

The Urban Book Series

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Edmond Manahasa · Fabio Naselli ·  
Odetta Durmishi Manahasa ·  
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# Current Challenges in Architecture and Urbanism in Albania

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# Chapter 10

## Past, Present, and the Denied Future of Tirana National Theatre



Federica Pompejano and Elena Macchioni

**Abstract** Tirana National Theatre maintained its public use since the 1930s, documenting the changes of twentieth-century Albanian history. The construction was built during the Italian Protectorate as part of the Circolo Italo-Albanese Skanderbeg, a multifunctional architectural ensemble conceived for entertainment and Fascist propaganda. The structure was assembled with a prefabricated system representing the new building technologies and materials research developed under the autarchy restrictions imposed by the Fascist rule. It was used as cinema and theatre until its renovation under the Communist regime. After 2000, the building, then National Theatre, was included within the Tirana Historic Centre, put under preliminary protection status, and incorporated as part of the buffer zone. However, in 2018 the Government planned its demolition and replacement with one new construction. Despite the opposition of the local community and international associations for the protection of modern architectural heritage, the building was demolished in May 2020. In an ever-changing country like Albania, the difficulties in dealing with a layered urbanity can certainly be considered an issue. Despite its impact, the demolition of the Theatre left one void that, even if soon filled, added its own layer to the urban evolution of Tirana.

**Keywords** Tirana National Theatre · Albania · 20th-century architectural heritage · Demolition · Denied heritage

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## 10.1 Introduction

The case of Tirana National Theatre (Fig. 10.1) represents a clear example of a historic structure that was demolished to renew the image of a capital city at the expense of an increasingly torn urban landscape, further neglecting its significance within the context of the historic city. The building testified the first modernity sought during the Italian Protectorate and its construction system was representative of an extremely specific period that pushed forward the building techniques' research frontiers. Furthermore, it served as a theatre for nearly 80 years, hosting the most important Albanian theatrical institution since May 1945 (Teatri Kombëtar 2020) and becoming well embedded in the community's collective memory.

Despite the building's multifaceted significance, in early February 2018, the Government announced plans to demolish and replace it with a new construction. The news faced the opposition of the local community, including several Albanian activists and artists, which started to protest in front of the building at the beginning of 2018. It is unfortunately well known that conservation too often collides with economic and market interests, as well as with development pressures and urban planning: the efforts for saving the Theatre were worthless and the entire architectural ensemble was demolished in May 2020.

By unfolding its construction history and recent events leading to the demolition, we not only aim at demonstrating how Tirana National Theatre deserved to be preserved, but also how its announced disappearance represents a layer in the complex urbanity of the Albanian capital.



**Fig. 10.1** The main facade of Tirana National Theatre in 2016 © Albinfo/CC BY-SA 4.0



## 10.2 Tirana National Theatre: A Brief Construction History

Tirana National Theatre (*Teatri Kombëtar*) documented the transformation of Albanian history during the twentieth century. Dating to the Italian Protectorate (1938–1943), the building was part of the Italian-Albanian *Circolo Skanderbeg*, a multi-functional architectural ensemble conceived for entertainment as well as for Fascist propaganda. The new institution was aimed at promoting Italian culture, language, and educational system (Basciani 2012), according to the strategy of the Albanian Office for Fascist Propaganda, established in 1938 (Pes 2017).

Archival research conducted at the *Arkivi Qëndror Teknik i Ndërtimit* (AQTN), *Arkivi Qëndror Shtetëror* (AQSH) in Tirana, *Archivio Centrale dello Stato di Roma* (ACS), and *Archivio Storico Luce* (ILC) enabled the authors to further study the history of the building and its peculiarities. The investigation corroborated the hypothesis that the building was a representative surviving document of a very specific historic period, shared between Italy and Albania.

Described as “*a harmonious and symmetrical ensemble*” where design care was taken to distribute the architectural bodies according to their particular function, the Italian-Albanian *Circolo Skanderbeg* was composed by three main volumes joint by means of a colonnade in order to reach an “*impressive result*” (AQTN 1938a). The 1938 procurement contract, issued by the Italian firm *Pater—Costruzioni Edili Speciali*, precisely described the works to be carried out within a foreseen period of about 120 days (AQTN 1938b). While the left body was conceived as a multifunctional recreational space with a gym, the right one hosted the Theatre in the front and an indoor tennis court on the back.

The Theatre was designed to be exactly symmetrical with its left counterpart. Hence, the monumentality of the whole ensemble represented the design priority. In addition, regular composition allowed to easily implement the construction with a modular prefabricated system. According to the original drawings, the auditorium was provided with areas where the audience could interact. There was a large entrance hall and foyer, with a wardrobe and bar, and two staircases provided access to the balconies. The use as movie theatre is mentioned in the AQTN and AQSH archival documents and it is demonstrated by the images available at ILC, but the projection booth is not present in the 1938 project drawings. Parallel lateral walls and balconies around the three sides of the room made the *Circolo Skanderbeg* auditorium more suitable for the theatre function rather than for cinema screening. Typically, auditoriums inside Fascist buildings hosted projections, performance, political speeches, and educational activities, creating a space for entertainment as well as for propaganda.

The structure of the *Circolo Skanderbeg* was assembled according to a Pater patent that allowed to cover the large span of the edifice through an “*audacious solution [...] in a place where skilled manpower [was] missing*” (AQTN 1938a). The patent involved a construction system composed of different assembled materials, such as thin timber elements, concrete, and *Patercimento* panels of different

thickness (Menghini 2013). Initially patented with the Intellectual Property Office of the Ministry of National Economy under the *Legnobeton* trademark in 1927, *Patercimento* was also known as *Populit* and was made with wood-cement agglomerates and magnesites for building construction (ACS 1927). The trademark, patented by the Italian company SAFFA in 1939, was described as “*wooden fibres and cement agglomerate for building purposes*” (ACS 1939). Poplar fibres and high-strength cement, by means of a mineralization treatment of the fibres themselves, acquired lightness, incombustibility, thermal and acoustic insulation, and inalterability (Tanziani 1934; Giuliano 2016; Ascione 2017b). For Italian architecture, the beginning of the twentieth century represented a period of important innovative efforts, both from the technical and stylistic point of view, which still coexisted with traditional building techniques and materials (Barozzi and Guardigli 2009). Autarchy addressed building techniques towards the use of easily available local raw materials. However, the industrial logic based on economic factors and resources’ processing cycle and effectiveness encouraged the research on new building products through waste materials recycling. On the materials’ research during autarchy, Pier Luigi Nervi stated: “[...] *indeed it is probable that the renewed research impulse will lead to a better solution than the customary ones*” (Pagano 1938). Moreover, beyond the avant-garde example of the Italian Modern Movement, the architectural production of the period was characterized by an extensive number of timber constructions, presenting a noticeable innovation in their structural systems (Tampone 2002). The bearing framed structures allowed the replacement of masonry walls with stratified solutions composed of different layers where each component had a specific role (Ascione 2017b). In fact, research and technical achievements of the period between the two World Wars were also characterized by the use of wood as main building material combined with others, like iron and concrete, or assembled with fibres panels (Gradi 2008).

Very few years after its completion, a survey report compiled by Stellario Bonaccorso, executive engineer of the *Ispettorato Opere Pubbliche Albania (OPA)—Servizio Edilizia ed Opere Igieniche*, reported problems in the Theatre’s wooden roof, due to scarce maintenance of the structure, and urged a series of additional works to be carried out in the auditorium (AQSH 1941a). The report, together with a detailed estimate of the completion and restoration foreseen interventions (AQSH 1941b, f) was sent to the *Regia Luogotenenza Generale* for approval (AQSH 1941a). The piecework company *Arch. Renato Lupo* won the bid with the provision of finishing the works before the start of the opera season, at the end of November 1941. Despite the distressful collaboration between the company and Bonaccorso, interruptions due to delays in materials supplies and project approval (AQSH 1941d, e, 1942a, b, c), the interventions were completed on December 10, 1941 (AQSH 1941e). However, the following day Bonaccorso wrote to the company a complaints letter remarking the poor execution of the works and the non-fulfilment of the project requests. Among them: the inadequate use of building materials, water leaks from the roof and under the stage, and unfinished spaces in the entrance, galleries, bathrooms, and royal box (AQSH 1941d). In the end, the final delivery report signed by representatives of

Bonaccorso and the companies Lupo, Natrella, and Baldelli, certified and approved the implemented works on February 19, 1942 (AQSH 1941c).

After the end of the Italian protectorate in September 1943, the *Cinema-Teatro Savoia* was renamed *Kinema Kossova*. In 1945 the Directorate of Architecture and Urban Planning transformed the cantilever flat roof of the colonnade into a pitched roof with wooden structure, covered by Eternit corrugated plates (AQTN 1945).

Following the establishment of the Communist Regime, the *Teatri Profesionisht i Shtetit* was founded in May 1945 and few years later the *Kinema Kossova* was named as *Teatri Popullor*. Thus, in July 1949, some interiors changes were foreseen in the adjoining spaces of the stage (AQTN 1949a, b). During the early 1950s both the right and left architectural volumes underwent major internal transformation. The ex-billiard room on the first floor of the left body was converted into the Theatre rehearsal room with a new wooden floor (AQTN 1950). Two years later, detailed technical drawings regarding the backstage and grid were prepared (AQTN 1952); in 1954, a new single storey volume was built between the two existing bodies and the grid was enlarged in height (Merxhani et al. 2018).

Minor undocumented interventions occurred in the following decades and at the dawn of the end of the Communist Regime, the *Teatri Popullor* was renamed *Teatri Kombëtar*, i.e., National Theatre, in June 1991; later the *Teatri Eksperimental* was accommodated in the left volume.

### 10.3 Towards an Announced Demolition

The following considerations on the state of conservation of the Theatre are based on a technical report published by the *Instituti i Ndërtimit* in March 2018 and another one submitted to *Europa Nostra* by a group of local architects in the same year. According to the *Instituti i Ndërtimit*, the building underwent a series of modifications through the years, some of them not documented, and presented severe decay conditions with cracks and water percolations (Instituti i Ndërtimit, Ministrisë së Infrastrukturës dhe Energjisë 2018). The report submitted to *Europa Nostra* identified major problems in the roof mantle and wooden structure due to the lack of maintenance. Furthermore, the northern façade presented heavy decay in the *Popullit* panels due to water infiltrations; the same was observed in the other elevations, even though they were in better condition (Merxhani et al. 2018). Surprisingly, the Institute's report considered that 90% of the building structure needed substantial restoration intervention, while Merxhani et al. (2018), affirmed that only the 20% was heavily compromised. A detailed structural assessment of the bearing structures of the entire complex and an accurate analysis of the state of conservation of the building, based on objective qualitative and quantitative data, was missing.

According to the Albanian regulatory framework, the area where the Theatre was located was declared *Ansambël monument-kulture*, i.e., Cultural monument ensemble, in April 2000 (Council of Ministers of Albania 2000), together with the main axis of the city centre, planned by the Italians in the 1930s. According to Law

no. 9048, April 7, 2003, in 2015 the Institute of Cultural Monuments Gani Strazimiri issued the Ordain no. 1068 appointing the status of object under preliminary protection to the National Theatre, forbidding any intervention to the building. Later, upon proposal of the Minister of Culture, the Council of Ministers emitted the Decision no. 325, April 4, 2017, that re-defined the protected area as composed by the Tirana Historic Centre and its protected zone, excluding the National Theatre from the Historic Centre (Council of Ministers of Albania 2017). The attached Regulation defines the Historic Centre of Tirana as “*the urban space having urban and architectural outstanding values documenting the historical evolution of the city and its architectural and urban achievements*”, while its protected buffer area “*preserves historical-cultural values, that are complementary and enrich the Historic Centre’s values creating a gradual transition zone towards the rest of the city areas*” (Council of Ministers of Albania 2017). Article 9 lists the possible interventions within the protected buffer zone: restoration, adaptation, reconstruction, or new construction must be in harmony with the architectural and urban character of the ensemble (Sect. 1), respecting the maximum height of the tallest building of the historic centre (Sect. 2), whilst architectural features of buildings should be adapted to the existing architectural and decorative character of the context (Sect. 3). The same directives were missing in the last Regulation issued on October 3, 2018, where the Theatre was still excluded from the Historic Centre area (Council of Ministers of Albania 2018). Merxhani et al. (2018) underlined that current national law constitutes the major threat for the Theatre. In fact, the extraordinary Law, the so-called *Ligji Fusha* no. 37/2018 was declared unconstitutional by the Albanian President in July 2018 and against the principles of the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. Despite the President’s Decree no. 10849 listing eight reasons against Law no. 37/2018, in October 2018 the Law was approved by the Albanian Parliament.

Soon after the project for the new theatre was announced, a widespread movement against the demolition of the National Theatre arose. The group *Aleanca për Mbrojtjen e Teatrit* protested in front of the building almost every day since February 2018 and drew attention to the topic through its Facebook page. The movement offered a platform for people involved in the Theatre cultural activities, such as workers, actors, directors, as well as members of the audience, to publicly share their memories and create a new enriched narrative for the site. Albanian academics and professionals (among them, the Association of Albanian Architects) also expressed their desire to protect the building. It was possible for the authors to follow the development of the events through online newspapers (such as the web pages of Tirana Times, *Gazeta Panorama*, Exit Albania, *Peizazhe të fjalës*, *Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso*, etc.), TV channels, and social media.

The protest gained wider public attention after the Chair of Docomomo International (Docomomo 2018) and Europa Nostra (Europa Nostra 2018) wrote to the Albanian Prime Minister, urging Albanian authorities to halt any irreversible action to be done on the monument. Europa Nostra stated the Theatre was a “*heritage site of great cultural and architectural importance in Europe*” (Europa Nostra 2018).

On May 11, 2020, however, the responsibility for the Theatre was transferred from the Government to the Municipality of Tirana (Council of Ministers of Albania 2020) that went ahead with the demolition of the entire complex on the last day of the special emergency measures, taken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Municipality Council of Tirana 2020).

## 10.4 Despite the Past: The Denial of a Possible Future

In February 2018, the Government unveiled plans to demolish the Theatre and replace it with a new performance space designed by Bjarke Ingels Group. Hence, following many examples in Europe, a new building designed by a famous Archistar is expected to work as a catalyst for the revitalization and rebranding of a city. The project of a new theatre was therefore considered as an opportunity to shape a new contemporary urban identity for the Albanian capital. At the same time, several projects for high-rise structures to be built in the city centre were approved and constructed in the last years.

As for the case of the National Theatre, sometimes wounds from the past are used as means to justify the destruction of historical stratifications to pursue a populist idea of the beautiful, efficient, and orderly city, in line with the demands for internationalization (Giusti 2006). Thus, the conservation issue, enlarged at the urban scale, goes beyond the National Theatre fate and concerns the preservation of the entire Tirana historic urban landscape.

The widespread protest movement demonstrated that the significance of the Theatre was broadly recognized. First, it was an outstanding example of a sought first modernity in the country and representative of the rationalist architectural design during the Italian protectorate. Not only its planning was pivotal in shaping the development of urbanism in Tirana, but also the construction was one of the last surviving landmarks in the capital, given the context of extraordinary transformations that occurred during the last few years. Second, it was highly significant for its construction technique and materials, being the first prefabricated construction in Albania and the only one of its kind that was still existing in the country (Europa Nostra 2018). Moreover, since its construction during the Italian Protectorate, it documented the twentieth-century history of Albania through its transformation, maintaining its public, cultural and, societal function. Therefore, it could have been considered a “shared heritage” since it constituted a document of both countries’ culture and history. Finally, being the principal theatre of Albania since the end of the 1930s, even if it was a venue for Fascist and Communist leaders, it was undoubtedly a place where Albanian theatrical history was made and where the art and theatre of today should have continued to be made.

Furthermore, planned strategical conservation of the building conceived consequent to an accurate analysis of Tirana urban development could have enriched the future knowledge of the city landscape and texture, acknowledging the overlapping traces of different moments and people in the city’s history (Giusti 2006).

As many suggested, the new theatre could have been possibly built elsewhere, thus preserving the National Theatre and the continuity of its public function. This could have followed the path traced by the attempt to preserve the Pyramid of Tirana, opened in 1988 as a museum about the legacy of Enver Hoxha and now planned to become a multifunctional complex, in consideration of its role not only as a document and landmark but also because it had long acquired a new meaning for the population. In fact, despite the difficult and more recent past symbolized by the Pyramid, the will to preserve it stands as an example of the effort of the country to face (and re-interpret) its past, instead of erasing it. In the same way, a conservation project aimed at consistent or alternative reuse of the National Theatre could have contributed to adding a contemporary significance to the past stratifications linked to the fabric, already imbued of collective memory.

## 10.5 Conclusions

Twentieth-century architectural works are often the ones that are most easily neglected, given their specific characteristics, lack of appreciation by the public, and difficulties related to the preservation of novel and sometimes unique materials and construction techniques. While the values associated or recognized to a building can change over time, the historic fabric should be conserved so it could again be rediscovered, re-valued, and re-examined in relation to present multiple narratives (Musso 2017).

As we demonstrated, several reasons claimed the Tirana National Theatre to be preserved. Not only as a testimony of Albanian history and for its peculiar constructive system and materials, but also in consideration of its resilience, and its continuous public use during the last eighty years. Furthermore, the Theatre was deeply embedded in the citizens' collective memories and its significance was acknowledged by society and the international conservation community. In fact, inspired by democratic principles, heritage should be better considered as a practice, rather than as a mere object, a narrative and multifaceted process that concerns cultural identity in the present in relation to the past and can unite a community (Holtorf 2018). In this sense, the fact that the Theatre was imbued with collective memories, well-recognized by citizens and listed as a second category monument, demonstrated also how enough time passed for it to be judged without political bias.

Conservation, reuse, demolition, reconstruction, and new construction: perhaps the matter relates to which of these approaches to the built environment better suits each different national context. As also La Cecla (2008) states, to date demolition is one of the most profitable businesses in cities with a complicated urbanity, in which the signs of time are struggling to stratify and persist. Therefore, designing and building from scratch is very often preferred to reading and interpreting the urban fabric as a testimony of the transformation of the city. Nevertheless, in a widening and developing country like Albania, the local community's nostalgia for historical

buildings is inversely proportional to the traces that can still be read in the urban fabric.

At the same time, in the complex urban landscape of Tirana, the demolition of historic buildings not only creates voids that constitute tangible traces but is being used as a weapon in political struggles in favour of real estate plans for future property speculation.

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Nevertheless, after the demolition of Tirana National Theatre, a new paper by the Authors titled *Tirana National Theatre: Chronicle of an Announced Demolition* was accepted for publication in the *Journal of Architectural Conservation* and is forthcoming. Thus, the two contributions share the sections related to the historical events.

The Authors would like to remark that the contribution reflects their personal point of view and they are solely responsible for any error and/or inaccuracy. Consulted archival documents are in Albanian and Italian languages. English translations from Italian and Albanian provided within the text were prepared by the Authors.

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