, spatial, and social consequences; and from the desire to appear unprecedented towards the capacity to make a lasting contribution.

Conclusion: The Future Is Not an Image

Architecture will continue to seek the new because creation depends on the possibility of imagining what does not yet exist. Yet the pursuit of novelty becomes limiting when it is separated from the historical, cultural, and environmental conditions that give architecture its significance. The future cannot be reduced to a collection of unfamiliar forms, just as progress cannot be measured by the speed with which one architectural trend replaces another.

The real challenge is to create something new without losing the capacity to recognise what already exists. It is to understand repetition not as the enemy of originality, but as the ground on which meaningful differences can emerge. It is to approach architectural creation as a dialogue between memory and anticipation, permanence and transformation, intention and uncertainty.

In this sense, *Reoccurring Novelties* proposes a critical position rather than a stylistic programme. It invites us to look beyond the immediate attraction of the unprecedented and to ask what architecture makes possible, for whom, and for how long. It challenges architects to move beyond the production of images and towards the creation of environments capable of sustaining human experience, collective life, and future change.

Ultimately, the most important architectural question may not be whether a project is new, but whether it changes the way we understand and inhabit the world. A genuine novelty does not merely announce its arrival. It establishes a possibility that did not previously exist and gives that possibility the capacity to endure.

Perhaps architecture's most radical gesture today is not to produce something entirely unfamiliar, but to transform the familiar so

profoundly that it can no longer be understood in the same way.
The future of architecture does not depend on the endless invention of new forms. It depends on our ability to make new meanings emerge from the conditions we inherit.