

MATERIALISING MODERNITY IN RURAL SOCIALIST ALBANIA

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ABSTRACT.

During the 20th-century, Socialist Albania planned, adopted, and implemented large scale development and agricultural plans to modernize its rural areas. Those plans provided an experimental opportunity for new landscape and architectural ideas converging on the vision imposed by the regime. With the establishment of dedicated central-state institutions, aimed at designing and implementing the modern rural architecture and urban planning, Socialist Albania attempted the urbanisation of the countryside. A process that, while affirming an evolutionary continuity with the *'rational essence of tradition'*, tried to integrate it into the necessary development of the new socialist rurality. This article aims at investigating how the communist ideology materialised modernity in the Albanian rural architectural and territorial planning. To what extent traditional local architectural values have been reflected in the standardisation of the modern rural housing, for a classless society, characteristic of the Socialist planning during the land collectivisation process? Despite the socialist ideals inspired by scientific, technological, and cultural progress pushed towards a new urbanised rurality, *de facto*, the tension between tradition, nationalism and socialism shaped a new hybrid and modest rural architecture that sought to temper the characteristics of local genius loci in the universal qualities of socialist modernism. As part of the EU funded project *"Materializing Modernity — Socialist and Post-socialist Rural Legacy in Contemporary Albania"*, this contribution intends to provide a preliminary state of the art as baseline upon which develop further studies to discuss the Albanian example in the framework of European studies on modernist rural architecture and landscape.

1. INTRODUCTION

Socialist era represents for Albania an important historiographic period that, extending from the end to the WWII to the early 1990s, deeply impacted its territory and society. As Mëhilli pointed out, economically behind and with no working class, Albania looked at the Soviet model and tried to literally "forge a working class out of illiterate peasants".¹ Representing a turning point in Albanian modern history, socialist ideology and Soviet methods importantly affected a wide period in the overall palimpsest of 20th-century Albania architecture and urbanism. In fact, among the first generation of Albanian architects, there were also some that started the studies in western countries and then continued or re-started the studies in the URSS and, until the end of the diplomatic relationship with Moscow, professionals and experts regularly came in the country. Moreover, credits for constructions sector helped in the industrialisation and modernisation paths through the drafting of new socialist rural and urban masterplans, the implementation of land reclamation works, the building of residential complexes, societal and cultural edifices, and the establishment of productive fabrics. Despite the end of the relationships with the Soviet Union (1960–1961) and with China (1976–1978), Albania persisted in implementing Stalinism and closed into a harsh self-reliant system. The latter approach was reflected into the slogan by our own efforts [*me forcat tonë*], and with respect to architecture and urban planning, it was practically translated into the 1968's voluntary construction works initiatives carried out by organised brigades, and into major efforts put into the architectural standardisation process to supply the low technological construction level. All this as-

sociated with an increasingly indoctrination which, also in the field of architecture, aimed at the purge of any external influence while continuing the efforts in bridging the distances and differences between the urban centres and the countryside. This contribution aims at generally framing Albanian socialist modernity in the planning architectural field, introducing the discourse around the new socialist architecture by especially considering as representative the case concerning housing architecture in rural contexts. In fact, only around the 2000s socialist architecture and urban-countryside development in Albania has started to be considered as object of systematic scientific, even if fragmented, studies.²

How the communist ideology materialised modernity in the Albanian rural architectural and territorial planning? To what extent traditional local architectural values have been reflected in the standardisation of the modern rural housing, for a classless society, characteristic of the Socialist planning during the land collectivisation process? With the awareness that such a vast topic cannot be exhausted in this brief article, I attempt to introduce part of the research studies that I am currently carrying out in the context of the EU funded project *"Materializing Modernity — Socialist and Post-socialist Rural Legacy in Contemporary Albania"*.

2. SOCIALIST MODERNITY STARTS WITH THE AGRARIAN REFORM

In 1945, immediately after the Liberation occurred in the end of 1944, the first process aimed at modernising the country and implemented by the communist regime, consisted in a radical land reform. Such initiative foresaw the confisca-



Fig. 1. Rural house in Rëmbec, Korça, 1951. © Andromaqi Gjergji, *Etnografia Shqiptare*, 2, 1963, 94; Rural houses in: Nartë village, Vlorë, 2019–2020. © F. Pompejano, 2019 and 2020; Nivicë village, Sarandë, 2020. © N. Bardhoshi, 2020.

tion of the land ownership from large landlords and the distribution of the lands to peasantry families.³ During the implementation of the 1945's Agrarian Reform, which paved the way towards the establishment of agricultural production and livestock cooperatives and state-farms and the land collectivization process, a special commission composed mainly of engineers and an agronomist was appointed by the Albanian Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry to the study of rural housing typologies to be adopted in the planning of new inhabited rural villages, that would have followed the conclusion of the agrarian reform.⁴ The development of new rural inhabited centres composed of specific urban spaces and standardized architectural units was among the major aims of the building programme of socialism and communism during the dictatorship. Thus, simultaneously with the final acts of the land reform implementation and the proceeding of the land collectivisation process⁵, in 1947 specific directives for the establishment of the [*katundeve të rijë*], were issued by the Directorate of the Agrarian Reform of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forests, following a meeting with representatives from other different Ministries.⁶ According to these early directives, each different ministry was competent in studying and defining the requirements and the construction types needed in the new rural settlements to guarantee better living conditions to the peasantry. Generally, the place for the foundation of the

new rural villages had to be chosen based on favourable conditions for the development of an inhabited centres, thus preferring slightly hilly, dry, and protected land from floods. The development area also had to be such as to be able to provide each family with a plot of land of about 800–1500m². Following the directives of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forests which in addition to providing for the survey of the terrain was also responsible for the study of the most suitable housing types for peasant families, the responsibility for the masterplans' design and related regulatory document for the new rural villages was appointed to the Ministry of Public Works. For each new rural settlement, the number of resident families, the number, and types of buildings, as well as the number of rooms composing each building had to be established specifying which among the new settlements could be object of future developments and enlargements. Moreover, independently from the cooperative development, each new rural village had to be equipped with an oven, a cobbler's and a tailor's shop, a public toilet, and a plot for the possible future construction of a small hotel. With respect to the very first new rural housing, they were simple, single family one-storey dwellings, made of bricks, adobe, or stone and had to be furnished with a room with a chimney and a toilet *allaturka*.⁷ The simplicity of the plan composition and rooms' arrangement, the volumes, and elevations, but especially the construction techniques, demonstrated



Fig. 2. The construction of the refectory of the elementary school in the village of Ballaban, Përmet, by means of voluntary labour initiative of the alumni and teachers. © inside cover, *Bujqësia Socialiste*, 9, 1968.

how, since the very beginning, they strongly related to, and relied on, the local traditional building experience while trying to respond to the needs of the new rural socio-economic-cultural life (Fig. 1).

In the attempt to improve the living conditions of the peasantry, the Albanian architects had to materialise the communist ideology while responding to the fast pace of demographic growth, another consequent effect of the modernisation processes and policies of the countryside.⁸ Thus, in addition to the abovementioned one- or two-storey dwellings, small two- up to four-storey apartments blocks were introduced in the countryside landscape, especially in state-farm settlements, standing as a symbol of the reduction of differentials between town and countryside. By the 1955, Albania declared its society as an agrarian industrial society and at that time around 26110 dwellings were already built⁹, tracing the way to the creation of the new urbanised rurality. Furthermore, since introduction of the five-years plans the country was turned into a giant construction site and the urban and rural housing issues was addressed also through the introduction of the voluntary labour initiative (Fig. 2), not only as consequence of the late 1960s cultural-technological revolution, but also as regime's instrument to severely penalise the lives of people considered enemies of the state.

3. THE 'RATIONAL ESSENCE OF TRADITION' AND THE AESTHETIC PROBLEM

On May 6, 1971, in the dynamic implementation of socialism in Albania and twenty-seven years after the Liberation, the First National Meeting of the Albanian Architects was held in Tirana, organized by the Albanian Writers and Artists Association. Among the participants that took part in the debate there were representatives of the Party Central Committee's Politburo and the most representative architects, engineers, and urban planners of the Albanian context of that time. Before then, architecture was a matter of the political internal closed debate among the Ministries and the Party representatives. In the opening speech, the Ministry of Construction, the engineer Shinasi Dragoti, clearly stated which was the main responsibility of the new socialist architectural works in Albania:

*[they] must be characterized by the art and modern construction techniques applied with skill and dignity in adaptation to the real conditions of the country that is building socialism. They must preserve from generation to generation the stamp of the efforts and sweat of our people, who build socialism [...].*¹⁰

However, despite the glorious opening made by Dragoti,

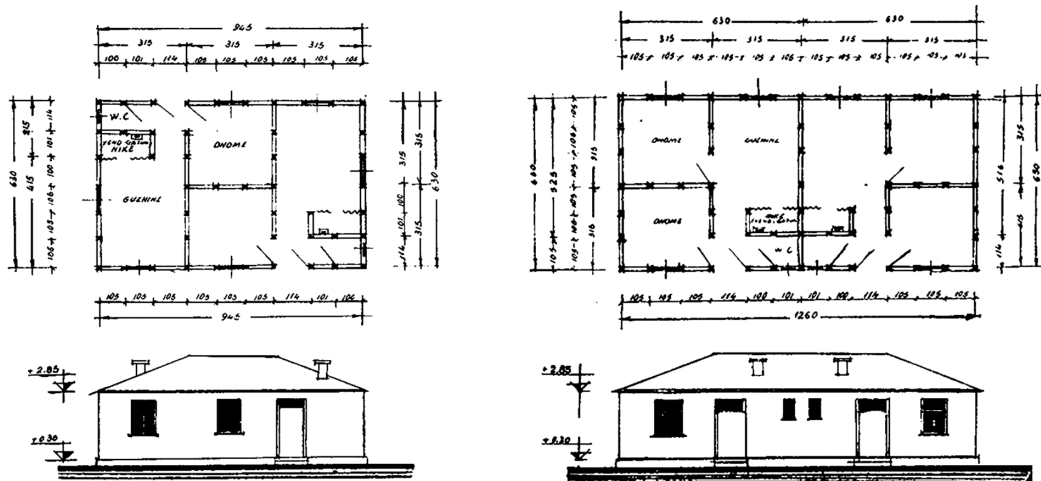


Fig. 3. The *projekti tip* adopted for the rural housing built by means of voluntary labour initiative of the peasantry of the agricultural state-farm in Lushnjë. © Mensur Ymeri, *Bujqësia Socialiste*, 2, 1968, 38–39

Sokrat Mosko in its report highlighted a series of problems and concerns related to the inconsistencies of urban and countryside masterplans, the monotony of architectural volumes, the widespread tendency towards the elaboration of too schematic and arid architectural forms and compositions, the missing of a 'sense of measure and scale' and the indifference towards the importance of aesthetics, the problems related to the standardisation process and the tendency to replicate buildings everywhere on the territory despite different local conditions.

Mosko particularly pointed out how this trend was observable in housing buildings:

*We are dealing with a serious inconsistency of our architecture with regard to this problem related to residential constructions that primarily arises from the great shortcomings at the professional level of our architects, in the great workload that they have to bear [...], in the most suitable conditions that [still] should be created and in the most correct enhancement of architectural creativity, in the knowledge and appropriate use of standardization, as well as in some concepts and attitudes towards the problems of aesthetics in architecture.*¹¹

In fact, standardisation [*tipizimi*], should have been considered not a final aim, but as a tool helping in the construction, industrialization, and mechanization process, thus serving as accelerator of the works pace. At the same time, standardisation, especially in the housing projects, contained the *seed of uniformity* fuelling the so criticized monotony of the architecture (Fig. 3). To Mosko, this was considered as the *tipizimi* internal contradiction to be solved by architects and engineers by paying more attention to the standardization of details and elements in accordance with

the project design process and regulations. In this sense, the architects had to look at the inherited buildings where form, function and aesthetic were balanced and organically reflected in the building's fabric. According to him, in the traditional buildings of the past, architectural elements were both functional and beautiful, and consequently, aesthetic issues were conceived not as an addition, but as a necessity. In this sense, the new Albanian socialist architecture had to attempt to represent the developments of the new classless society, reflecting the communist ideology and the economic and technical improvements of the country, but still in continuity with its rich tradition.

What was defined by Alimehmeti as the '*rational essence of tradition*' clearly indicated the intention to consider and rediscover the functional solutions of the interiors' arrangement, the construction structure, and aesthetic values of the inherited traditional architecture. Moreover, the new rural housing, in continuity with the traditional one, rather than offer a novel evolution of the housing design and plan solutions, revealed how modernity materialized in modest and simple architectural plans, forms and volumes. In fact, despite the Albanian socialist rural housing aimed at "*integrating step by step [new architectural] elements to respond to the demands that arise from the needs of the transformation of our new rural settlements*"¹² it remained modest in its architectural language and composition. To simple volumes corresponded simple, light-coloured, and clear, often not plastered, façades.

The socialist ideals inspired by scientific, technological, and cultural progress pushed Albania towards a new urbanized rurality constantly in tension between tradition, nationalism, and socialism. Thus, the Albanian architects shaped a new modest housing architecture that sought to

temper the characteristics of local genius loci in the universal qualities of socialist modernism.

4. CONCLUSION

In this paper I have attempted at providing for an overall excursus on the Albanian planned socialist rurality in terms of architectural efforts in the rural housing sector. Indeed, this contribution cannot be considered exhaustive, but rather as a preamble to the further research questions I will address in my current MSCA-IF research project.

To sum up, three main phases might be identified: 1) early post-war rural housing constructions characterised by one- two-storey single houses built in bricks, adobe or stones in the reclaimed lands or in pre-existing villages; 2) the development and implementation of the so-called standardised projects [*projekt tip*], with the introduction of up to three- or four-storey apartments blocks or low-rise flats in the countryside built in bricks with cast-in-place concrete slab floors 3) the voluntary construction housing initiative developed since the late 1960s' cultural revolution.

As also stated by Hall, in the formulation of the new architectural and urban planning four objectives seemed to appear important: the reduction of socio-economic differentials within society and geographical regions in terms of rural/agricultural and industrial/urban; the granting of people's living standards and facilities in line with the socialist ideals; the reclamation and the enhancement of agricultural land and agricultural production; the study and the promotion of Albanian traditions and customs as well as the preservation of traditional architecture and archaeological finds.¹³ Of course, considering the socialist ideals, the emphasised roles of the latter were also ideologically explained as educational for the masses and representative of the glory of the past national culture and popular tradition.

Consequently, from this preliminary analysis emerges a clear tendency manifested by the Albanian architects, to deal with three main characteristics or values especially acknowledged to the inherited traditional architecture: the function, the construction/structure, and the aesthetic. Nevertheless, in responding to the impellent transformation of the country, those architectural values had to cope and dialogue with the introduction of mechanisation and standardisation processes, new building techniques and imported technologies, and socialist ideals for the building of a classless society, but also with increasing economic shortages and poor-quality building materials.

Interesting aspects affecting the overall Albanian architectural production relates to the fact that communism was experimented in and implemented by the most backward European society in the post-war period that, despite the socialist modernisation efforts, at the dawn of the regime's collapse still had the lowest level of urbanisation in Europe. Moreover, to corroborate the Albanian case within the main palimpsest of European modernisation processes imple-

mented in the field of architecture and urban planning, further studies should be carried out, considering the peculiarity of the Albanian communist architectural experience which, after the Sino-Albanian split in 1978, developed in a harsh self-reliant dictatorship context, trying to transmute and merge values from the past and socialist values into tangible architectural fact.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This article builds upon preliminary considerations stemming from the scientific research project that has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 896925. This contribution reflects only the author's view, and the EU Commission is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.

NOTES

- 1 E. Mëhilli, *From Stalin to Mao. Albania and the Socialist World*, 2017, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 6
- 2 See among others, A. Stiller, *Albania — Decades of Architecture in Political Context, Catalogue of the exhibition, October 10th- November 22nd*, Wien, Mury Salzmann Verlag, 2019; D. Veizaj, et al., "Form follows ideology. The communist Albania — An almost unknown story", *Proceedings of the European Association for Urban History (EAUH) 14th International Conference, August 29th-September 1st*, Rome, 2018; R. Kodra, "Architectural monumentalism in transitional Albania", *Studia Ethnologica Croatica*, 29 (1), 2017, 193–223; O. Lelaj, *Nën shenjë e modernitetit*, Tirana, Pika pa sipërfaqe, 2015; O. Ndreçka, & F. Nepravishta, "The Impact of Socialist Realism in the Albanian Architecture in 1945–1990", *Architecture and Urban Planning*, 9, 2014, 27–32; D. Miço, "When "Words Fall on Deaf Ears" — An Outline of Albania's Socialist Architecture", A. M. Zahariade, *Printed in Red. Architectural Writings during Communism*, Bucharest, "Ion Mincu" University of Architecture and Urbanism, 2013.
- 3 A. Cungu & J. F. M. Swinnen, "Albania's radical agrarian reform", *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 47 (3), 1999, 606.
- 4 Establishment of a commission for the housing types for villages that are expected to be founded following the application of agrarian reform, 8 October 1945, AQSH, F. 499, v. 1945, dos. 37, fl. 1
- 5 In 1946, the land collectivization began on the plain areas and was extended to hilly and mountainous areas by the mid-1950s. At the same time, early in the 1950s, the firsts agricultural production cooperatives and state-farms were also established. The result of the collectivization process was the nationalization of all land in 1976.
- 6 Minute of the meeting of the commission for the drafting of regulatory plans for new villages, 9 August 1947, AQSH, F. 498, v. 1947, dos. 41, fl. 4.
- 7 Ibidem, fl. 6.
- 8 During the 1951–1955 period of early industrialization, the country's urban population increased by 52% and between 1970 and 1978 the high rural population growth rates represented the 72% of the national total increase. See: Derek R. Hall & Andrew H. Dawson, *Albania, Planning in Eastern Europe*, Croom Helm Series in Geography and Environment, London, Routledge, 1987, 45; Derek R. Hall, "Housing policy in Albania", J. A. A. Sillince, *Housing Policies in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union*, London, Taylor & Francis, 1990, (Kindle edition).
- 9 Ibidem, 36.
- 10 Takimi Kombëtar i Arkitektëve, *Nëndori — Revistë e përmuajshme letrare-artistike shoqërore-politike*, 6 (18), 1971, 3.
- 11 S. Mosko, "Për një nivel më të lartë në krijimtarinë tonë urbanistike dhe arkitektonike", raport, *Nëndori — Revistë e përmuajshme letrare-artistike shoqërore-politike*, 6 (18), 1971, 18–19.
- 12 F. Alimehmeti, "Mbi disa veçori të banesës fshatare të zones fushore-kodrinore të Tiranës në vitet e para pas çlirimit", *Monumentet*, 1(31), Tirana, Instituti i Monumenteve të Kulturës, 1986, 116.
- 13 See Hall 1990, (Kindle edition).

