URBAN FAÇADES, POLITICAL SHADES: Tirana's Nationalistic Turn in Architecture and its Subtexts

DORINA PLLUMBI[1]

Abstract

This article explores the use of nationalistic narratives in architecture in the Albanian urban landscape, focusing more on Tirana as a reflection of shifting power dynamics, ideology, and national identity across different political regimes. From the early 20th century, through the state socialist era, and into the contemporary neoliberal period, architecture in Tirana has been used as a tool of political expression and domination. Despite the ideological clashes between nationalism and both socialism and neoliberalism, these regimes have employed nationalistic rhetoric to shape architectures and consolidate political power.

[1] Dorina Pllumbi is an architect and PhD researcher at the Delft University of Technology, Netherlands.

Under the state-socialist regime, exemplified by buildings like the National History Museum and Skanderbeg Museum in Krujë, architecture merged nationalism with socialist ideology to project an Albanian national identity as European and socialist. In the 2010s, under Prime Minister Edi Rama, nationalistic architecture is currently emerging as a blend of national identity with neoliberal agendas. This trend, exemplified, among others, by projects like Downtown One Tirana (the map building) and the Skanderbeg building designed by MVRDV, often reduces Albanian identity to commodified symbols designed for foreign consumption, prioritizing economic gain over a rich and diverse cultural heritage. The article concludes that while the power dynamics have evolved, the instrumentalization of architecture by those in power persists, albeit in more playful forms and through the figure of the star architect. The recent nationalistic-themed architectures in Tirana exemplify how Balkan nationalism, on the one hand, is often perceived as a marker of "backwardness", yet on the other hand, this very backwardness can be exoticized when it is reinterpreted with irony or humor by prominent Western architects.

Keywords: *socialist nationalism*, *neoliberal nationalism*, *nation branding architecture*, *Skanderbeg*, *Tirana*

I. Introduction

"At least in Tirana, you have star architects designing contemporary architecture", Bogdan (anonymized name) lamented to me. "There, star architects have collaborated with local studios, also serving in this capacity as a school for local

architects." Bogdan and I were two architectural scholars sharing frustrations over the current interventions taking place in our respective cities, Skopje and Tirana, and I knew what motivated his remark. Following the devastating earthquake of 1963, Skopje underwent a renowned reconstruction effort led by the esteemed architect Kenzō Tange. This initiative gifted Skopje with a wealth of modernist architecture, which is still revered today. Architects continue to pilgrimage to these structures as if they were architectural temples, reminiscing about a bygone era when architecture was seen as a panacea for societal ills. It was a time when society placed unwavering faith in the transformative power of architecture, mirroring a sentiment and conviction that architects nowadays still hold dear and long for. In an era when society placed profound faith in the potential of architecture, architects could still do—in Donna Haraway's words—the god's trick and be praised for it. Their designs were celebrated for their perceived ability to shape and uplift society. Thus, my colleague from Skopje perceived a similar phenomenon unfolding in contemporary Tirana, with star architects supposedly uplifting its urban landscape and teaching local architects the avant-garde of the profession.

Moreover, his sentiment seemed to echo a deep-seated despair over the perceived regression stemming from the infamous Skopje 2014 project, a controversial urban redevelopment initiative launched by the government of North Macedonia, seeking to reshape the capital city's identity and aesthetics. The project involved the construction and renovation of numerous buildings, monuments, bridges, and public spaces, using neoclassical and baroque architectural styles, with the aim,

as Andrew Graan explains, of "obscur[ing] the modernist construction of the socialist period and the Ottoman-era architecture that indexes the city's Muslim heritage", and giving the nation a more "European" and classical look.[2] The project once more put Skopje at the center of architectural discourse—this time not only for the use of architecture as a tool for nation branding, but also for the unfortunate stylistic backlash against the marvelous modernist Skopje.

The sense of loss I perceived in my colleague's words was rooted in the memories of the Yugoslav era, when Skopje felt that it was not on the margins but at the center of architectural discourse on societal progress (although the segregation of the neighborhoods inhabited by predominantly ethnic Albanians in the city is absent from these pages of architectural history books). "Well, at least as an architectural community, you created a resistance front to counteract Skopje 2014", I comforted him. "In Tirana, on the other hand, architects often find it too risky or pointless to voice their opinions, despite widespread disdain within the architectural community for nationalistic-themed buildings shaped after the head of Skanderbeg or with a façade depicting the map of the country."

That is to say, Skopje's nation-branding project utilizing architecture as its primary vehicle is not an isolated case in the region. Albania is undertaking a similar enterprise—with different architectural styles and actors, but still enacted within a neoliberal regime. A central figure in this process is Edi Rama,

[2] Andrew Graan, "Counterfeiting the Nation? Skopje 2014 and the Politics of Nation Branding in Macedonia", *Cultural Anthropology* vol. 28, no. 1, 2013, pp. 161–79.

the artist-politician Prime Minister of Albania, who previously utilized a progressivist agenda dismissing nationalism as primitive. The recent nationalistic shift in his rhetoric marks a new phase in his nearly three decades in power, first as Minister of Culture (1998–2000), then as Mayor of Tirana (2000–2011), and finally, since 2013, as Prime Minister of Albania. Moreover, the phenomenon of a nationalistic turn in architecture and the arts is not entirely new in Albanian history. A similar turn occurred in the 1970s when Albania was still under a totalitarian state-socialist regime.

In this article, I examine the use of symbolism in architecture in Albania during two significant periods of nationalistic shifts in state politics: the 1970s, when the Albanian state adopted an inward nationalistic stance, and the present day, characterized by an outwards-facing nation-branding endeavor under a consolidating neoliberal regime. There are notable parallels between the nationalistic architectural trends of the 1970s and the recent wave of neoliberal nationalistic architecture. Both forms of nationalism use architecture to consolidate state power by materializing a sense of national identity. However, while the nationalism of the 1970s sought to establish Albania as a bastion of communism in Europe—particularly as the country distanced itself from its Eastern patrons—the recent neoliberal nationalism is more focused on commodifying national history, primarily for foreign consumption.

This shift underscores a recurring problematic dilemma in Balkan nationalism noted by Maria Todorova as the "trap of backwardness", which stems from an Orientalizing point of view

towards the Balkans.[3] Moreover, as the Albanian sociologist Enis Sultarova has argued, Albanian Orientalism itself has unfolded as an "escape" from Eastern influences and has been an influential intellectual and ideological discourse throughout the creation of the modern Albanian identity. It is still a very active ideological frame as Albania aims to integrate into the European Union, a decades-long ambition.[4] The recent nationalistic-themed architectures in Tirana exemplify how Balkan nationalism, on the one hand, is often perceived as a marker of "backwardness", yet on the other hand, this very backwardness can be exoticized when it is reinterpreted with irony or humor by prominent Western architects.

II. Unraveling Nationalisms: Myths, Realities, and Contemporary Challenges

Nationalism as an ideology promotes strong attachment and loyalty to one's nation, often shown through attention to shared language, culture, history, and territory. Benedict Anderson describes nationalism as an "imagined community", emphasizing the role of collective imagination in creating national identity. [5]

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[3] Maria Todorova, "The Trap of Backwardness: Modernity, Temporality, and the Study of Eastern European Nationalism", *Slavic Review* vol. 64, no. 1, Spring 2005, pp. 140–164.

[4] Enis Sulstarova, *Arratisje nga Lindja: Orientalizmi shqiptar nga Naimi te Kadareja*, 4th ed., Tirana: Pika pa sipërfaqe, 2019.

[5] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, 1983; Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006; and Philip Spencer and Howard Wollman, *Nations and Nationalism: A Reader*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005.

Despite its potential for unifying a state, such as the European nation-states in the 19th century, nationalism has faced significant criticism for its exclusionary and divisive tendencies, severely harming society's multicultural complexity by simplifying cultural identities and promoting ethnocentrism, xenophobia, and intolerance.[6] Nationalism gains traction during times of crisis or instability, as seen with the rise of fascism in interwar Europe or in contemporary waves of far-right populism.[7] A series of consecutive crises like the economic downturn of 2008, the 2015–2016 refugee crisis, and the COVID-19 pandemic have fueled this nationalistic wave, as evidenced by the European Parliament elections in June 2024. Nationalistic rhetoric has sparked wars and conflicts, with demonstrable links between militarism and gender violence, looking at how nationalism exacerbates sexual violence and the marginalization of women's voices in military conflicts. Feminist scholars like Nira Yuval-Davis argue that nationalist discourse often portrays the nation as a masculine entity that provides protection, defense, and control. As a result of this construction of the nation as a "fatherland"—or even a "motherland"—traditional gender roles are reinforced while non-normative gender identities are marginalized or excluded.[8]

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[6] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, and Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

[7] Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2007; Anthony Smith, *Nationalism: Theory, Ideology, History*, MA: Polity Press, 2010; Cas Mudde, *On Extremism and Democracy in Europe*, New York: Routledge, 2016.

[8] Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1997; Cynthia Cockburn, "The Continuum of Violence: A Gender Perspective on War and Peace", in Wenona Giles, ed., *Sites of*

However, while nationalism is central to modern European history and remains very much an active problem today, its study in the Balkan region—often treated as the geographic periphery to the occidental center of Western Europe—has also been marred by often ambiguous uses of an exoticizing and othering gaze. Still, the Balkans' complex mix of different ethnicities and geopolitical tensions is undeniable, as are its historic nationalist movements, conflicts, and state formations dating back to the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of independent nation-states in the 19th and early 20th centuries.[9] The scars of the Yugoslav wars between 1991 and 1999, including genocide and ethnic cleansing, remain central to present-day attempts at statehood and self-determined sovereignty in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosova.

Originating from the Balkan Peninsula's historical reputation, the problematic term *balkanization* has become widely used in political discourse, deployed to describe the process of territorial disintegration, ethnic fragmentation, and political instability in various regions (including beyond the Balkans as well). Promoted by Robert D. Kaplan in his book *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey through History*, balkanization is a term that characterizes the region as inherently perpetuating conflict due to ethnic hatred, failing to account for the role of external powers, economic conditions, and the political ideologies that have shaped the region's history in generating

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Violence: Gender and Conflict Zones, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004, pp. 24–44.

[9] Richard Hall, *The Balkan Wars 1912–1913: Prelude to the First World War*, New York: Routledge, 2000.

these conflicts.[10] The phrase "the Balkans is the powder keg of Europe" is widely attributed to Otto von Bismarck, the first Chancellor of the German Empire, as a metaphor to describe the Balkans in the late 19th century. This phrase is continually revived to single out the region as having the problematic potential to ignite conflict in Europe due to its ethno-nationalistic tensions. Scholars like Anthony Smith reinforced the image of the Balkans as a "hotbed of nationalism" that embodied ethnic nationalism, discussing the role of historical memory, myths, and symbolisms in forming national identities that can lead to intense forms of nationalism.[11] This dominant, historically ingrained narrative of the Balkans as a conflict-ridden region often overshadows the significant role of Western interventions. Usually framed as progressive, these interventions from outside the region frequently introduce extractivist developmental projects that perpetuate a colonial mindset, nowadays enabled through neoliberal policies, while dismissing the agency of local discourses in the Balkans. Similarly, larger geopolitical powers from both the Western and Eastern worlds have treated the Balkans as a geographical arena of competition for political influence.

In 1997, Maria Todorova's seminal book *Imagining the Balkans* debunked the damaging Orientalist perspective that depicted the region as exotic, backward, and inherently violent.[12]

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[10] Robert D. Kaplan, *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey through History*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993.

[11] Anthony D. Smith, *Nations and Nationalism in a Global Era*, Cambridge, UK: Polity, 1995.

[12] Maria N. Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, updated edition, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Nevertheless, the stigma towards the Balkans persists, perpetuated by these enduring stereotypes and oversimplifications. Furthermore, in his book *White Enclosures*, Piro Rexhepi performs a more thorough exploration of the (re)production of whiteness in the Balkans, revealing how the European politics of othering operates not only through territorial boundaries but also on a subordinate level within the Balkan region. His research uncovers the historical racialization of Muslims and Roma communities in the region. Rexhepi challenges the perception of the Balkans as a homogenous colorblind area by showing how its peoples have internalized European whiteness with all the power relations it implies, at the same time that they themselves are not considered fully white from the Eurocentric point of view.[13]

Moreover, as the Albanian sociologist Enis Sulstarova argues, Albanian Orientalism has been an influential discourse that has unfolded throughout the creation of the modern Albanian state. In his book *Arratisje nga Lindja* (*Escape from the East*) he provides a genealogy of Albanian Orientalism, showing how Albanian intellectuals, throughout different periods, starting from the National Awakening Movement to the contemporary period, have sought to distance themselves from the "East" (often associated with Ottoman, Islamic, or Balkan influences) in an effort to align more closely with the "West" (European, secular, or Western influences).[14] Albanian nationalism, like that of many

[13] Piro Rexhepi, *White Enclosures: Racial Capitalism and Coloniality along the Balkan Route*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2022.
[14] Enis Sulstarova, *Arratisje nga Lindja: Orientalizmi shqiptar nga Naimi te Kadareja.*

other Balkans countries, has been influenced by Orientalist thought, while the problematic dichotomy of East-West has extensively influenced the ideological and political discourse in the Albanian sphere.

III. From socialist nationalism to neoliberal nationalism

Extensively used in nation studies as a conceptual framework, Anderson's civic/ethnic nationalism binary has often been mapped onto a West/East framework, implying that Western nationalisms lean more towards liberal-democratic values and collective identities based on the state's territory, while—in contrast—Eastern nationalisms are more ethnic, emphasizing shared culture, ethnicity, or religion.[15] Other authors argue that the dichotomy is inconsistent and that nationalisms cannot be categorized as strictly civic or ethnic because regardless of their geographic positioning they often exhibit features of both, intertwined with the complex histories of different regions.[16] Similarly, when questioning whether nationalisms are "good" or "bad", David Brown relates them to the socioeconomic status of the class articulating them—whether it is marginalized or in power, and whether its nationalism is based on resentment of others or developing its own identity.[17]

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[15] Hans Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism: A Study in Its Origins and Background*, New York: Macmillan, 1944.

[16] Christian Joppke, "Nationalism in the Neoliberal Order: Old Wine in New Bottles?", *Nations and Nationalism* vol. 27, no. 4, 2021, pp. 960–75; Adam Harmes, "The Rise of Neoliberal Nationalism", *Review of International Political Economy* vol. 19, no. 1, Feb. 2012, pp. 59–86.

[17] David Brown, "Are There Good and Bad Nationalisms?", *Nations and Nationalism* vol. 5, no. 2, 1999, pp. 281–302.

Nationalism, focusing on national identity and interests, has foundational ideological clashes with both socialism and neoliberalism. A central aspect of socialism, particularly Marxism, is the working class's international struggle against capitalist exploitation. The idea of socialist internationalism is premised upon the transcendence of national borders via the solidarity of the international proletariat. It envisions a unity of the global proletariat leading to a world revolution that would enable a classless, stateless society.

When socialist movements or states adopt nationalist policies, a form of "socialist nationalism" can emerge where nationalist goals prevail over socialist ones. In the context of Albania in the 1970s, this tension is particularly evident. As will be elaborated further in the text, the Albanian state, under Enver Hoxha, adopted a nationalist stance as it sought to assert its independence from both Western *and* Eastern imperialisms and revisionisms. This inward turn was framed as a defense of Albania's socialist purity, an instrumental reaction to geopolitical constraints.

Further, neoliberalism and nationalism have theoretical discrepancies, making it hard to see them functioning together. For example, the theory of neoliberalism advocates for minimal intervention in the economy apart from the promotion of the free market and private property. The state's role is to create and maintain the conditions for the free market, prioritizing individual initiatives over collective goals. It focuses on efficiency, competitiveness, and growth. Neoliberalism promotes breaking down national barriers that impede globalization and the free flow of goods, capital, and labor.

Nationalism, on the other hand, promotes a strong, centralized state that acts in the nation's interest, promoting national identity, culture, and national economic interest. Therefore, national economies are supposed to resist globalizing trends that threaten national identity.

While neoliberalism and nationalism seem to stand theoretically in opposition, in practice, they have points of convergence. As argued by many scholars, including David Harvey, there is a discrepancy between what neoliberalism promotes in theory and how it operates in practice. In reality, a neoliberal state does not guarantee a free market; on the contrary, it pairs with the ruling economic elite to enhance their economic power.[18] For example, in Albania's crony capitalism, the borderline between the political and economic elite has almost vanished.

Nation branding, a tool of neoliberal nationalism (used to a lesser extent by socialist nationalism as well), promotes a country's image and reputation internationally. It invests in marketing the country's culture, values, tourist attractions, and economic opportunities to make it attractive in a global market. Neoliberalism—because of how it operates and not what it promotes—appears not to conflict with public-private nation-branding investments as long as growth and profit are not jeopardized. Therefore, nationalism in the neoliberal context is interested in nation branding, an expression of economic nationalism that looks outward to promote a product in the global

[18] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

market.[19] For example, the Albanian economy depends on the construction industry, but recently, tourism has become a relevant sector as the country has been promoted as a tourist destination. Therefore, the production of architecture is the only product of this economy. The political and economic elite is using this product to promote it internationally, as we see recently, with a national stamp, while financializing the real estate market, gentrifying entire neighborhoods, and commodifying the city for local inhabitants.

IV. Architectural Manifestations of Power in Tirana: From Ottoman Inheritance to Colonialism to National Socialism

The top-down reshaping of Tirana is perceived to be an integral part of its transformation into the capital city of Albania. The first attempt to create an overview of the city of Tirana is what is known as the Austrian Plan of 1917, which was actually a survey map of the town developed for military purposes. In 1920, when it was declared the capital, Tirana was a rhizomatic city inherited from the Ottoman period that was faced with aspirations to become the country's political, economic, and cultural center while also fulfilling the utilitarian needs of governmental administration. Thus, different political regimes have consistently utilized the city to display power and reinforce dominance. Under Ahmet Zogu's rule (1922–1939), planning

[19] Mads Mordhorst, "Nation Branding and Nationalism", in Stefan Berger and Thomas Fetzer, eds., *Nationalism and the Economy: Explorations into a Neglected Relationship*, Budapest: Central European University Press, 2019, pp. 189–208.

initiatives set the stage for major projects during the Italian occupation (1939–1943), when fascist colonial aspirations were evident in implementing professional planning and architecture to project a Western aesthetic in the capital. The cosmic axis designed by Armando Brasini, a boulevard that cuts across the old town, is where the history of planning in Tirana begins. This axis laid the ground for a city structured around a central spine that became the stage for political manifestations of the powerful and the powerless, a function that continues today. This planning pattern emphasized progress, hygienics, and Westernization, often at the expense of minor agencies and the organic, rhizomatic capacities of the city to develop autonomously.

In Tirana and other cities of Albania, the Italians established a pattern of colonial control over the territory. They established power relations through urban planning and architecture, which persisted into the subsequent period of state socialism. Despite its opposing ideology, Hoxha's state-socialist regime (1944–1991) continued to reinforce these power dynamics within the city. Extensive interventions were conducted, using architecture to influence human consciousness, demonstrate progress, and, at least in the first years, break away from tradition, including in spatial terms. The regime aimed to transform the city for the socialist utopian ideal of the new human being as the City for the New Man. During nearly five decades of state socialism, the built environment in Albania evolved through various phases and directions, and discussions about political revisionism played a significant role in these developments.

During the era of Socialist Realism, Albanian architecture found itself initially leaning toward several styles, starting with

Stalinist classicism, a reflection of the country's alignment with the Soviet Union during what some termed the Soviet-Albanian Honeymoon (1948–1955).[20] This period saw the development of significant large-scale industrial projects and concerted efforts toward acculturation with the Soviet model. Notably, many Albanian Soviet-trained experts—including architects like Gani Strazimiri, Sokrat Mosko, Besim Daja, Eqerem Dobi, and Koço Miho—returned to contribute to the country's technological advancement.[21] However, after Stalin died in 1953 and Hoxha diverged from Khruschev's so-called revisionism, architecture shifted towards a more standardized and functionalistic form of socialist realism (without naming it modernism, since the leadership associated it with Western bourgeois culture).

Revisionism in state socialist Albania was a political term referring to the divergence from the original principles and ideology of Marxism-Leninism, particularly as applied in the context of the Albanian Party of Labor (Partia e Punës e Shqipërisë or PPSh) under the leadership of Enver Hoxha. In 1960–61, a split occurred within the international communist movement, with the Soviet Union and its allies pursuing a policy of peaceful coexistence with the capitalist world. Hoxha and his supporters in Albania criticized this approach as a betrayal of Marxist principles and a deviation from the revolutionary path. Hoxha and the Albanian Party of Labor accused the Soviet

[20] CIA Paper "Soviet-Albanian Relations, 1940–1960 (Reference Title: ESAU XIX-62)", CIA Central Intelligence Agency, 22 June 1962, pp. 12–15.
[21] Elidor Mëhilli, *From Stalin to Mao: Albania and the Socialist World*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017, p. 163; Elidor Mëhilli, "Kryeqyteti dhe Pushteti", *Përpjekja* nos. 34–35, 2016, pp. 83–108.

Union, at the time led by Nikita Khrushchev, of embracing revisionism. They argued that the Soviet leadership had abandoned the principles of class struggle, proletarian revolution, and internationalism in favor of collaborating with capitalist powers and compromising ideological principles. They denounced the Soviet Union and its allies, labeling them as "revisionists" and "social imperialists". The Albanian-Soviet split was a prolonged period of gradually deteriorating relations that started in 1956 and continued until 1961, with the full break from the Soviet Union and many others in the Eastern Bloc, who were accused of revisionism and collaboration with Western imperialism. Subsequently, Albania turned to the People's Republic of China, establishing a fruitful alliance that lasted until Mao Zedong's death in 1978, although relations between the two countries had already begun to cool in the early 1970s. Meanwhile, in the late 1960s and early 70s, there was a period of relative cultural liberalization, during which time expressions of Western modernist influences were more tolerated in different forms of art and architecture. The liberal period, however, ended abruptly in 1973 due to the sharp directives of the Fourth Plenum, followed by the beginning of the Sino-Albanian split that was finalized in 1978. The Albanian leaders posed the same accusation of revisionism against their last big ally, the People's Republic of China. What is known as Albania's Ideological and Cultural Revolution was a party-state-led radical campaign in the late 1960s that aimed to reshape Albanian society to align more closely with Marxist-Leninist principles while fighting pre-socialist culture, religion, and traditional social structures, replacing them with a new socialist culture that was deeply loyal

to the Party of Labor of Albania. As Ylber Marku shows, this was a way to create a new generation of loyalists after continuously purging those in ideologically shaky positions.[22] Albania entered a phase of almost full autarchy and the curtailment of various freedoms, including religious freedom. Resistance to revisionism was manifested by a more hardline, nationalist stance taken by Enver Hoxha and the Albanian Party of Labor.

In 1968, the figure of Skanderbeg was employed as the first signal of an impending nationalistic turn in the country's ideological compass. Skanderbeg is the symbol of resistance and unity against Ottoman occupation. He successfully led a rebellion against the Ottoman Empire from 1443 to 1468 while unifying various Albanian tribes and maintaining Albanian autonomy during Ottoman control in the Balkans. He was a feudal lord and is also seen as a symbol of points of connection with the Western world, as he was a Christian leader from the North of Albania, opposing a Muslim empire. For Hoxha, who had already taken an extensive campaign against so-called backward customs and religion in 1967, the religious aspect of the figure of Skanderbeg seemed to be less important than the unifying component. Furthermore, Skanderbeg's legacy of Western associations reaffirmed the European identity of the Albanians. He had already inspired the Albanian National Awakening in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Hoxha emphasized Skanderbeg's figure as an object of glorification

[22] Ylber Marku, "Socialism in Action: Albania's Ideological and Cultural Revolution and the Lessons from History", *Art Studies* vol. 21, 2022, pp. 39–87.

amidst a continuous process of revising history through the ideological lens of the regime, highlighting historical figures that were deemed useful and purging others.

The statue of Skanderbeg was placed in the central square of Tirana in 1968 on the 500th anniversary of his death. It replaced Stalin's statue, which was moved to a different location (still auspicious, but not in the city's center), and from that time on the area was named Skanderbeg Square. Ardian Vehbiu interprets Hoxha's utilization of the figure of Skanderbeg in his book-length essay *Kulla e Sahatit* (*The Clock Tower*):

> "The equestrian statue of Skanderbeg in Tirana was a belated tribute to our national hero, but it simultaneously acted as a sign of the normalization of the Albanian capital as a European city; in the sense of 'us too'. This becomes clearer if we consider the extraordinary circumstances in 1968 when the statue was placed in Tirana—it was the years of Albania's isolationism, fear of a possible invasion from the Warsaw Treaty and the epilogue of the 'revolutionization' of life in the country. Even the fact that a monument dedicated to a medieval feudal lord who had fought, among other things, for Christianity and the Pope of Rome, took Stalin's place, attests to the dramatic turn of events, or the re-orientation of the Hoxha regime towards nationalism."[23]

Monuments bearing national symbols and buildings designed to evoke nationalistic identities began to emerge. Later, after his death, the statue of Hoxha was positioned on the other

[23] Ardian Vehbiu, *Kulla e Sahatit*, Tirana: Çabej, 2018, p. 23.

side of the square, with the National Historical Museum adjacent to it.

As stated in the quote by Vehbiu, 1968 marked the beginning of what is commonly recognized as a period of self-isolation. From this period on, the communist ideology turned inwards, becoming closely intertwined with nationalist ideology. Contrary to this common perception, some scholars maintain that Albania did not aim for self-isolation, although it was widely perceived as such. In reality, Albania sought to restore relationships with neighboring countries such as Yugoslavia, Greece, and particularly Romania.[24] Following the Soviet attack on Czechoslovakia in 1968, Albania and Romania shared a common fear of being forced into colonialist relationships with the major political and economic powers of the Western *and* Eastern blocs. By 1975, Albania had established diplomatic relations with 67 governments worldwide, including North Vietnam, North Korea, and the Royal Government of Cambodia. However, these countries were not economically powerful enough to support Albania's economy, which continued to deteriorate.[25] Hoxha's regime was clear in its position against Western imperialism and different forms of socialist imperialism, such as Soviet and Chinese socialist revisionism and even Eurocommunism.[26] The breakup with major geopolitical powers automatically placed

[24] F. B. Singleton, "Albania and Her Neighbours: The End of Isolation", *The World Today* vol. 31, no. 9, Sept. 1975, pp. 383–90.

[25] See also: Mentor Beqa, "A Critique of the Concept of Isolationism: The Case of Albania", *European Academic Research* vol. 4, no. 12, 2017, pp. 10705–10715.

[26] Enver Hoxha, *Eurocommunism Is Anti-Communism*, Tirana: The Institute Of Marxist-Leninist Studies at the CC of the PLA, 8 Nëntori, 1980.

Albania in a position of political, economic, and cultural marginality. Nevertheless, the regime's loyalty to Stalinist ideological principles and the praxis of party-state rule reinforced the centralization of power. It maintained totalitarian control through a combination of state terror, political repression, purges, and personality cult.

Notably, the final phase of the totalitarian regime, initiated by the infamous Fourth Plenum in June 1973, saw a resurgence of nationalist and folkloric symbolism in architectural designs alongside other artistic fields. This marked the socialist nationalistic wave in Albania, unfolding during the late stage of the totalitarian state socialist regime, characterized by a state-driven, inwardly-focused nationalism. Enver Hoxha used nationalism as a tool to consolidate his grip on power during this moment of internal and external challenges to his authority.

The post-1973 fight against Western modernist influences unfolded as a severe critique towards architectural professionals and artists in other fields. A number of architects were accused of liberal, formalist, and modernist influences, including Sokrat Mosko for his design of the Fier cine club, Petraq Kolevica for the library of Korça, Koço Çomi for the palace of culture in Saranda, Maurizio Bego for the extension of the Fine Arts Institute in Tirana, and Maks Velo for the residential building known as the Building with Cubes (*Pallati me kuba*) and the ATSH building. Maks Velo faced the harshest punishment, being sentenced to ten years in prison, of which he served seven. Petraq Kolevica, on the other hand, was sent to be re-educated "close to the working class people". Both architects have left extensive autobiographic works detailing their experience of being

persecuted under the regime for pursuing creative freedom in their professional practice.[27]

As a crucial component of Albania's broader cultural and artistic landscape of this period, architecture was driven to pursue a distinct national identity. The aesthetic directives of the authoritarian regime guided this endeavor. At this point, the Party-State adopted a revisionist twist for the sake of anti-revisionism in the Socialist world. Initially, Albania's socialist regime had dismissed tradition as backward, particularly during its early, most progressive phase, which brought significant changes to the state's foundational core and socio-cultural structuring of the country. However, Enver Hoxha and his regime's ideological and aesthetic administrators revised their position on tradition, suggesting that folklore should serve as the cradle of future artistic and architectural inspiration. This shift also redefined socialist realism, which had been practiced for over two decades.

The turn in architecture at this moment (as in the other arts) is expressed with folkloric decorations while aiming to maintain the Stalinist motto, "socialist in content and national in form". As Hoxha stated:

> "… But for us, the tradition is not only the powerful tradition of the patriotic literature of the National Awakening, of the progressive democratic and revolutionary literature of pre-liberation, but also the already thirty-year-

[27] Petraq Kolevica, *Arkitektura dhe Diktatura*, Tirana: Marin Barleti, 1997; Maks Velo, *Paralel me arkitekturën*, Tirana: Librat "Njeriu", 1998. See also Dritan Miço, "When 'Words Fall on Deaf Ears': An Outline of Albania's Socialist Architecture", *Studies in History and Theory of Architecture* no. 1, 2013, pp. 45–59.

old very rich and diverse tradition of our socialist realist literature and art."[28]

Hoxha himself was deeply invested in dictating nationalistic and native guidelines for architectural expression in Albania. In his extensive writings, he criticized the field of architecture for lagging behind in developing an authentic Albanian architectural style and provided explicit directives on what he expected from the architects. Many buildings across Albania were designed to have a folkloric or nationalistic touch. The most pronounced examples of this nationalistic turn in architecture are two museum buildings, the National History Museum in the central square of Tirana and the Skanderbeg Museum of Kruja. Architects were instructed to be modest in their architectural expression, avoiding extravagance even in monumental buildings, but to make sure to include folkloric elements.

Regarding the project of the National History Museum, Hoxha wrote extensively on the conceptualization of the building, including the program and the arrangement of its compartments. (**Fig. 1**) He positioned himself as the supreme author of the history of the Albanian people, including a revolutionary understanding of how his own regime came to power.[29] In the first written document in 1977 on the design of the building, he uses a more suggestive yet critical tone towards

[28] Enver Hoxha, "Të thellojmë luftën ideologjike kundër shfaqjeve të huaja e qëndrimeve liberale ndaj tyre", in *Mbi Letërsinë dhe Artin*, Tiranë: Shtëpia Botuese "8 Nëntori", 1977, pp. 375–443.

[29] Enver Hoxha, "Disa mendime rreth materialit për Muzeun Historik Kombëtar dhe për Monumentin e Lirisë", in Enver Hoxha, *Vepra 62, July 1977–November 1977*, Tirana: Shtëpia Botuese "8 Nëntori", 1988, pp. 1–12.

the proposals the architects had offered to him. However, in the follow-up discussion one year later in the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the APL he is more assertive, as reflected already in the title of his speech: "The museum must have an entirely national character". After having a detailed discussion on the interior of the building, he then addresses the façade, looking at it as an opportunity to intervene in Skanderbeg Square, which until that point was missing a national touch besides the presence of the Skanderbeg statue:

> "… Then comes the matter of the façade. This too must have a national character, because the other two buildings that are here [facing the square], such as the Grand Hotel and the Palace of Culture, do not reflect this need; but even the Bank's building has no national character. Therefore, everything must be adapted to our national architecture and art. I cannot say anything concrete now about how this can be realized, but our architects, painters and sculptors have done studies, they have also published large albums and, from what I've seen, in these creations by them, I have noticed that they have managed to bring out the authentic, national characteristic. Their task now is to try to find some of the most typical national characteristics from the hundreds of specific data they have extracted, and to then reflect them with the language of art on the façade of this museum."[30]

The façade of the National Museum features a large mosaic depicting the historical glory of the Albanian people. The mosaic

[30] Enver Hoxha, "Muzeu duhet të ketë tërësisht karakter kombëtar", in Enver Hoxha, *Vepra 63, December 1977– March 1978*, Tirana: Shtëpia Botuese "8 Nëntori", 1988, pp. 338–341 (p. 339).

itself has been the subject of revisionism in 1993, with symbols of the communist period erased, showing that the rewriting of history is an ongoing process. Skanderbeg Square, in the center of Tirana, has been a place of ideological accommodations, and it continues to fulfill that function, as I will argue when exploring its contemporary context later in this text. The square has been a stage for theatricality and the semiotics of power, through demolitions and (re)constructions, as well as the placement or displacement of statues of political figures, national heroes, and Hoxha himself. Notably, Hoxha's statue (inaugurated after his death) once stood in front of the National Museum, a building he participated in designing and where he asserted his authorship over the history of the Albanian People.

Another example of a nationalistic expression in architecture is the "Gjergj Kastrioti Skanderbeg" Museum in Kruja, inaugurated in 1982, one year after the inauguration of the National History Museum. (**Fig. 2**) The museum was designed to showcase the myth of Skanderbeg within Kruja's Castle, the site of his legendary activities. The design, inspired by the medieval style, aimed to evoke the era of Skanderbeg's victories. The project involved a team of historians led by Kristo Frashëri, sculptors led by Odhise Paskali, and a group of architects headed by Pranvera Hoxha, Enver Hoxha's daughter. The museum was intended to present Skanderbeg as a triumphant strategic leader, serving as a symbol of liberation of the Albanian people from the occupation.[31]

The pursuit of a nationalistic style in architecture persisted

[31] Ylli Drishti, *National Museum Gjergj Kastrioti Skanderbeg, Kruja*, Tirana: AlbPaper, 2012.

after Hoxha's death, and the Enver Hoxha Museum, inaugurated in 1988, could be considered the culmination of these endeavors. (**Fig. 3**) Designed again by a selected team of architects led by Klement Kolaneci, Hoxha's son-in-law, the building's aim was to host a museum that would exhibit the dictator's illustrious life. The intention of the designers was to erect a building that, from the bird's eye view, would resemble a stylized double-headed eagle, a symbol that stands in the center of the Albanian flag. The building became popularly known as the Pyramid of Tirana because of its perceived shape by the public.

V. A new wave of state-nationalism in Albania?

With the totalitarian regime's collapse in 1991, Albania became more open to the outside world, and foreign influences—previously banned—flooded the country. After the exposure to focused and prolonged nationalist propaganda from the state-socialist regime, and the struggle for freedom, a sense of disdain for their own country and culture would emerge among Albanians. This was driven by a thirst to enter into contact with other cultures after the traumatic experience of enforced borders, when leaving or entering the country was strictly prohibited, except for a few carefully screened cases. The fall of the regime was associated with an exodus of desperate people fleeing the country. Sometimes, a need to suppress the Albanian identity manifested particularly among immigrants in Italy or Greece, who felt compelled to hide their own origins due to the stigma of Albano-phobia perpetuated by the media of the time.[32] While this

[32] Julie Vullnetari, *Albania on the Move: Links between Internal and International Migration*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012.

situation has somewhat improved in the neighboring countries where a new generation of Albanians are more integrated into their adopted societies—although no one has calculated the price of assimilation—the stigma and singling out of the Albanian ethnicity continues in other countries like the United Kingdom, perpetrated by right-wing politicians.[33]

With several waves of immigration continuing and the Albanian government facing ongoing criticism, efforts to lift the nation's spirit with pride, unity, and optimism make sense. It is important, however, to distinguish between patriotism and appreciation of one's own culture, and the problematic aspects of hetero-patriarchal and ethno-homogenous nationalism. It is of particular interest to observe how attempts to use nationalistic rhetoric are being re-applied from the top down in Albanian society, especially as this occurs within a newly consolidated neoliberal regime, which differs substantially from the previous state socialist one. While both periods are characterized by the awareness of an outside gaze while addressing the domestic population, in contemporary times, there is significantly more weight given to this external gaze. A focus on nation branding, aimed at appealing to global tourists and conveying political

[33] For more on the xenophobic attitude towards a single ethnicity, see Lea Ypi, "We Albanians Are Just the Latest Scapegoats for Britain's Failing Ideological Project", *The Guardian*, 4 November 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/nov/04/albanians-scapegoats-britain-failing-ideological-project-invaders [last accessed: 21 August 2024]. See also: "Albanian Migrants in the UK: Why They Have Been Vilified", *ABC Listen*, 21 August 2023, https://www.abc.net.au/listen/programs/latenightlive/vilification-of-albanian-migrants-in-the-uk-lea-ypi/102757132 [last accessed: 21 August 2024].

messages to the European Union, appears to be at the forefront of the current nationalist shift.

Over the past two decades, several cities in Albania, and particularly Tirana, have undergone fundamental makeovers. Many star architects have been involved in development projects commissioned through non-transparent processes, seemingly based on the preferences of the Prime Minister (Edi Rama) and other people around him. During this period, marked by the consolidation of a neoliberal regime in Albania within a crony capitalist context, several architectural interventions were implemented—mostly in the capital city but also in other cities—under the umbrella of a controversial state initiative known as *Rilindja Urbane* (Urban Renaissance).[34] Already here, there is a reference to the Albanian National Awakening (which, in Albanian, used the same term: *Rilindja Kombëtare*) as an illuminating and unifying moment in the country's history. As a state-led transformation of many urban areas throughout Albania, this initiative aimed to improve the infrastructure, enhance the livability of public space, promote tourism, and generate economic development. Beyond its glorious portrayal in the pro-government media, this initiative has employed public-private partnerships as its main mechanism of operation within a corrupt system, lacking transparency and shrinking or erasing the role of local communities in urban planning and decision-making while

[34] *Rilindja* (Renaissance) is the political platform generated within the Socialist Party by Edi Rama when he took over the Party's leadership. Through the platform of the Renaissance, he came into power as Prime Minister with the promise to transform the country. For more on Urban Renaissance projects see https://birn.eu.com/outputs/birn-albania-launches-urban-renaissance-database/ [last accessed: 21 August 2024].

instrumentalizing star architects to intimidate a locally led debate on the projects.[35] After a decade of implementation, the effects of these interventions—including gentrification and the displacement of long-term inhabitants—are clearly visible in urban reality. Some investigative journalists and media outlets have reported on the controversies and potential conflicts of interest within the Urban Renaissance projects, where private greed is closely tied to central and local governance.

The populist use of Albanian national symbols has manifested in many concept renderings by international architectural firms engaged in new design projects. For example, the first publicly presented renderings of the much-contested new National Theater designed by the Danish architectural firm BIG overtly displayed the Albanian flag. This project has been recognized as an instrument for the demolition of the former National Theater (which took place in 2020), to grab and repurpose its public land for private commercial high-rise developmental constructions (while using only one third of the existing land for the new theater). This project exemplifies the

[35] A public-private partnership (PPP) is an arrangement between a governmental body and a private sector company to finance, design, build and manage a project or service that would otherwise be provided by the public sector. In the PPP, the private sector assumes some financial, technical or operational risk in exchange for the potential profit it might make from the project. The public sector might gain some of the benefits of the private sector's skills and efficiencies and its capacity to invest in new projects or services, while retaining some control over the outcomes of the project to ensure the public good is served. Public-private partnerships, or PPPs, are often criticized for the complexity, expense and opaqueness of the approach, which can be a cover for public debt, while also risking imbalanced accountability, prioritizing profit over securing the quality or affordability of the public service.

problematic public-private partnerships that have become typical of neoliberal city-making practices—partnerships that prioritize private interest over public participation in decision-making to the point of aggressively repressing collective acts of resistance. The Movement to Save the National Theater was a significant effort—lasting more than two years—by civil society, artists, activists, and opposition parties to prevent the government's plan to demolish the historic building. Despite these persistent efforts and significant public opposition, the government proceeded with the demolition in the early hours of 17 May 2020, after forcibly removing activists from the site and the building.[36] While images of police brutality were being disseminated, the Albanian and international public were simultaneously presented with renderings of the new National Theater by BIG, prominently featuring the Albanian national flag flying atop the nearby building, or being carried by the theater's users, such as artists on stage, people gathered in front of the building, or even just passers by. The overuse of the national flag in these images seemed intended to distract from the violence of the demolition, and convey that these actions were being carried out in the name

[36] For more on the National Theater see: Dorina Pllumbi, "Commoning as a Material Engagement of Resistance: The Struggle to Save the Albanian National Theater", in Gerhard Bruyns and Stavros Kousoulas, eds., *Design Commons: Practices, Processes and Crossovers*, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2022, pp. 19–43, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-95057-6_2 [last accessed: 21 August 2024]. See also Raino Isto, "'Monument of Culture, Protected by the People': Destruction, Resistance, and Counter-Heritage in the Case of the National Theater of Albania", *Passés Futurs* vol. 13, June 2023, https://www.politika.io/fr/article/monument-of-culture-protected-by-the-people-destruction-resistance-and-counterheritage-in [last accessed: 21 August 2024].

of patriotism and love for the country.

Another mode of nation branding involves incorporating symbolic folkloric motifs into public spaces. These motifs are evident in the design of public squares and pedestrian areas, such as those in the *Pazari i Ri* project intervention in the heart of Tirana's old town, which catalyzed gentrification and touristification in the area. This trend extends beyond Tirana to projects all over Albania—as, for example, in the "Albanian Carpet" project by Casanova + Hernandez in Shirokë, Shkodër, completed in 2020, featuring similar folkloric designs.

Several recent projects have been developed with a similar but even more amplified aesthetics, blending neoliberal practices with a new wave of nationally-themed architecture. A notable example is the makeover of the National Stadium in 2019, which was designed by the Italian firm Archea Associati. The intervention was much-debated because of the over-commodification of the building with numerous commercial spaces and, above all, a 110-meter-high tower that includes a luxury hotel. Representing a shift towards neoliberal policies in the city, the building reflects the prioritization of commercial interests over public space and community needs, combined with a process that does not allow for transparency, highlighting deficiencies in the democratic process and authoritarian governance. While this is clearly evident, and the use of national symbols can be understandable in a national stadium because of the status football has gained, there is another interesting merging of symbolisms that the building accomplishes in the city. The façade of the building carries in its panels the red and black colors of the national flag while often merging them with the color

purple that has become synonymous with the Socialist Party (currently led by Rama), blurring the lines between national pride and political propaganda.

Several high-rise buildings had already been introduced in the 2004 plan for the center of Tirana, known as the French Plan, as it was developed by the competition winner Paris-based Architecture Studio (during the time that Rama was mayor of the capital). The masterplan—which did not include nationalistic or folkloric elements—proposed surrounding the central Skanderbeg Square with high-rise buildings, as a sort of background or second plane for what was inherited from the previous regime. The last ten years have seen an intensification of the construction of these high-rise buildings, known as *kulla* in Albanian, marking the Manhattanizing of the center of Tirana, often erasing its inherited urban fabric and prior scale.[37]

Similar to Hoxha's obsession with repeatedly returning to and revising history while purging and redefining enemies more than allies, Prime Minister Rama has found a great new interest in historical semiotics. Winy Maas, one of the founders of the well-known Dutch firm MVRDV and one of Rama's close collaborators and favorite architects, shares anecdotes about Rama's interests in his lecture "What's next?" given to the students of the AA School of Architecture in May 2018. "I want to do something with history", the Albanian PM shared with Maas. Later, Maas asks, "What kind of history? […] What do we add? Can architects contribute to that or it becomes too Disney?

[37] The positioning and number of new towers would often deviate the French Plan approved two decades ago, but most of them were already assigned where they would be placed.

[There is t]he question of how far can we go?"[38] Although hesitant, as we understand from their dialogue, the architects actually went quite far, making use of the freedom of creation enjoyed by foreign architects and artists in Albania, a privilege that their local counterparts do not have.

The most pronounced examples of Albania's latest national turn in architecture are the high-rise buildings Downtown One Tirana and Skanderbeg Tower, both designed by MVRDV. These projects employ a new, conspicuous scheme of nationalistic architecture through oligarchic private investments. The use of Americanized names for these projects confirms that they are part of a nation-branding strategy focused more on outward appeal than the inward impact on local communities. In relation to this, in the previously mentioned lecture, Maas shared that he had even discussed with European politicians about MVRDV's intended projects in Albania. He goes on by saying: "Is nationalism something good or bad? But Albania needs it, to show, and it's sexy in that way. That can be actually quite cool. This is a European project."[39]

Downtown One Tirana is promoted as a 140-meter mixed-use luxury tower, the tallest in Albania. (**Fig. 4**) Aiming to give the city an iconic building that features on its façade a "pixelated map" of Albania (rendered in relief), it is marketed as creating a vertical village, imagining the inhabitants communicating on the façade across the different floors. This development replaced a

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[38] *What's next? – Winy Maas, MVRDV*. Directed by AA School of Architecture, 2018. *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zBLbIH3wYkU [last accessed: 21 August 2024].
[39] Ibid.

well-known playground where previous generations of Tirana's children have joyful memories. It is otherwise unclear how this building will contribute to the inhabitants of the city of Tirana, except for the richest who can access it and jobs in the construction industry. Creating new jobs is often cited as the typical neoliberal justification for investments of this kind, in a society where inequalities are deepening at a rapid pace and construction workers are leaving the country in high numbers.

The Skanderbeg building is, thus far, the peak of bold and spectacular nationalistic expression in Tirana, where MVRDV has gone quite far with "doing something with history". (**Figs. 5–7**) This 85-meter-tall high-rise in the heart of Tirana is shaped like the head of Albania's national hero, Skanderbeg, its face turned toward the Skanderbeg plaza. Aiming to make a bold statement on the city's skyline, MVRDV claims to have given Tirana a powerful symbol of national pride and identity. The building aligns with the new wave of neoliberal architecture and its effects on the city's financialization, commercialization, and touristification. It is perhaps the ultimate symbol of neoliberal nationalist architecture, aiming to play a significant role in nation branding efforts. Interestingly enough, within this volumetric and financial game that is unfolding in the square, Skanderbeg's figure appears again, as if Albania's leader needs to call on Skanderbeg for help to bless yet another regime, the authoritarianism of commodification.

With the aim of making Albania part of the EU and with the rise in the number of expat communities in Tirana, Rama is striking a difficult and problematic balance between fostering a strong national identity and promoting global citizenship. Efforts

to promote both can lead to mixed messages and confusion. One could argue that, in order to differentiate his nationalistic expression from what he once considered primitive Balkan nationalism, he might be trying to showcase a hybrid form of what is known as neoliberal nationalism as a way to reconcile forms of nationalism and cosmopolitanism, which are argued to be problematic and contradictory, as they are grounded in different philosophical foundations. The continuation of the theatricality of the city's center (especially Skanderbeg Square) under a different regime and on a different domestic and geopolitical scale, is now aiming to function as a technique for nation branding through the only product of the Albanian economy at the moment: the construction industry, which in turn is put in the service of tourism and the real estate market.

Scholars argue that nationalism is often a strategy deployed by autocratic rulers to maintain control over their power—which in Rama's case is shared with a newly created economic elite of so-called strategic investors, the Albanian oligarchs. Up to a certain point, Rama maintained a favored group of Albanian investors while employing foreign architects, but we now see a shift in that tendency as well.[40] Rama is aiming to go global, attracting strategic foreign investors as well, and that is where national branding becomes all the more important.[41]

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[40] Daniel Göler and Dimitër Doka, "Busting the Scales: From Small-Scale Informal to Investor-Driven Urban Developments. The Case of Tirana/Albania", *Annals of the Austrian Geographical Society* vol. 162, 2020, pp. 65–90.

[41] An upcoming big investment is the Durrës Yacht & Marina masterplan to be developed by the global scale real estate company Emaar Properties, which developed the contested Belgrade Waterfront. Another one is the project that

VI. The Duck Nationalism of Rama and MVRDV

The straightforward and bold symbolism utilized in recent nationalistic projects immediately brings to mind the term "duck architecture" to anyone in the field of architectural theory. In the abstract of a presentation entitled "Neonationalist architecture in Albania: A postsocialist syndrome", Gjergji Islami and Denada Veizaj, two professors in the Faculty of Architecture at the public Polytechnic University of Tirana, raise the question of whether this nationalist turn in architectural objects in Albania is "powered by the cultural traces of socialism and their political use? Or are they a variation on the theme of duck architecture?"[42] To elaborate on this question, I will discuss what the term "duck architecture" entails, and how it actually relates to the dynamics of the nationalistic turn during the consolidation of the existing neoliberal regime in Albania.

The term "duck architecture" was coined by architectural critics and theorists Denise Scott Brown, Robert Venturi, and Steven Izenour in their renowned work on postmodernist

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turns Sazan Island into an area exclusively for luxury tourism, which will be developed by the company of Jared Kushner, the son-in-law of former US president Donald Trump. Other extractive projects met with strong environmental activism, such as the construction of hydro plants in several wild rivers like Valbona, Zall Gjoçaj, and the most famous intended interventions on the Vjosa River, now declared a national park. Similarly, critics see the management of archeological sites through partnerships with private NGOs as examples of selling off the country's assets.

[42] Gjergji Islami and Denada Veizaj, "Neonationalist Architecture in Albania: A Postsocialist Syndrome", *Chronicles of Ever-changing Cityscapes: AACCP 2022, 24–25–26 November, Polytechnic University of Tirana, Albania (Book of Abstracts)*, pp. 45–46: https://aaccp2022.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/book_of_abstracts_aaccp2022_single_page.pdf [last accessed: 24 September 2024].

architecture, *Learning from Las Vegas*.[43] It originates from a famous building, which is now listed on the United States National Register of Historic Places: the "Big Duck" on Long Island, New York. This building was a roadside construction in the shape of a duck, serving as a shop selling duck-related products, including duck eggs and poultry. It is an example of architecture that captures motorists' attention and contributes to a memorable and distinctive stand-out identity for the business it hosts. The architecture itself here becomes a form of advertising, attracting curiosity about the products, a tool to boost consumerism. Other buildings of similar style can be identified, especially in the American architectural scene, such as a hot dog stand shaped like a giant hot dog or a coffee shop in the form of a coffee pot. Therefore, "duck architectures" are constructions designed purposefully as an exaggerated representation of their function, emphasizing symbolism and direct communication. They convey their function directly and without ambiguity to the viewer, aiming to capture their attention by all means.

The controversial Las Vegas study—which has been both praised and criticized—was one of the most influential critiques of modernist architecture at the time, and it is associated with theorizing the postmodernist style in 1970s American architecture and beyond. The architects focus on extracting knowledge from the consumeristic and commodified reality of Las Vegas; they refuse to adopt a moralizing tone and recognize this American desert city as a vernacular, popular, and commercial reality. Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour advocate

[43] Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, 2nd edition, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977.

for complexity, contradiction, and the inclusion of vernacular and commercial architecture, considering the culture of consumption of the image as worthy of attention. They argue that we can learn from this culture as architecture moves towards future engagements with digital technology, where signs and symbolism come back to have an important role within urbanities, a role that they had lost during modernism.

As a result of their observation, they differentiate two types of architecture that stand in binary opposition when it comes to their role in the perception of a place. On the one hand, the "decorated shed" stands as an "ordinary building" with a sign that expresses its function. This kind of architecture is ubiquitous in the Las Vegas Strip, where signs are overused as added promotional information to attract the attention of visitors. Opposite this stands "duck architecture", which is the extreme case when the building itself serves as a giant decoration; the use of the term was pejorative rather than celebratory. The authors' critique of this kind of architecture concerns its lack of architectural integrity because of its kitschy or cartoonish appearance, while such buildings also create interior spaces that are hard to use functionally. Nevertheless, duck architecture is recognized as highly communicative with the public, employing the spectacular feature of a sort of theatricality of commerce.

However, Aron Vinegar's analysis in *I Am a Monument: On Learning from Las Vegas* questions whether Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour's study truly escapes the limitations of modernist thought, or merely reformulates them while perpetuating certain cultural and economic hierarchies. He critiques the simplified dichotomy of "duck" vs. "decorated

shed", and encourages a more nuanced and context-sensitive approach to architecture.[44]

With this said, we could argue that the Skanderbeg building is certainly a pop commercial building that has facets of duck architecture and should be subject to a more context-sensitive interpretation. In contrast with other duck architecture examples—where the sculptural building would directly indicate what is being sold inside—the Skanderbeg building does not attract customers in order to sell them anything in relation to the history of Skanderbeg inside the building (unless some future changes alter the building's function). The building, as explained on the MVRDV website, will be mixed-use dominated by luxury apartments. Boosterism promoting the real estate market in Tirana is what the duck national architecture is actually being used to sell. In the midst of financializing and commodifying the city, the nation branding enterprise enacted by Rama and his administration perfectly coincides with the function of selling the only products that Albania is trying to sell, which are tourism and real estate assets in the city. Nationalism in neoliberal times aligns with nation branding solely for that purpose: to attract the interest of the global tourist who does not have much time to spend digging further into the culture of a place, country, or nation. Instead, Skanderbeg Square turns into a sort of Las Vegas or Disneyland of spatial nationalistic spectacle and entertainment.

The Skanderbeg building's duck architecture, seemingly different from typical duck architecture, dissociates the

[44] Aron Vinegar, *I Am a Monument: On Learning from Las Vegas*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008.

symbolism of the façade from the functionality of the interior. This is also because it aims to communicate more with the public in the plaza, who—apparently—are the global tourist customers that the PM is trying to persuade.

When analyzing the Las Vegas Strip, the experience of the space and its scale are guided by the fast-paced movement of a car. The authors of *Learning from Las Vegas* observed the dismantling of the idea and size of the classical Italian piazza, and the emergence of the stretch of Las Vegas Boulevard South, which is experienced at a higher speed while driving. According to Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour, the interplay of scale and speed makes the signs and the easily graspable spectacle important and relevant.[45]

The discussion of scale is crucial as well when examining Skanderbeg Square. From its conceptualization during the Italian colonial period, when the piazza was first established, through the communist era, significant transformations took place. The demolition of the old bazaar to construct the Palace of Culture, the building of the National Museum, and the consecutive addition and removal of the statues of Stalin, Skanderbeg, and Hoxha have all contributed to the unsettling conditions of the plaza. The post-1990s era started with the toppling of the dictator's statue, followed by a period when cars dominated the space, which had previously been an enormous void in the city center. Amidst numerous debates about the square's future, the project developed as a collaboration between Rama's selected Belgian architectural firm 51N4E and his artist collaborator Anri

[45] Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*.

Sala seems to establish a stable vision of the space.[46] Analysts of architectural composition have always raised concerns about the disproportionately large square's size. The surrounding low-rise buildings failed to serve as proper urban walls. While the newly built high-rises around the piazza now spatially enhance its established scale, they also create an environment where the human experience can feel diminished, making visitors feel small. However, the size of the square has also turned it into a central position from which the visitor's eye can engage with the volumetric skyline that now surrounds it.

The Skanderbeg building reinforces the enhanced size of the square, where the national hero is now aggrandized alongside the many other high rises that surround the square. Following the logic of Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour, the square has transitioned from the scale of a conventional piazza that was intended by the initial Italian designers (but that was never realized as such) to a massive space that competes for the attention of global tourists. The tourist experience is designed to be consumed quickly, akin to Disneyland, wherein the country's culture is packaged and immediately delivered before tourists catch their next flight. The image needs to be iconic, contributing to nation branding through the figure of a national hero who gestures toward European identity, famously fighting the Ottoman Turks in the 15th century. The figure of Skanderbeg once again functions to univocally reinforce the idea that Albanians are incontrovertibly Europeans and deserve to be accepted as such, clarifying the doubts of any visitors who might

[46] Marson Korbi, "The Return of the Piazza: Tirana, and the Politics of Urban Renaissance", *OASE* no. 115, 2023, pp. 108–24.

hold Orientalist views of the majority Muslim country. Nation branding through the figure of Skanderbeg is utilized to establish an Albanian identity that matches European acceptance, getting rid of the richness of Albanian involvement with the Eastern and Middle Eastern world.

These features of the duck architecture employed by MVRDV, while satisfying and accommodating the Prime Minister's desire to "do something with history", seem to present a playful understanding of nationalism—a topic with many stigmas throughout the region's history, as previously discussed. This is not the first time that MVRDV has casually neglected Albania's contextually sensitive histories, as in the case of their recent project for the Pyramid building.[47] With the Skanderbeg building, they have pushed the practice further by framing Albanian nationalism as another possible commodity, which, apparently, within the elite sphere, seems "to be sexy", according to Winy Maas.[48] Attempting to sell nationalism as a condensed package within Albania's rich and diverse history of fluctuating identities—a place where cultural influences meet and interweave—is a profoundly reductionist intervention. Albanian culture is far more nuanced than that, as Albanians have continuously experienced a morphing identity and have

[47] Dorina Pllumbi, "Outrage: the unwilding of the Pyramid of Tirana", *Architectural Review*, 19 May 2021, https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/outrage/outrage-the-unwilding-of-the-pyramid-of-tirana [last accessed: 21 August 2024].

[48] *What's next? – Winy Maas, MVRDV*. Directed by AA School of Architecture, 2018. *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zBLbIH3wYkU [last accessed: 21 August 2024].

historically been materialistically open to that. If we suppose that there is something to showcase to Europe, it is the fluidity of affinities that Albanians have historically embodied by blending within diverse cultures and beliefs, something that is getting lost in the current right-leaning Europe. The attempt to homogenize and narrow all this down to the figure of the medieval national hero through architectural symbolism remains a parochial approach, regardless of the playful pop-architectural style employed to achieve it or the signature of star architects aiming to Europeanize it.

VII. Conclusion

The architecture of Albanian cities, particularly Tirana, has been a continuous interplay between power, ideology, and modern national identity throughout various political regimes. From the early 20th century, when the city was declared the capital of Albania, through the state socialist era until today, urban planning and architecture in Tirana have been utilized as tools of state control and expressions of political dominance.

Although ideologically clashing with socialism and neoliberalism, nationalism was still adopted in both regimes in Albania. Under state socialism, nationalist policies in the 1970s asserted independence while allegedly preserving socialist purity. Similarly, while nationalism and neoliberalism theoretically clash, in practice, they may converge in areas like nation branding and economic nationalism, as recently seen in 2010s Albania.

Under the state-socialist regime (1944–1991), particularly in the 1970s political turn, architects had to incorporate a

nationalistic character into the socialist architecture to reinforce the regime's ideological narrative, often formalistically. Monuments and buildings like the National History Museum and Skanderbeg Museum, from the late period of the regime, symbolize this convergence of nationalism and socialism, witnessing how architecture became a medium for projecting Albania's modern identity as a European and Socialist nation. Even after Hoxha's death in 1985, the pursuit of a socialist *and* nationalist architectural style continued until the regime's collapse. The Enver Hoxha Museum, commonly known as the Pyramid, embodies the attempt to immortalize the leader and ideology of the regime.

The 2010s marked yet another tendency to incorporate nationalistic narratives in Albania's architecture and urban transformation championed by Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama. The latest nationalistic-themed contemporary architecture unfolds as an interplay between nationalism and neoliberalism. A sense of national identity intertwined with efforts to align with European and global features has been used as a rhetoric to shape its urban landscape. However, this fusion of national pride and neoliberal strategies often serves the interests of a political and economic elite, particularly within the framework of public-private partnerships that prioritize profit over public good. Furthermore, the current wave of architectural nationalism in Albania—differing from expressions of similar trends in other Balkan cities like Skopje—comes across as playful and an expression of pop art and "duck architecture". Whereas the architecture proclaims to be progressive and playful, the nationalistic references it uses make it come out as parochial and

rigid. The use of national symbols in these developments, particularly in the context of Tirana's ongoing "Manhattanization", illustrates a broader strategy of nation branding that blurs the lines between cultural identity and political propaganda.

Interpreted as a savior of Europe from the Ottoman invasion in the 15th century, the figure of Skanderbeg has played a crucial role in asserting the European identity of Albanians for his Western-looking identity. Skanderbeg was also a key figure in Albanian Orientalism, an influential intellectual strand adopted from Western-centric thought and developed throughout the efforts to consolidate a modern European Albanian identity, starting from the Albanian National Awakening Movement and continuing until today as an attempt to "escape from the East", as coined by the Albanian Sociologist Enis Sulstarova.[49] While both political regimes (state socialist and the current neoliberal one) have capitalized on the figure of Skanderbeg for his Western-oriented identity, the glorification of the figure of Skanderbeg and national narrative in general during the 1960s and 1970s was more inward-looking, aiming to consolidate power based on domestic politics through totalitarianism. In contrast, today's new state-nationalistic politics, developed under a neoliberal regime aiming at the Albanian economy's globalization, are more preoccupied with the external fast-paced consumption of European and global tourists while perpetuating an outdated East-West dichotomy.

The recent nationalistic architecture, as exhibited in the

[49] Enis Sulstarova, *Arratisje nga Lindja: Orientalizmi shqiptar nga Naimi te Kadareja.*

recent designs by MVRDV in Tirana, namely, Downtown One Tirana (the map building) and the Skanderbeg Building, represents a troubling shift towards a reductionist and commodified form of neoliberal nationalism that reduces national identity to a series of easily marketable symbols. By distilling and hardening the Albanian identity into simplistic symbols like the heteropatriarchal figure of Skanderbeg, this architectural project overlooks the rich, fluid, and diverse cultural heritage that historically characterized the Albanian culture. Instead, they contribute to a superficial, marketable image designed to appeal to global and European tourists. In reducing national identity to a set of tropes, the neoliberal imperative for economic gain and external validation risks reducing the potential for a much more representative national imaginary.

Furthermore, very much in line with the dominant narrative of escaping from the "East" and his attempts to appeal to the European Union's leaders, Edi Rama's recent political maneuvers—including an agreement with far-right Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni to construct a detention center in Albania where African immigrants intending to enter Europe will be detained—enable him to position himself, just like Skanderbeg, as a modern guardian of European whiteness within Fortress Europe. This is yet another example of the legacy of coloniality in places like Albania, where foreign, geopolitical, and domestic politics interplay through cultural games of power and influence.

To conclude, Albanian nationalism from the 1970s to the present day reveals significant shifts in how national identity is constructed and represented. Architecture has consistently served

as an important instrument in both eras to materialize nationalistic ideas. During the 1970s, Albanian architects were both pressured and instrumentalized to follow the regime's directives. However, as we know, architects were not a homogenous group; some suffered under the regime's pressure, while others were part of the power elite. Today, while power dynamics have changed, certain patterns of silencing and instrumentalization remain similar within the local community of architects, while the star architect's figure has appeared in the context of the global market economy. Although it is claimed that they are educating the local architects, they actually reproduce the pattern of blindly serving those in power, albeit in a broader and more complex terrain.[50]

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Fig. 1. National History Museum, 1982. Source: AQTN (*Arkivi Qendror Teknik i Ndërtimit* / Central Technical Archive of Contruction)

Fig. 2. "Gjergj Kastrioti Skanderbeg" Museum in Kruja, 1982. Source AQTN (*Arkivi Qendror Teknik i Ndërtimit* / Central Technical Archive of Contruction).

Fig. 3. Enver Hoxha Museum, 1988. Source: AQTN (*Arkivi Qendror Teknik i Ndërtimit* / Central Technical Archive of Contruction).

Fig. 4. Downtown One building by MVRDV, 2024. (Photo courtesy of Ronald Qema.)

Fig. 5. Skanderbeg Tower by MVRDV, view from the front, 2024. (Photo courtesy of Dorina Pllumbi.)

Fig. 6. Skanderbeg Tower by MVRDV, view from the back, 2024. (Photo courtesy of Dorina Pllumbi.)

Fig. 7. Skanderbeg Square, 2024. Photo courtesy of Dorina Pllumbi.