



Slide taken from Grimshaw Architects' master plan of Tirana 2016 showing the north extension of the original Italian axis.

Tirana's Unknown Legacy

By Cousin von Erich

From village to capital, from monarchy to fascism – through communism, deregulation and explosive demographics – how is the ninety-six-year-old capital managing in the newbie country – and what's Mussolini got to do with it already? This is the story how a boulevard came to form the spine of a country – a line in time where the twentieth century unfolded in its most condensed and volatile form.

It's happened to me twice now – the Mussolini experience. Albania is my second. The man has a tendency to pop up the oddest of places. Last time – a couple of years ago – was in Tripoli, Libya. I mean, I know the Italians were there, but the scale and ambition of fascist Italy and their revamped concept of *mare nostrum!* They certainly succeeded in making an imprint the Italians... a statement... this was for keeps. It is a legacy you cannot miss. Look for anything remotely organised or aesthetically pleasing – sites, buildings and infrastructural remains, the train station, the stadium – rest assured, the Italians did it. With Gadhafi, Tripoli turned into the sublimely dysfunctional and stinking zest pool of today.

But returning to Albania... to a Scandinavian with scarce knowledge of the country, it was like finding an unknown symphony of a famous composer. Well, The Albanians have been living it for about three generations and the Italian fascist period from 1925-1943 is a part of everyday life in Tirana – another well-established historical fact on Italo-Albanian geopolitical ties. But still... to a foreigner... *significant* and iconic fascist architecture in this previous reclusive communist stronghold! It is like an illegitimate child that post-war Europe never heard of. I picked up on it the very day I arrived – at night. I had reached Skënderbej Square and the boulevard from Myslym Shyri. To my

right, there was this imposing neo-classical complex perfectly concluding a three kilometre axis with pines running alongside the entire stretch... that Romanesque stringency with its roman arches and symmetry... I was immediately intrigued. Like I said to myself; *'this looks unmistakably fascist.'*

Now we just need a capital ...

Back in the thirties, a French Architect is rumoured to have summarized his impressions about the very same boulevard as such: *'I have seen cities without boulevards, but I never saw a boulevard without a city!'*

Somehow, this one statement in particular epitomizes the initial Tirana master plans. Extrapolating, you could say it encapsulates the region's claim of nationhood – it carries its strangely construed ambition to straighten out the most Gordian set of historical and political dynamics that preceded it – an attempt to iron out of countless conflicting domestic and foreign power plays and agendas. In a span of thirty-one years Albania went from a declaration of independence in 1912, thus ending five centuries of Ottoman domination, through the Balkan wars, an Austro Hungarian principality in brackets, The Great War with British, French, Serbian and Greek occupying forces, tribal warfare and blood feuds – the longstanding period under president Zog and later; King Zog I, let alone the Italian protectorate and ultimate occupation in 1939 – are you still there?

Suffice it to say in this context that only in 1920 Tirana was proclaimed capital of Albania. It was indeed a tall order. Renowned historian Bernd J. Fischer, an authority on Albanian history characterizes the town that went before the master plan:

"The new capital was actually little more than an enlarged Moslem village... ..and consisted primarily of a bazaar used for hanging offenders of the peace, four mosques, several barracks and a number of legations. Tirana gave the appearance of a gold rush town in the late 19th century American West, with its saloons, gambling casinos and ever present guns and gun belts. A rickety Ford progressing slowly along the muddy unpaved unlit streets was the only sign of the twentieth century. The buildings of the town were rather unostentatious. ..."



Tirana at the turn of the twentieth century. Notice the Et'hem Bey mosque of which you see the corner to your left. Communism spared it for some reason.

And so in the making of Albania, Italy came to play a crucial part. In that period, foreign power players, domestic policies, economic constraints, ties and squeezes led Zogu to embrace Italy as the viable partner in the reconstruction of the country. Secondly, Zog was guided by an overarching ambition to westernize Albania. The born Muslim, Ahmed Zogolli – later known as Zog I – swore an oath on both the bible as well as the Quran at his accession to the self-proclaimed throne in 1928, and in 1929 Islamic law was abolished and replaced by a civil code based on The Swiss civil code. These were the main prerequisites that came to forge the framework of the financing and design language of the master plans that followed.

A two-part agreement was reached with Italy for the economic development and reconstruction of Albania in 1925. The National Bank of Issue and Credit was set up by Credito Italiano. The bank was entrusted with the exclusive right to issue currency, also the directors of the bank were entrusted the awarding of contracts for public works. The second part that effectively tied Albania to Italy for the rest of the inter-war period, was a 50 million gold franc loan extended through the ad hoc set up; '*Società per lo Sviluppo Economico dell'Albania,*' (*Organization for the economic development of Albania.*)

And so now, we are finally down to how the famous boulevard came into being. Not surprisingly an Italian – the architect *Armando Brasini* was chosen for the job. He was a prominent, prolific architect and a main contributor in defining a historicist approach to Italian fascist design where an eclectic mix of baroque, renaissance and classical elements played an intricate part. Armando Brasini was involved in the restoration of many administrative buildings in Rome and several urban plans for Italy's African colonies – including Libya – go figure. Zogu's ambition to westernize the country was to be clearly reflected in the project's aim at creating a new capital city of Roman and Neoclassical grandeur, distinct from the old Oriental nucleus. The square at the beginning of the boulevard, would form the city's backbone and serve as a focus for the later partial studies and master plans of the city.

In the first version, the centre of the city was designed like a fan-shaped main square surrounded by central administrative buildings which led way to two smaller plazas to the north and south. As you can see below, the plaza connects to the old Karapici Mosque and the old city to the north, while the southern end of the boulevard points towards the projected Presidential Palace.

The second version was based on the main boulevard as the point of departure, but this time the interconnected plazas were replaced by a single circular vast plaza, similar to Rome's Saint Peter and *Via della Conciliazione* – another project by Brasini.

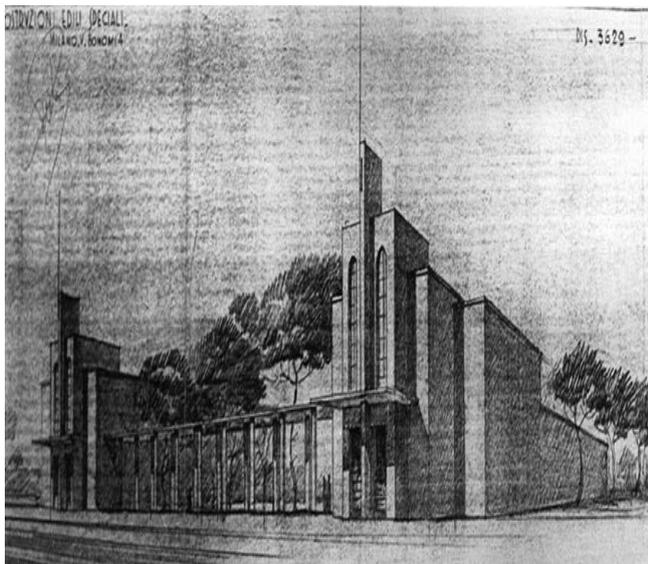
Either way, none of them was executed. By comparing Brasini's plan to the third option by the another famous Italian architect *Florestano di Fausto* who continued Brasini's work, expenses seemed to have been a major obstacle. In Florestano's plan, Brasini's Presidential Palace to the south is dispensed of and the square is simplified, also a well-proportioned sunken garden allowing the buildings to appear taller and at the same time create shadow without obscuring the complex is conceived. In the end, the finalized plan only executes two thirds of the plan. On the square facing north, a later demolished post office was built – the north east corner... nothing.

A general road plan with a more detailed study of the centre seems to have been prepared by a work group of three engineers, E. Frashëri from Albania, Castellani from Italy and Weiss and Köhler from Austria.

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Towards a rationalist approach

In 1938 there is radical departure from the eclectic historicist approach as exemplified by Brasini, to what would evolve into a distinctive and unique modern rationalist fascist design language, cfr. The National Bank Headquarters located at the western part of Skënderbej Square by *Vittorio Ballio Morpurgo*, right, also the futuristic *Circolo Italo-Albanese Scanderbeg* by *Pater*, *Costruzioni edili speciali*, below left – where a system of patented prefabricated construction techniques was applied.



Ironically, the Pater design is strangely under dimensioned and cramped behind the Florestano's public administration buildings. The National Bank Headquarters is an example of the austere, unadorned rationalised monumentality of fascist design. One uniquely fascist feature is how the use of columns become a pronounced decorative feature. Here columns take on a rectangular form and are elongated beyond a classical expression to support an only wafer thin architrave.

It reiterates the roman legacy but rationalizes the expression. Compare Italian example in Rome, right.

Università di Roma, Marcello Piacentini, and Giuseppe Pagano. La Sapienza' 1935.



The Fifth Shore

La Quinta Spóna (The Fifth Shore) was a somewhat contrived concept reflective of how fascist Italy perceived Albania. Ultimately, in the of morning of April 7, 1939, some fifty thousand Italian troops, supported by hundreds of aircrafts, mechanized infantry and warships invade Albania. In its wake, the Italians establish *Ufficio Centrale per l'Edilizia e l'Urbanistica dell'Albania (Central Office for Construction and Urban Planning in Albania)*, a small potent unit, headed by a third Italian famous architect, *Gherardo Bosio*. Ferdinando Poggi took the lead of the project after Bosio's untimely death in 1941.

As already envisaged by Vittorio Ballio Morpurgo in the styling of National Bank Headquarters, architectural design in Tirana now takes on a distinctively new rationalist and modernized expression under *Gherardo Bosio* which clearly discontinues Armando Brasini's architectural vernacular. In his legacy the *Piazza Littoria* complex from 1940 finalized in 1943, Bosio concludes the *Cardo Maximus* axiality of *Viale del Impero* starting at the incomplete *Florestano di Fausto* ministerial complex to the north.

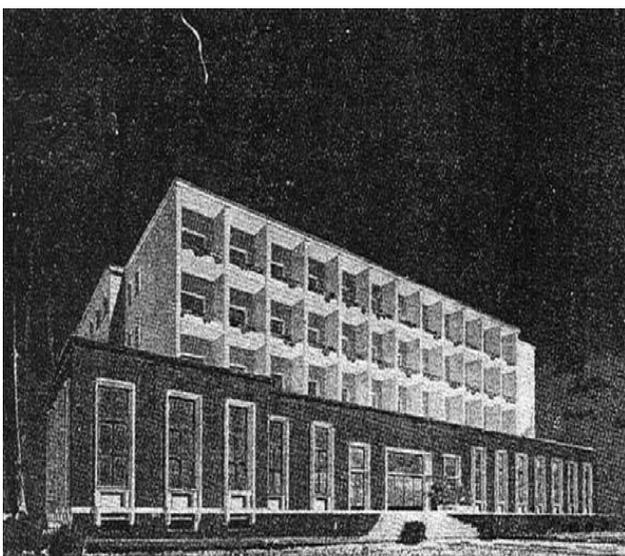


Piazza Littoria, and Casa del Fascio by Bosio 2016.

Piazza Littoria redefines a classical roman departure in an unadorned, austere minimalist expression. I don't know if monumental ... it is rather that the undaunted and determined use of axiality, symmetry, proportion and physical reference points and empty space seduce you to see it as such. The complex is well proportioned with fine detailing and subtle articulation in its deliberate interaction with the surrounding and ample empty space. You tend to forget that *Casa del fascio* in spite of its elevation is in fact a mere five storey structure and that the wings of the complex are three storey structures. *Piazza Littoria* is by no means ostentatious – it is light, elegant and unobtrusive. In keeping with rationalist school you notice the pronounced use of rectangular columns and the almost fragile architraves. Another telling detail are the square penetrations of the balcony in the complex to the right. Instead of resorting to historicist curvy supports in the railing, the design denudes the expression to a square perforated support.



Piazza Littoria, west wing. Mid below the east wing. Below Hotel Dajti 1939.



As opposed to an internationalist Marxist abstract approach of non-belonging, you see how the fascist concept of modernity is consciously anchored in a classical expression by attempting to tie together and reinforce a collective historical, architectural and cultural identity of a particular region, the *genius loci* – another fascist concept. It carries the concept of *Mediterraneità*, the idea of a common Mediterranean expression. The complex has survived in its entirety, however, the centre square shares no resemblance with the original plan.

Farther down the boulevard you will find *Gherardo Bosio's* I-shaped *Hotel Dajti* from 1939 of exceptional standard. The balconies at the front take on a sculptural effect by singularly articulating the symmetrical façade. Its present 2016 state is deplorable. It is abandoned and photos do not do it justice because of the large trees in front it. Another reflective complex is the *Palazzo della Luogotenenza 1939-41 – presently, Office of the Prime Minister*. In spite of his early death in 1941, *Gherardo Bosio* marks the end of the Italian legacy – strangely enough, he too would have another barren go at north-east part of *Florestano's* Skënderbej Square that was never built. To this day the square presents the unfinished and irregular layout.

The communist legacy

One thing is theory, another reality. In spite of ideological differences, practicality and finances meant that the communist take-over did not discontinue the Italian layout – it was rebottled – brass name plates on the doors exchanged – at the end of the day symbols of power are universal – a quantum of monumentalism, symmetry, axiality and a wide boulevard for a military parade and you are in business. In *The Cultural Palace* on Skënderbej Square the communists even emulated the fascist design language with the rectangular columns eighteen years later. No doubt, they had a close look at *Palazzo degli Uffici dell'Ente Autonomo* from the fascist EUR in Rome (1937-39).

That was never the issue with The Cultural Palace though. It was the fact that its construction was closely tied to what became known as the Soviet Albanian split. It started as an almost Marx brotherish bilateral spat in Late May, 1959. First Secretary of USSR Nikita S. Khrushchev paid a long visit to Albania to reassure that the Stalin-Khrushchev transition did not mean a discontinuation of Soviet Albanian friendship and to smooth out the potentially menacing Soviet Yugoslavian rapprochement. And so Khrushchev laid down the cornerstone to the Cultural Palace, given as a gift in the name of fraternity from the people of Soviet Union. However, only two years on, the entire entourage of Soviet architects, engineers and specialists hurriedly left the country in April 1961, six months before the unofficial expulsion of Albania from the Warsaw Pact and COMECON. You can almost picture the appalled Soviet envoys with their shirts hanging out of their luggage going: “*This is an outrage – we just got here!*” As this was an immense investment for the economic state of the country, again the Chinese financial help came to rescue.

As such, the reason why the Cultural Palace merits special attention is – well, not due to its cultural activities – but rather as a ghostly monument on Albania's isolationist foreign and domestic policies that ensued and signified the following decades. Apart from its relations to communist China – Albania's was practically sealed off from the outside world for the next thirty years. The isolated status of the country was common knowledge – but unless you are well aware about the COMECON multi- and bilateral controversies this is to enlighten you that Albania *did not* want to push a more democratic agenda, Albania reacted in staunch *disappointment* over Khrushchev's revisionist line. Albania fought for its right to *continue* as a paranoid Stalinist hard liner – to that effect, the generously strewn one-man mushroom bunkers in the Albanian landscape are a stark reminder.



Above, "if this is communism – I'm a communist" – Skënderbej Square in the seventies. Below, The Cultural Palace, 1959-1963.



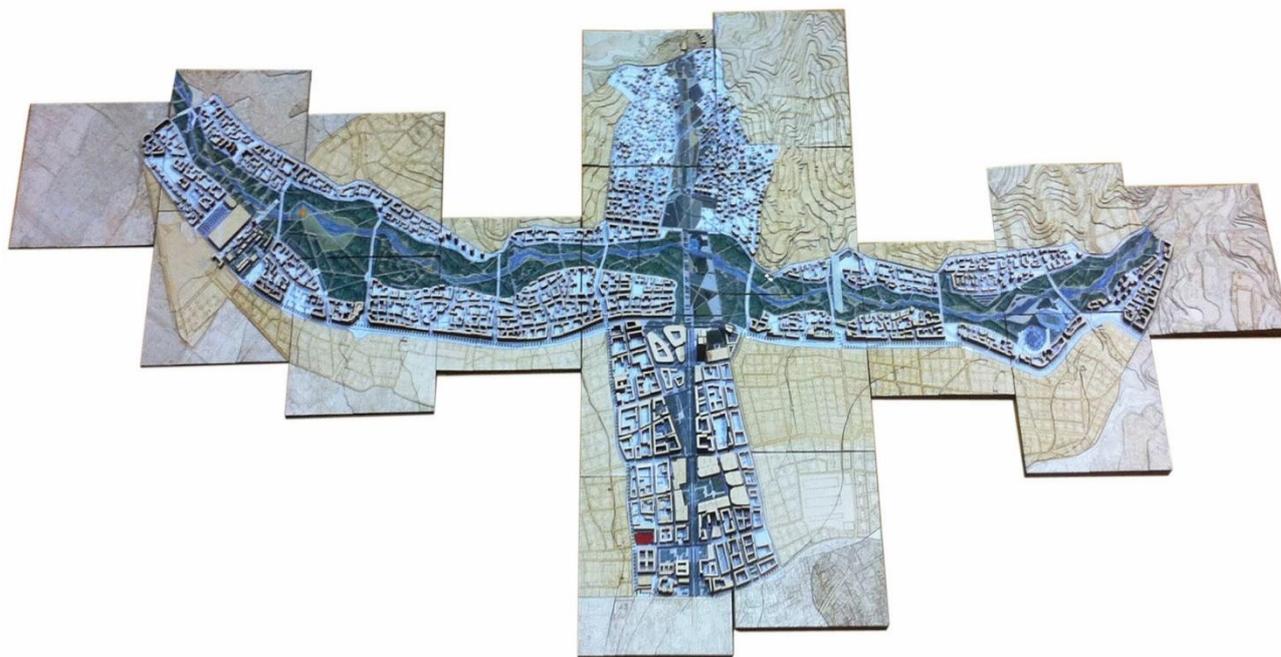
There is a twist though ... without going into the expected *horrificica* of an ultra-repressive socialist regime, the fact of the matter is that the isolation and necessity occasioned an environment that modern city planning trends are currently trying to embrace. Check out this photo of Skënderbej Square from that era ... for namely two reasons. Notice the low skyline. Secondly, there are no cars – they were banned. That meant no traffic besides bikes and public transport. Subsequently, there was no traffic noise, no traffic pollution, and also no stress inducing high rises. In combination with a regular use of trees and parks, these components in fact created a very desirable physical space. “*It was like Venice,*” a city planner from the municipality told me. In the evenings – I’m told – streets were full of pedestrians, so as for the physical planning the *comrades* got it just right – from being behind!

Following the communist ban on cars, planning efforts honed in on prioritizing the needs of pedestrians and bicyclists by default so to speak. The experience, perception and interaction with the city was experienced from the perspective of the pedestrian and bicyclists. You notice the use of wide pavements flanked by a consistent use of trees and generous room for parks. To a large extent, serious attempts were made to invite nature into the city which has remained a distinctive feature in Tirana – or like di Fausto saw it; *Il Citta Giardino*. Also worth noticing are the general building constrictions on the height of the buildings – going back to the early communist period the Tirana axial boulevards are low four-five storey structures. Planning in the city centre has thus avoided the signifying dreary, monolithic, alienating and invasive high rises otherwise known in communist Europe – or in Western seventies constructions for that matter. They did suffer from a few minor misgivings such as central heating, running hot water and electricity – but otherwise they were spot on. The street, Rruga Myslym Shyri from that period works well – many facades from the period are mostly well articulated with window bays. See for your-self below.



The street Myslym Shyri, Tirana 2016.

A minor curiosity that I am sure was handed down from that period are the public gardeners that use a reaper to mow the grass at present day – a zen like little theatre to watch – no noise guaranteed. In Denmark we use fossil fuel lawn mowers that produce a bleeding racket and as a bonus we get to pollute nature as well. Still the efficiency is completely similar. Or what about the fossil fuel leaf blowers – what the fuck is wrong with a rake? Personally, I am not advocating an anti-technology, but a critical mature common sense of what is actually an improvement instead of a nineteen fifties infatuation with redundant gadgetry and smart ass fads.



Slide from the new Grimshaw Architects' master plan for Tirana – the river Tirana.

Towards the future

These dynamics have created a strange asynchronous paradox. As in many other Eastern European countries, the breakdown of communism resulted in an uncritical import and emulation of the worst trends and features of capitalist society – in particular, the city planning paradigm of prioritizing motorized traffic that grew out of the technology crazed nineteen fifties. Symptomatically, in the nineteen fifties' Copenhagen you prepared for a general widening of the streets to support more car traffic. Construction demarcation lines for new builds were withdrawn from the old build demarcation lines in order to widen the streets. Needs of pedestrians were consciously ignored and neglected.

Only during recent years' sustainability trends, you start to see a change in city planning *run-for-your-life-approaches*. Western cities are now imposing a growing amount of regulations on motorized traffic. Pedestrian or bicyclist modes are taken seriously and prioritized. Pavements are widened and car lanes narrowed in combination with a variety of traffic slowing measures. So as Western Europe is currently emulating a sustainable city planning similar to that of Tirana during the communist era – present day Tirana need to stay wary not to reach backwards to the capitalist nineteen fifties city planning of Western Europe.

Albanian authorities are clearly struggling to cope with the exploding car traffic – trying to keep up, rather than plan ahead. In the city centre the situation has produced an entirely unliveable space

of massive congestion, pollution of fumes and noise. On top of that they drive like children at a fair. You won't miss the numbing sound of revving German muscle cars and the inexperienced absence of a commonly abided by set of rules for moving about in a motorized world. I'm hoping that the new ring road under current construction in the inner city will take the brunt. Also, there is the sheer demographics issue. Tirana has gone from an estimated 15.000 in 1912 to an estimated 700.000 in 2016.

Tirana's attempting to rein in the Wild East nineties of unbridled deregulation of absent building permits, metastasising constructions and riverside kiosks. Also, Tirana's homogenous skyline suffered. Tirana's progressive ex-mayor Edi Rama – now the Prime Minister – addressed many of these issues and also Rama who happens to be an artist encouraged wild façade colourings to escape the dreary communist grey concrete slabs – who can blame them. Edi Rama was responsible for the *Clean and Green project* in 2000 which resulted in the production of 96,700 square-metres of green land and parks in the city and the planting of nearly 1,800 trees.

The latest add-on to the Italian backbone is an unprecedented billion-dollar master plan in cooperation with Grimshaw Architects – whose Associate Principal is Italian by the way. It has been four years under way and covers a fifth of the overall area of the city. Again the efforts are focused on Tirana's spine – on another 3 kilometre expansion towards the north. It establishes a new seven kilometre riverside park, aiming at rejuvenating the river Tirana and the city.

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