

The 'Undesired' Buildings of Tirana

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Until 1912, almost no effort was given towards Tirana's urban planning development. Till then, it had a comprehensive ottoman district and special importance was given mainly to the individual dwelling, as a one unit but not to a certain unity of them, in the sense of what today we intend with urban planning. This started and continued from 1939 to 1944 during the fascist occupation, considered particularly as the period when Tirana had the most substantial architectural and urban development.

A city's urban planning is like a mirror that reflects all the political changes and mobility of power and Tirana especially is one of the examples of how the structure of a city gets shaped from a continuous concept of 'tabula rasa', the destruction of 'the whole' and its replacement with a new 'whole', as *E. Mëhilli states in 'Kryeqyteti dhe Pushteti' (1)*. Every regime on power represented a deeply 'denying' force, upon everything, created from a previous regime.

Supporting this idea we simply can mention the fact that for the implementation and construction of 'The Palace of Culture' an impressive area from the Old Bazaar was torn down (the genesis of Tirana) or the demolition of *Kinema '17 Nëntori'*, to build a Shopping Mall or the demolition of the first Cityhall to make possible the construction of The National Museum and other cases that through the years created this irreversible sense of change. Therefore you get the perception, that Tirana is developing as a city that sees its regeneration through massive flattening of the already existing context and spaces, and re-building over it in the name of a greater good, hypothetically and it seems like actions like restoration, revitalization, re-construction represent 'alien' practices.

This research consists, first of all in providing a general mapping of all of those buildings in Tirana, which through time have been defined as '*The undesired buildings of Tirana*'. We talk also about the concept of a building's value; who defines the value of a building not necessarily to categorise it as a listed monument, but a value attributed specifically from the community, the historical collective memory and other factors. All the buildings have a certain value from, 'zero', 'positive' or 'negative' and we can provide several examples of them in the urban texture of the city of Tirana. How can a building become 'undesired' despite the value it contains.

In this retrospective, a considerable help was provided also from the communities approach through their perceptions, their evaluation for these buildings and especially the way these buildings have affected their everyday life.

The criteria used for the listing in '*The undesired buildings*' of some of the buildings, of different typologies from residential dwellings, villas to public buildings, have been as follow:

- a. Buildings that have a considerable historical and architectural value (testimonials of the social and economic development of Tirana through the years, of its organic, urban development as a city, testimonial of the materials and building technics in different times.) for exmpl. *The urban Villas built during the fascist occupation, Traditional vernacular dwellings realized with masters and not architects etc.*
- b. Buildings that are part of the collective memory and Identity of the city of Tirana. *For.exmpl. The former Cinema '17 Nentori', The former 'Ekspozita shqiperia sot', Kombinati Textil 'stalin' etc.*
- c. **Endangered** Buildings in a current miserable condition, not functional on the verge of destruction, left to the course of nature/ also including those ones that are planned to be demolished, despite their value as buildings or despite the fact of having the status of 'Monument of culture 'for.exmp. *The villa of the former Radio Tirana, Villa on Rruga Xhorxhi Martini etc.*
- d. **Demolished** buildings (despite their value) sacrificed to give life to a new project (in most of the cases a multi-storey polifunctional building, contested on many levels). *for.exmpl. 'Qemal Stafa' Stadium, Nature Science Muzeum, The former Cinema '17Nentori'.*

To translate all these data and information about the list of buildings mapped, in a more engaging and interactive way, the website *preservingtirana.city* was created.

It's important to specify that this categorisation is not a strict, rigid one, it's built upon the existing value of these buildings, therefore is important to talk about the notion of the value of an architectural creation.

A building's value, negative value, zero value. The Concept of Beauty.

The concept of Beauty in Architecture was given since during ancient times from the roman architect *Marcus Vitruvius*.

According to him, three are the main criterias that an architect should follow, during the process of project design for an architectural creation : *Stability, Functionality and Beauty.*

Related to the last one mentioned, according to the fact that it is difficult to define a universal sense of a beautiful architecture that would function for all people, during all times, he connects beautiful architecture with the human being. Therefore, every architect should refer to the proportions and human body simetry as the closest ideal and perfect proportions.

So according to *Vitruvius*, the 'architectural creation' can achieve a certain state of *eurythmie*- a harmonic and acceptable state.

There was a special relation defined, between the human being and the 'architectural creation', since ancient times. On one hand, these spaces (buildings), have as a central reference the human being, on the other hand, they embodie all the hopes and human frustrations, in the way they function, in the way they are. Despite this shared dependence from both sides, what happens is that the majority of people still don't have the possibility to alter and change the buildings, their everyday life is related to. This way, It transfroms them into simple witnesses to their alterations, as part of a bigger plan on them.

During different periods of time and in different places, there have always been buildings considered 'desired buildings' and other ones defined as structures without any value at all.

The 'desired buildings' have been preserved, renovated and promoted through touristic guides or in architectural books, because of their values. Some of them are listed as protected Cultural Monuments and are so appreciated and valued that people from different parts of the world travel with the specific purpose to go and see them, for example of The Colosseum, Acropolis, the Pantheon etc.

Meanwhile the ones of the second category have been left to the course of nature, ignored or even transformed in a pejorative phase.

M. Van der Horn talks in her book '*Indispensable Eyesores: An Anthropology of undesired buildings*', about a hypothetic axes of value which doesn't necessarily include to extreme values, negative and positive. All the buildings who aren't listed as cultural monuments, could be positioned in many statuses. It would include buildings with a negative value to zero value or undefined value. On one direction of the axis, there's a category of buildings defined as '*undesired*' and that are related with specific historic events that give to them a negative connotation. In between the two categories there's a very dense grey zone with un-categorised buildings, not belonging in any of the two direction-axes. Those ones that we would define as with 0 value are the ones, towards even people and the local community would simply be indifferent, would have no relation or certain perception to them. This category is still different from the ones with a negative value and the 'architectural ruins'.

Two examples in the city of Tirana, of buildings with a 'negative' value were *The Pyramid of Tirana* and the one known as *The building with Cubes*, mostly because of what they represented back then.

M. Van der Hoorn në '*Indispensable Eyesores: An Anthropology of undesired buildings*'.(2) gives a very important definition for the concept of 'architectural ruin'. We know that they represent dilapidated and marginalized buildings, neglected, left to the course of nature, process that provokes its obsolescence to the limits of complete destruction that as a result, brings people away from them. In the case of Tirana, people's perception and reaction to this situation is simply indifference in most of the cases, even though they are aware that there are ways of preventing it and they can be a crucial factor for making this prevention strategies, a reality.

Going back again to the case of the Pyramid, It represents a quite complex building for its architecture and history included. It has gone through various changes through the years. In 2001 it served as one of the main Medias headquarter in Albania (Top Channel), its space being used at the same time from a coffee Bar, a Night-club and through the years its prominent courtyard as a meeting protests place and public space.

In 2011 a decision was made, from the regime in power to demolish it, related to the first real purpose it was build for, during the communist regime, the Mausoleum of the dictator E. Hoxha.

This threatening misfortune, didn't happen luckily because of the general determination through reactions and protests of the local community, to strongly preserve the Pyramid of Tirana. This exact moment represents a very clear declaration of how the negative value can be attributed to a building from the power of politics but not from the community.

In terms of architectural project-idea and implementation it represents a very interesting building where each one of its facades is different and the main one imitates the silhouette of Dajti mountain, at its background. The façade on the back has a rectangular shape, different from all the others and also the fifth façade (the above

view) imitates the silhouette of an eagle (national symbol). Its inner space is somehow sculptured through the mezzanine element.

Currently, the Pyramid appears totally naked from its once shining marble-armor, which back then played a crucial role in harmonizing it with the other marble facades buildings along the main Boulevard.

Its space is used sporadically as a space for several 'alternative' events, but you can easily sense it is 'turned off' already. The lack of a continuous maintenance, transformed it in a today's 'ruin', but as M. Van der Hoorn in *'Indispensable Eyesores: An Anthropology of undesired buildings'*, would say: *'an Indispensable Eyesore'*, because it has always been present in any historical and urban change of Tirana and therefore forming the spatial identity and collective memory of the inhabitants on it. There is currently a plan to revitalize it in a Center for Innovation and Technology, for young people and children as multifunctional recreational space, education and workshops.

This case clearly shows how a building can be re-evaluated and can pass from the negative axis of the value system to the positive one.

The *Palace with Cubes* or as it was called by the locals, the Kadare's Building (where the families of *D. Agolli*, that of *I. Kadare* and other prominent figures lived), which is considered as one of the first modernist Albanian projects, but in the past has been labeled as a clear provocation to the communist official art of the time. The volume of the building had a tendency towards 'cubism', much different from the rational and gloomy communist architecture of that period. Today, however, it stands in one of the most visible spots in the city, ruined, where every single sign of the time becomes visible, in the absence of a proper treatment with plaster, finishing, informal extensions on the lower floors etc. A structure that once caused so much anger, today ironically remains ignored and neglected.

As long as societies will be a heterogeneous mixture of individuals with different perceptions and understanding about the world, we will never have a unique evaluation for a building, which means that the same building will find itself in different positions in the 'axis of value'.

Also during the course of time, architectural works can move along the 'axis of value' therefore today's 'Landmarks' can turn into the 'architectural ruins', the 'eyesores' of the future, and vice versa. (3)

This is the case also of the today's Museum *'House with Leaves'* that has gone from being, the Gestapo Center, to the State Security Center (Political Police), during the German invasion, therefore a structure that induces fear, repression, today is transformed into the home of a Museum that attracts, each month tourists and young people curious for this part of Albania's history.

What can be noticed to a considerable extent, during the research and the field research of 'undesired' buildings, are the typology of the villas, *'the forgotten villages of Tirana'*

Green gardens have been part of every indoor space in Tirana. It was typical that the gardens like in the case of Kavaja Street, were organized along the two sides of the street. During the 'genesis' of Tirana as a city, the focus was more on the architecture of the apartment building than on the urban planning of the city as a whole. During this period we have the development of the 'Traditional Tirana' dwelling (with local material, 'qerpic' and handicraft works with traditional masters).

Nowadays Tirana's dwellings are representative of an early and distinct historical period of the development of Tirana, from those with a pronounced oriental, ottoman character to the villas of the fascist Italian domination. There are some in Tirana, such as the Toptani's Sarajet, Villa at Tafta Tashko Koco Street, Villa on Xhorxhi Martini Street, Villa of the former Tirana Radio Station etc, all mapped in the general map of the Undesired Buildings of Tirana. Some of these buildings listed Cultural Monuments, like in the case of the villa on Xhorxhi Martini Street, or The former Radio Tirana building, today they are in a deplorable situation. These houses with a clear architectural value (stylistic and in the context of construction techniques) as well as historic ones are under private ownership. There is a repeated situation with the status of these villas, a conclusion drawn from conversations with different people living in their neighbourhoods. The most illustrious, rich families of Tirana, own them, while today their children who have inherited them, for various reasons have moved abroad, leaving the fate of these dwellings undefined. According to Article 6 of Law 27/2018, For Cultural Heritage and Museums (4), owners and users of private property (monuments) are obliged to guarantee the preservation of these properties and the values they carry and cooperate with relevant public institutions for protection, evaluation and access to these cultural assets.

The problem with their situation today lies in the fact that this co-operation between the family owners of these monuments, with the responsible institutions, which should guarantee their protection, lacks at all. There is a general negligence to make possible a re-use and allocation plan for possible fundings, for their restoration. Some old villas, proclaimed monuments of second category, have had a different fate, have been renovated and maintained in time by hosting embassies, institutions such as the Swiss Embassy villa, World Bank headquarters, etc.

Among the most representatives of these villas is the villa of former Radio Tirana Station, which is a second category monument. The lack of maintenance over the years made possible the loss, of all its virtues as a building, from those virtues that give it the status of *Vitruvian eurythmia*, status for an architectural work. After having accommodate various functions over the years, today there are families of the Roma community who have cleansed it, and during the day use the ground floor yard for an improvised flea-market, as long as its private owners continue to agree.

From an interview held with some of the neighbours, two more villas close to the former Radio Tirana Station, have had the same fate. One of them was believed to be the first Brothel in Tirana.

These people have stood with a constant fear that one day someone would come, pull them out and the building would be torn down for the rise of a combined housing and business facility building, going along the interests of a certain private owner. This is a well-known and repetitive pattern story in Tirana, like the demolition of the Museum of Natural Sciences to build a residential and business complex, the demolition of '17 Nëntori' Cinema for the construction of the 'Galeria' shopping mall, also the actual attempt to destroy the National Theater, with the idea of bringing a new Theater with several residential and business towers and business with a hypothetical 'added value'.

We are all helpless, witnesses of a day-to-day degradation that is happening to these buildings. Their fate is left to the course of nature and then simply decided that they are no longer suitable and no longer meet the conditions of the present, to stay as structures in use. The result: 'Decapitation'. This is because the power to set the value of a building in Tirana stands in the hands of a certain group of interest, whose individual goals do not match the common public interest of the city.

Another very interesting phenomenon is when the existence of a building is jeopardized or put in discussion, this automatically increases its value. We mention the case in Sarajevo, where the *'Oslobodenje'* journal's management

offices, was a building with no special importance or worth, until the time it was set on fire by the occupiers of the city. Therefore this fact caused it to become a 'point of reference' and true symbol of survival for the city (5). This phenomenon reminds me of the situation with our National Theater and Experimental Theater in Tirana. *The National Theater or the 'Italo-Albanian Skanderbeg Circle'* started to be constructed when *Galeazzo Ciano*, then Minister of Foreign Affairs, commissioned in 1938 the realization of the district project by the company 'Pater Constructions Edilizia Speciale' which made the construction in the arch of a few months in 1939. It was thought it would work as a cultural, relaxing center, with a sportive pool, a sports field, a theater, a restaurant and also would serve as a very important meeting place. The way it was treated aesthetically, was thought to bring a sort of a post-futuristic style, like in the works of *Angiolo Mazzoni*. The building was built under the supervision of the 'Pater Company', which provided speed in construction-time and low prices in its realization due to the use of prefabricated materials from Milan. The materials used were cement, wood and some prefabricated tiles called *populito* or '*pater cemento*' (6).

Actually through the VKM No. 325 from 12.04.2017, the complex area of the National Theater was extracted from the map of the protected historic center of Tirana, which constituted an intangible space for interventions. The Danish architecture studio BIG was commissioned to design a new National Theater on the same site, through demolishing the existing one and with investment through a public-private partnership. According to the agreement, part of the public property area on this site, will be used, for the erection of high-rise combined residential-business buildings. This situation itself is quite similar to the analogue case of the National Theater in Budapest. It could be a possible, potential scenario with what could happen to our Theater.

The history of the National Theater in Budapest is very complex, since it has been a source of national pride as well as a source of constant conflict in terms of its position and design. It worked as a Theater from 1908 to 1963 and was founded in 1875 as the 'Popular Theater' serving as a temporary structure, since it was thought that Hungarian culture deserved something more monumental and imposing. The demolition event is still imprinted in the minds of many Budapest residents, making this issue still a touching one ever since. Only after 2002 a new National Theater was built in a new place (7). In its square they recreated the former façade of the building, exactly opposite to the new one but under water in the water-basin. Indeed, no original architectural elements were preserved from the Old Theater, but anyway those who commissioned it somehow highlighted the value of his predecessor, symbolically re-emerging through the under-water facade element in the square. The Hungarian National Theater was 'martyrised' and it completely changed the way the inhabitants perceived it further on and it also produced something valuable, it created narratives on it today. At the bottom served a very important result, the creation of narratives on it today.

As *M. Van der Hoorn* cites: "*The first step to bring a building on the superior status of a 'martyr' is to 'kill' it.*

(8).

This might be the fate of The National Theater of Tirana also if its demolition will result as an inevitable event. Meanwhile, another form of this 'martyrdom' is the preservation of it in the form of relics, as it has been for the Berlin Wall with its fragments (relics) spread all over different places. It was mentioned for example of an intent to preserve the historical facade of the 'Qemal Stafa' Stadium, as a second category monument by bringing it back to the new project as a form of revaluated relic but we still don't know if it's still unsure if it's going to happen.

The most relevant and most important question that needs to come automatically when creating such narratives through these buildings is: *Who has the power to create and destroy Value?* This important issue was raised

by Michael Thomson's *Rubish Theory*. 'The power to create or destroyed value is not given to everyone. It challenges not only the architectural notions of durability and architecture, but also challenges the social (power) relationships, deeply related to the question of who sets the value of things', Michael Thomson in *Rubish Theory* [9].

The situation with our National Theater has awakened many controversies, many discussions, many attitudes and that is very important, the fact that there are narratives today, that has awakened in citizens the feeling of reaction and protest, without once more leaving things flow, passively. Some of the residents of Tirana and a group of artists have been able to gather regularly every afternoon for a long time in the forme of a peaceful protest in its most representative public space, the 'agora' courtyard. There have also been protests through street art, slogans, posters, social networks. In principle, this firm attitude of some of the inhabitants toward the protection of the Theater as a building and the public space it occupies, is indeed one of the most democratic ways a community uses to gain the power of setting, or destroying values in a city. It expresses determination not to leave this power, as the case usually is, in the hands of certain groups of interest.

As long as there is no real purpose in Tirana to take into account the opinion of professionals of the field, architects and urbanists, on which the proper system of value should be, as well as the desires and needs of the citizens of Tirana to whom the land and builfing, belongs and should serve to, then Tirana will remain acity without identity, as one of the absurd cities of *I. Calvino*, '-Maurilia', in the '*Invisible Cities*' (fragment from 'city and memory')

... Be careful not to tell them that sometimes different cities, incomparable between them, follow each other over the same place without getting acquainted with one another. There are times that the names of the residents remained unchanged, and the emphasis on voices and features of faces; but the gods that dwell under the names of the countries have fled without saying anything, and their land is occupied by other strange gods. It is pointless to ask whether they are the best or worse than the old ones, until there is no connection between them, just as the old postcards do not represent Maurilian as it was, but another city that by chance was called as this, Maurilia. [10]

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