

The Impact of Socialist Realism in the Albanian Architecture in 1945-1990

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Abstract – The socialist realism principles, similar to other Eastern European countries, guided the construction and architecture in Albania from 1945 to 1990. The research done on various case studies of socialist architecture constructed in this period in Tirana tries to shed light on the topic of great interest nowadays regarding this style as part of Albanian heritage. The paper describes the history of socialist realism and the influence of the Albanian Communist Party on the development of the architecture during the socialist period. It demonstrates how the Albanian architecture development was radically changed by the socialist ideology and how this style was supported by the post-war architects. It is argued that the socialist realism style was predominant in the Albanian architecture of that period and this heritage needs to be preserved for next generations.

Keywords – History of architecture, socialist realism, dictatorship, ideology, theories of socialism.

Totalitarian regimes are characterized by attempts to control everyone and everything at any cost; by force and propaganda, they impose a single truth about the world and people. Lenin's Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 was conducted in the name of socialism, and the proletarian state power passed under the control of the Communist Party.

After the Second World War, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) carried out a powerful political and ideological invasion in many countries of Eastern Europe. Albania entered into the fold of the Soviet Union, "impatient" to pay tribute to Stalin. New elements of the communist ideology like socialist realism were introduced in all areas of culture and art. The control of the state was imposed over literature, music, visual arts and in the field of architecture and urban planning.

The relationship between architecture and politics is one of the dominant features characteristic of the Albanian architecture in the period from 1945 to 1990. Although the beginning of 1990s was the end of the socialist realism period, even at present in Albania there is a "strange" political approach to the heritage of that period. In fact, there are many problems regarding this heritage. First, it is not considered as a contribution in the Albanian history of architecture; on the contrary, there are continued attempts to destroy any trace or proof of the socialist realism period. Secondly, the buildings dating back to that period are often subject to deterioration, loss of identity and destruction. Thirdly, lack of maintenance and total abandonment make this heritage almost unrecoverable.

I. HISTORICAL DESCRIPTION OF SOCIALIST REALISM IN ARCHITECTURE

Socialist realism was developed in the Soviet Union and after the triumph of 'people's democracies' became the dominant style in other socialist countries.

Socialist realism is an artistic procedure whose essence consists in reflecting reality captured in its revolutionary

development, in a truthful and historically concrete way. It demands that the artist realize a definite aim – the formulation of the new man in whom ideological wealth, beauty, spiritual and physical perfection coexist harmoniously. The theory of socialist realism implies dialectical relations between form and content [5].

During the October Revolution of 1917, the Bolsheviks established an institution called PROLETKULT (The Proletarian Cultural and Enlightenment Organizations), which sought to put all arts into the service of the dictatorship [12].

Socialist realism became the state policy in 1932 when the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin promulgated the decree "On the Reconstruction of Literary and Art Organizations"[17]. The establishment of Moscow and Leningrad Union of Artists in that time ended the history of the post-revolutionary art. The epoch of Soviet art began.[9, 28–29]. The style of socialist realism, according to Anders Aman, appeared for the first time in 1933 in the Soviet Union on the occasions of the national competition for the Palace of the Soviets in Moscow [1, 48]. On February 1931, Soviet architects received invitations to bid for the Palace of Soviets design. Until February 1933, several competitions were held, and many architects participated, but there was not any winner [7].

To indoctrinate the masses, the socialist realism ideology was also forced in the arts and sciences, culture, and architecture [3, 9-10]. The Union Congress of All Soviet Architects, held in June 19, 1937, was a very important event for Soviet architecture. At this congress, the code of socialist realism architecture was drafted, which states: "The proletariat must create a style in Architecture" [3, 9-10]. The Soviet architecture borrows the form from the past, essentially from classical architecture that should incorporate new content along with the old form. According to the Congress of Architects, a classic architectural style was the only valid architecture, and as literature of that time required a red Tolstoy, architecture should have developed a red Palladio [4, 54].

In conjunction with the socialist classical style of architecture, socialist realism was the officially approved type of art in the Soviet Union. All material goods and means of production belonged to the community as a whole; this included the means of art production, which were also seen as powerful propaganda tools [16]. Architecture in the Soviet Union during the socialist period was associated with the socialist realism school of art and architecture.

Function and form were the basic concepts of Modernist architecture. The corresponding concepts in socialist realism were "socialist content and national form". A building like a novel or a symphony had to be "socialist in content and national in form" [1, 49-50].



Fig. 1. “New Albania” Cinema Studio. Source: [19].



Fig. 2. Former Central Committee of the Labor Party of Albania. Source: Authors' archive.

After WWII, the new architecture became prevalent in many areas. The victorious architecture became ubiquitous. It was seen from the ornamental details of the buildings to the sameness of the facades in different structures, city blocks, town squares, and the city as a whole. Architecture was seen as an art and was demonstrated by the style of prominence and distinction [1, 50–56].

This method became popular also in other Eastern European countries, such as Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland, East Germany, Yugoslavia, and Albania, too.

Since the creation of the Socialist Camp with the Warsaw Treaty in 1949, the two main superpowers realized the contradictory ideologies. The contest between these ideologies, as in other fields of art and culture, was also waged in architecture. There was a mentality in ‘the people’s democratic republics’ in Eastern Europe that everything had to be socialist in content and national in form. It had to be done quickly, with a revolutionary urgency.

The socialist realism in architecture, until the 1990s, had been mostly, but not always influenced by the Soviet Union. Even though the basic political conditions were the same in all countries of the Socialist Camp, events took different courses. Albania was a particular example of loyalty towards Stalinist ideology that was reflected in all areas of art and culture.

II. THE INITIAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE ARCHITECTURE OF SOCIALIST REALISM IN ALBANIA

The Albanian Communist Party and its leader Enver Hoxha gained power in Albania in 1944 [7, 11]. During the following

years, the Soviet economic, political and ideological model was introduced. The People’s Republic of Albania, which became one of the most fanatic communist states, was totally isolated from the rest of the world after 1978 when all connections with other countries had been broken. Hoxha ruled Albania as a dictator until his death in 1985. Albania was by then the poorest country in Europe [15].

The communist ideology was reflected in the physical urban environment, which changed in a harsh way during this period. New towns were built as well as many large industrial facilities, city centers of existing cities were re-constructed, statues and monuments were raised and street names were changed. The historical buildings that did not suit the dictatorship ideology were turned down. Religious buildings were demolished or turned into profane buildings since Albania in theory was an atheistic state.

Construction and architecture in Albania after the Second World War until 1990, exactly for 45 years, were guided by the principles of socialist realism as aesthetic design concepts, as well as the norms and rules that were binding and strong for the architects and engineers. There were radical changes in social and economic structure, as well as in the urban structure and the Albanian urban heritage because of the socialist realism ideas.

In terms of architecture, after the war the style, the “direction” or “language” of the Albanian architecture and urban planning was expected to change. The dominating options were to choose the “direction” and the style following the examples of communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, although in many Albanian cities solid foundations of the Italian rationalist architecture, MIAR (Movimento Italiano di Architettura Razionale) were laid. The Albanian architecture ‘decided’ and adopted the method of socialist realism. The genesis of the Albanian architecture in the communist period was based in social realism theory and practice of the Soviet Union, started at the Union Congress of All Soviet Architects [2, 14–15].

III. THE SOVIET INFLUENCE

During the years 1947–48, Albania was under the Soviet influence and also under the influence of Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which did not blindly follow the canons of socialist realism.

The first Albanian architects of the post-war period who had studied in the Soviet Union arrived in the years 1951–52. After completing the studies, they began working in the home country, followed later by many engineers and architects, who came from the socialist countries of Eastern Europe, part of the socialist camp, Soviet satellites as our country was.

The latter ones practiced closer to the contemporary architecture style, thanks to a tradition rooted in these countries before the Second World War. The prevailing education and the spirit of the time consequently brought the projects that strictly followed the Soviet social realism patterns. Any deviation was called “Anti-Sovietism” and was punished. Punitive measures were conditioned by the status or class of the individuals and also their political credibility [2, 54–55].

Among the first buildings that reflected the socialist style in Albania was the industrial building of “Stalin” Textiles Factory (Kombinati i tekstileve “Stalin”), designed by the architects that

came from the Soviet Union. It was constructed in the early 1950s in the suburbs of Tirana. The buildings of the Faculty of History and Philology and the “New Albania” Cinema Studio headquarters (Kinostudio “Shqipëria e re”), built in 1951–52 in Tirana, were also designed by the Soviet architects (Fig. 1).

Another example of the Soviet influence in Albanian architecture was the building of the Central Committee of the Labor Party of Albania, located in the main Boulevard of Tirana, designed by an Albanian architect Anton Lufi (Fig. 2).

This situation continued until the break of the relations with the Soviet Union. The current stream known at that time was criticized as regressive and archaic because it was obligatory in the 1930s.

Even in Albania, the elements of classical architecture in socialist realism style were criticized and abandoned due to the phenomenon that occurred in the Soviet Union, because of the generally adopted policy. The criticism was concentrated on the excessive and pointless decoration of the building facades while the main focus of government remained urban development through urban policies for the industrial and agrarian development of Albania [4, 14–17].

After the death of Stalin, the rehabilitation of the contemporary architecture was performed. The unnecessary ornamentation was removed. The lack of decorations and many other elements that had characterized the style of architecture up to that period in Albania was considered as construction cost reduction and loyalty to the socialist realism method.

Furthermore, the facilities built with low-quality available materials and without exterior plastering seemed very poor. The architects designed the buildings following the requirements and prescribed conditions. For this reason, the opportunities for something new and aesthetically attractive in architecture were restricted to usual facilities. Obviously, there were special designing requests from the government for the buildings of special importance. In such cases, the architects and engineers had to make use of new concepts and construct the buildings using new good quality materials.

For several years (till in the early 1960s), the Stalinist architecture was a model. The break of the relations with the former Soviet Union marked a relatively difficult period in the Albanian architecture. After the break of the relations, the friendly warm period in which the maximum was obtained from architectural projects and professionals from the former Soviet Union ended. Many buildings (even some very important ones) were “abandoned” and Albanian engineers and architects were forced to continue the construction of these major works by making changes, without excluding Stalinist ideology, but bringing it in the most rational form.

The Palace of Culture was one of these buildings. It was built in the location of the former Tirana’s Old Bazaar. The first stone was symbolically put by the former First Secretary of the USSR Communist Party, Nikita Khrushchev, in 1959. The building was a gift to Albanians from the Soviet government. The Soviet design group presented three versions of the project. The members of Politburo selected the winning version. In this version, changes should have been made, so a part of Soviet designers stayed in Albania to correct the design idea. A group of Albanian architects



Fig. 3. The Palace of Culture in the 1960. Source: [18]



Fig. 4. The Palace of Culture in the 2013. Source: Authors’ archive.

and engineers also took part in the project to help in the matter. After finishing the project, the Soviet staff left, keeping in touch with the group of designers who continued to work on the project.

The Albanian group of designers had never had the full project design, so the break of the relations caused a very big “cramp” for the work progress. The work began according to the drawings and supplements to the existing drawings, so that the project could be as close as possible to the Soviet one [11, 54–55]. Meanwhile, the Politburo and the government wanted the Palace of Culture to become larger. As a result, the project was extended, and the number of floors was increased, a library space was added, even though it was not part of the project designed by the Soviet architects (Fig. 3 and 4).

IV. THE INFLUENCE OF THE LABOR PARTY OF ALBANIA

The genesis of socialist realism architecture in Albania can be found in the Stalinist ideology and the decisions of the Labor Party of Albania (The Albanian Communist Party “PPSH”). At the Politburo meetings that used to be called “Plenum,” guidelines, theses, principles, and codes were processed and approved. This method was strongly supported by the group of the post-war Albanian architects. They graduated from architecture universities of the Soviet Union and other countries of the Communist Camp. It was also supported by the creativity of the Russian architects who were invited to design some of the important buildings in Albania.

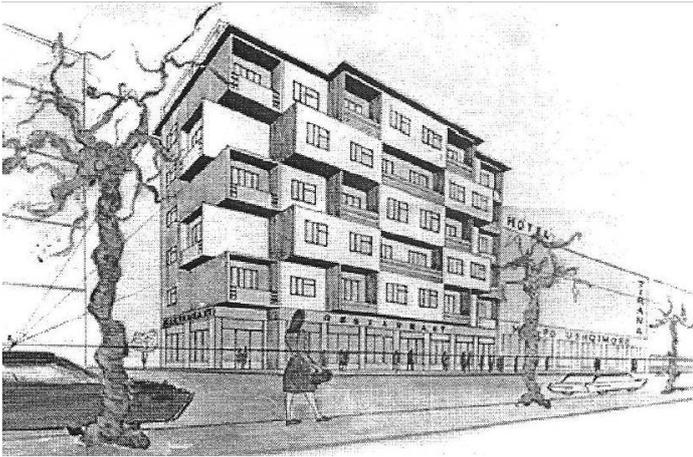


Fig. 5. Perspective drawing of the residential building. Source: [13, 79–80]



Fig. 6. View of the residential building. Source: [13, 79–80]

The Labor Party led the policy of the construction and architecture in Albania, considering the Ministry of Construction as the principal institution in charge for designs, urban studies, engineering and architectural buildings. In the majority, the buildings designed under the influence of socialist realism style in Albania were those with socio-cultural and administrative functions. The socialist realism style in the Albanian architecture was treated as a political and ideological approach, and it was always mentioned by political propaganda that this style was powerful and conceived in such way to fight against the foreign architectural models of the capitalist countries. [13, 76]

After the 1970s, Albania as a poor country met the demands for a rational, simple and functional architecture based on the modern technology of that time and the industrialization of the construction. The method of socialist realism style was always a political dogma, because it had no executive value. It did not help as a design instrument. The socialist content and the national forms remain only slogans.

The construction sector should follow the slogan “to build faster, better and cheaper” [10]. Under this motto and with voluntary work the majority of the buildings in socialist Albania were built.

In many cases, the architect’s initiatives and attempt to “dare” in functional and constructive solutions, or in the design of facades, were immediately rejected by the Ministry of Construction claiming that these solutions would be costly. An architect of the time stated that there was a Ministry Control Team that in separate social circles was called the “saving” team, because although the design of the facilities had a low budget, there were still attempts to reduce costs. For this reason, we can say that many of the buildings constructed during the socialism period in Albania could have been better.

The influence of the communist party was present in the life of everyone because, under the socialist system, there was a rigid rules that all engineers and specialists, as Party cadres, were under the management of the department of the party base organizations, in order to exercise centralized control. Whenever the architects wanted to be different, the communist authorities were not satisfied. The project process was closed; it had to do with the constructing matter, not accepting its artistic attributes, since the construction itself was included in economic plans [13].

According to Hoxha, First Secretary of Labor Party of Albania, “anything that will be built, will serve the people, because they will live in these built cities, will walk in the streets and will enjoy the sunlight that will penetrate everywhere” [6].

The most important aspect of architecture, the aesthetic, was left aside, neglected. It was considered only on special occasions for specific buildings. Only the government and the Labor Party representatives could decide where the ornaments could be used on definite buildings. A key element in the construction matter was the functional solution. Every extra request was regarded as excessive and finally was not accepted. Following this method, the progress was very difficult. The Technical Councils were the only place where the discussions were held. It was up to the council members to make decisions on this matter.

There were numerous cases when the Communist Party, present more than ever, “revolted” against the architects attempts to design the facilities in a modern style, the so-called revisionism style used at that time [13]. The system had a policy: building low cost living facilities, and building the administrative state facilities with relatively high budget (considering the poverty in Albania). The initiatives and attempts of the architects to disregard the rules, as mentioned above, were eliminated immediately. But still there were courageous architects whose design and work were attacked and punished by the system due to economic, ideological and political reasons [13, 79–80]. A residential building of the architect Maks Velo, the so-called “Dice residential building” (also known as “Cubic Residential Building”) built in the 1970s, is a good example (Fig. 5 and 6).

The building attracted the attention of the people, and certainly it was considered as a trend towards modernism, not only by those who in a hidden way shared the same opinion, but also by the ones who were against and attacked these structures together with its architect. The centrally located building would be a continuous provocation for the design style of that period. The building itself would be a target of charges, especially after the architect was sentenced in prison in 1978. The building was sometimes called modernist, cubist, and the government was in favor of its demolition. In an article in the “Drita” newspaper [14]

it was written, “The cost of an apartment in a residential building next to the store department (called MAPO) doubled. There was a drawback in designing the apartment; there was unjustified living and service space of different sizes and shapes. Because of the “free architecture”, the façade does not only lack functional balconies, but the foreign impact has also affected the function and the facade of the building. The economic effect is immense, because the budget used to construct this building would be sufficient for building twice the number of the apartments. The contradictions come from the foreign impact and trends. The cutback regime is strengthened by the beauty and simplicity, which is in harmony with the national style, contradicting the redundancy, the luxury and the overuse of expensive materials” [13].

Despite the written and spoken comments, the project of this building normally was introduced in the Technical Council of the Ministry of Construction as well as another special commission that purposely checked this building.

As mentioned above, for the buildings that were considered important for the government, a considerable budget was allocated and the most successful architects were hired for their design.

The National Historical Museum was one of the important buildings for the government and the Party. They had great requirements and expectations with regard to its construction. The impact of the representatives of Politburo was stronger than ever. They decided and assigned how it should be designed and built. As it was written in the newspapers of that time “the museum stands as a monument that the Party raised in the glorious and heroic history of our country in centuries” [14].

The National Historical Museum was inaugurated on 28 October of 1981 and became one of the biggest museum buildings in Albania (Fig. 7). Located in the western side of the square of “Skanderbeg”, the museum is one of the most important architectural works, playing an important role in the formation of the center of Tirana. The surface area is 27,000 m². Arch. Sokrat Mosko guided the leading group of the project, with several professionals from the Institute of Design (Instituti i Projektimeve), and other instances.

In the first years of project design, frequent meetings with the government authorities were inevitable, because their thoughts and suggestions served as a solid foundation for the development of the project. In Enver Hoxha’s works, there are certain remarks regarding the construction of the National Historical Museum in terms of its volume and the impact of the ideology used for the design of the building. He was dissatisfied with the lack of political, ideological, cultural and military concepts in the design of the museum, and he also urged to reveal (by means of this building) the Marxist - Leninist point of view.

The dictator himself did not hesitate to give his opinion on the architectural concept, forcing the professionals not to have extravagant ideas about graceful and gigantic buildings. On the contrary, they had to ascribe the museum national and traditional features. There were more and more orientations and suggestions, and also there were comparisons and parallelism, such as “the belt of ammo, “as an identifying element or symbol of the national war of liberation, led by the Communist Party”.



Fig. 7. Photo of the National Historical Museum in 1988. Source: Authors’ archive.

Such interventions were to some extent harsh, interfering with the creative process and the work of the architect [6].

CONCLUSIONS

For several years, the socialist realism style was a model for the Albanian architecture and urban planning. After the break of the relations with the former Soviet Union, the ideology led the policy of construction and architecture according to the directives of the Communist Party.

The socialist ideology led the policy of the construction and architecture in Albania during 1945–90. The socialist realism method affected not only political and administrative buildings, but also socio-cultural, educational and service buildings. The common point of view among the people is to forget totally, destroy any memories of the facts and buildings of that period. This happens because the communist period is still recent and many Albanians directly or indirectly suffered during this period, but on the other hand, there are several buildings considered as communist heritage that carry cultural values and represent an important period in the Albanian architecture.

The communist heritage should be recognized and preserved for the next generations. The best way to do this is to give a possibility to better understand the past better as well as the present of their society. There are several buildings that are recognized as important architectural examples of social realism ideology, and they represent aesthetics and functionality features.

The socialist realism ideology affected the landscape and cityscape in almost every aspect of architecture and urban planning. The most important thing to do with the built heritage of this period is not to separate these buildings from the history of the Albanian architecture. Although this is considered hard to do in the cultural landscape produced and transformed by a dictatorship, because some of the buildings clearly belong to the system’s ideology.

The rest of the remaining heritage of the socialist realism in the Albanian architecture should necessarily be preserved due to the following reasons:

Despite the conditions of the political system, the attempts of a great number of architects succeeded in designing many buildings that even today have a special and noticeable importance.

It is an asset of that period in the field of design and construction that reflects the mentality of that system.

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