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20th Century Modernisation Process and Application of Modernist Architecture in Albania

Modernisierungsprozess im 20. Jahrhundert und Anwendung der modernistischen Architektur in Albanien

ABSTRACT

Modernization is a broad socio-economic and institutional process that essentially consists of comprehensive reforms that enable the transition from a traditional to modern society. Following the developed countries of Western Europe, from the beginning of the 20th century, the process began to extend to the countries of the Western Balkans and Albania in particular. In this article, architecture, urban planning, and related developments try to shed light on the special meanings that the term 'modernism' took in Albania during the succession of totalitarian systems for over half a century.

By the beginning of the development of the new Albanian state, a certain European aspiration feeling was felt, and its early reflections were seen in the lifestyle, fashion, and the building of the cities. A new urban campaign affected almost all the Albanian cities, particularly Tirana went under transformations that aimed to turn the romantic oriental city into a new Europeanised capital. This process obviously would bring great urban transformations which are related to important historic events, in a short time by alternating diametrically different political regimes. The coexistence of architectural artefacts from both fascism and communism periods is a rare particularity of Tirana that triggers the interest for a comparative analysis of the production in the urban field and the influence that these operations had on the living society.

Although these political systems are opposite regarding the political ideology, there can be noticed many communication points regarding urban planning and architecture, and in Tirana, this is seen almost as continuity. The use of the city as support of propaganda, the politicization of the public space, the orientation of the urban planning and architecture directly by the government are the mutual characteristics of these political systems. On the other hand, the radical interventions in the city, starting from World War II, reached the peak with the communist system that was installed right in the coming years. Many facts show that the political pressure during this period was selective also towards the professionals working as architects, by suppressing and blocking any freedom of expression.

As the fascists developed a monumentalized version of rational Western architecture enriched with durable materials and symbols representing political ideology, communists in Albania did not differ a lot in this strategy. Instead, radicalism and

revolutionary actions toward the city and its actors become more and more evident. In contrast to the fascists, communists tried to block any kind of cultural communication with the Western world and manipulate any previous historical artefacts aiming for the lack of a comparative competition and resulting in an only auto reference – the socialist architecture. The poor economy and the discriminatory attitude towards professional resources seems to have weakened over time the advancement of the process of modernization, while the propagandised terminological deviations seem to have been more like a strategy to cover the defeat.

In conditions of knowledge deficiency and sometimes misinformation that characterises the literature of this period, today the scientific matters orientation regarding architecture as a single discipline, have resulted insufficient to generate a theoretical debate about the architecture of socialism. Meanwhile, a more extensive comparative approach which includes other study scopes and complementary disciplines of architecture, offers much clearer and complete conclusions, resulting in a more effective research method especially in subjects that have not been previously discussed.

Keywords: totalitarian architecture; modern architecture; modernisation; socialist – realism; transformations.

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