

## “Negative” Cultural Heritage: destruction or conservation?

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### **Abstract**

In the 21 century cultural heritage has been piling up. We have now more buildings worth preserving than ever. What was considered last century as modern architecture is today considered as cultural heritage. A growing awareness towards heritage followed by a growing number of national and international organizations is emerging everywhere.

Unfortunately not every historic building can be preserved or restored. They often become an obstacle to urban planning on account of their maintenance costs and inadaptability to the dynamic of modern development. Which type of cultural heritage needs to be preserved then? As a strong element in the building of national identity, heritage is often charged with meanings that can change as result of political shifts. Much sharper is the question of what to do with heritage that reminds us of a painful or distressing period.

Although our study analyzes examples of heritage conservation experiences, in different countries, its core questions concerns Albanian preservation policies. It attempts to open a debate between architects and conservation experts on which kind of heritage represents the best Albania nowadays and what needs to be protected.

The study is organized in three parts. In the first part the study will consider the concept of heritage and its links with national identity in the Balkans. In the second part we will analyze elements that contributed to building of Albanian identity. Lastly we will study how national identity reflects in the Albanian cultural heritage conservation policies in three periods, the period from independence to the Second World War, during the communist regime and lastly nowadays conservation. We will focus on a current issue: the history of the construction of Tirana’s city center, its importance in the urban organization and political significance and whether we need to keep or destroy buildings inherited from communist and fascist periods.

### **1. HERITAGE AS A CONCEPT**

The creation of World Heritage List as part of the World Heritage Convention in 1972 has been since then a great way to document interest towards heritage in the international arena. In 2011 we can speak about 936 listed properties. The increasing number of sites that are inscribed each year testifies the increasing consciousness towards heritage but as well a better understanding of the advantages that possessing a site brings to the development of tourism and economy. Above all the typology of site which is proposed for inscription to the World Heritage List, shows the evolution of national cultural politic, how heritage is perceived and which type of heritage is chosen to be representative for a country in the international arena.

What is heritage? The explicit meaning, the word implies, is that of a precious property inherited from the family because of its economic and spiritual value.

The heritage concept has run a long way to the definition that UNESCO<sup>1</sup> gives nowadays as “...*the entire corpus of material signs - either artistic or symbolic - handed on by the past to each culture and, therefore, to the whole of humankind. As a constituent part of the affirmation and enrichment of cultural identities, as a legacy belonging to all humankind, the cultural heritage gives each particular place its recognizable features and is the storehouse of human experience.*”

The positive result of this definition is that it contributed to the broadening of the time and space limits, in which cultural heritage is considered. It no longer names as heritage only the one prior to the ninetieth century but also the modern one. It neither prioritizes a culture towards another. Every culture has the same value and therefore they produce heritage worth preserving.

The negative output is that the meaning of cultural heritage has become to general. It seems like every kind of object or building can be considered as cultural heritage if it has good and solid arguments supporting it. Ashworth, Graham and Tunbridge would argue the word heritage is becoming good for everything being a word, “...*more widely used than understood ...*”<sup>2</sup> Nowadays we talk about modern heritage, industrial heritage, colonialist heritage, slavery heritage and uncountable other types of heritage.

How did we arrive to this recent boom of heritage? Buildings and natural sites have been there since centuries but we are talking about their historic and esthetic values starting from nineteenth - twentieth century<sup>3</sup> and we take more action than ever now.

Countries all around the World are competing to have as many sites as possible inscribed in the World Heritage List and as result almost every country has one<sup>4</sup>. For most State Parties having internationally recognized heritage means a place in the international political arena<sup>5</sup>. Other reasons for inscription, beside preservation, would be gain of political prestige, opening of perspectives for tourism and commercial heritage industry.

Authors would argue that this “hunger” for heritage is maybe “*sign of a lack of confidence towards future*”<sup>6</sup> typical to our period. Thus by recognizing heritage, we have material proves of our existence and particularity in front of a world which is globalizing at tremendous speed. The emergency factor has always been very relevant to us in recognizing heritage and building institutions to protect it<sup>7</sup>. The fact that history starts talking about cultural heritage in a moment of high emergency, as a response to the vandalism of French Revolution<sup>8</sup>, makes us believe that heritage has always responded to contemporary needs. Therefore heritage is a contemporary production and we value heritage esthetic and historical values based on our modern conceptions about them.

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<sup>1</sup> Draft Medium Term Plan 1990-1995, (UNESCO, 25 C/4, 1989, p.57)

<sup>2</sup> Ashworth, Graham and Tunbridge, *A geography of heritage*, Arnold Press.London, 2000.

<sup>3</sup> CHOAY Françoise, *L'allégorie du patrimoine*, Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1988

<sup>4</sup> From 195 countries that have ratified the World Heritage Convention of 1972, 153 of them have at least one property inscribed in the World Heritage List, available online at <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/stat#d2>

<sup>5</sup> To remind that the very recent acception of membership of Palestina at UNESCO in 31 October 2011, steered a huge international debate and changed the position of the country vis-à-vis the United Nations.

<sup>6</sup> RICCA Simone, *Conservation, politique et patrimoine mondial au Moyen Orient*, at J.-C. David, S. Müller-Celka, *Patrimoines culturels en Méditerranée orientale : recherche scientifique et enjeux identitaires*.

<sup>7</sup> International institutions such as UNESCO or Blue Shield were funded as a response to the destruction of Second World War.

<sup>8</sup> ICCROM Working Group *'Heritage and Society, Definition of Cultural Heritage, references to documents in the history'*, January 2005, information available online at <http://cif.icomos.org>

## 1.1 NATIONAL IDENTITY AND HERITAGE IN THE BALKANS

The Balkan has unfortunately always been a very fertile soil for nationalism studies. With the fall of the Ottoman Empire and rising of the new Nation States, under the control and support of the Great Powers, in the end of the nineteenth- beginning of twentieth century, theories on national identities start being conceived in all Balkan countries.

Special attention was brought, by the Balkan countries, to the creation of the image that they would have in front of Europe. We agree with the point of view of Stéphane Yerasimos<sup>9</sup>, who argues that the Balkans have an intermediary geographic and cultural position between occident and orient. For Yerasimos there are two frontiers and three geopolitical spaces: the occidental Europe, the orient and the Balkans in the middle. The first frontier is between the Catholics Croatian and Slovenians and the orthodox Serbians. This frontier doesn't indicate any geographical demarcation and the population on the two sides have the same Slavic origins. However it is constituted by different religious and cultural evolution of the peoples. With the ottoman occupation of the Balkans this will be the frontier between Muslim and Catholic world. For European people this represents nowadays the frontier between occident and orient. The second frontier is a geographical one situated in the Taurus Mountains between Anatolia, Syria, Mesopotamia and Iran Plate. For Balkan people this represents the real frontier between what they consider orient.

After five centuries of ottoman occupation the new Balkan states would aspire being part of Europe but at the same time they were rooted very deeply in the orient. Their identity was to be created based on the rejection of everything inherited from the ottomans past and the quick adoption of "modern" culture. Maria Todorova<sup>10</sup> points out the Balkans identity is not a genuine one, it is created as a reflection to the image that "the civilized world", Europe and North America, had of them. Moreover, Todorova argues that their self-identities, constructed during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, were the result of opposition to the "oriental others" which would be Ottoman Empire, Turkey or even regions in within the peninsula itself.

To the Europeans the "*homo balcanicus*" is, a frightening creature that somehow has skipped some phases of modern cultural evolution. On the other hand this creature is fascinating. Todorova continues that an increasing interest of Europeans in the late eighteen and nineteenth centuries, initiates as result of commercial and diplomatic relations re-established after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Diplomatic bodies produced maps and reports on the Balkan country they were established recently. Travelers would, on their side, write travel book. In all this documents, the Balkan peoples are described sometimes as violent barbarians and thieves and sometimes as very handsome "*bon sauvages*", with elegant and elaborated manners as the prejudice brought by the writer would dictate<sup>11</sup>. The European foreigner plays a decisive role in the development of nationalist ideologies. By political and cultural influence, not only they support national awakening but they provoke it.

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<sup>9</sup> Stéphane. YERASIMOS, *Questions D'orient - Frontières Et Minorités, Des Balkans Au Caucase.* Editions La Découverte, 1993.

<sup>10</sup> Maria Todorova, *Slavic Review*, University of Illinois, Vol.53, No2 1994, pp. 453-482

<sup>11</sup> Edit Durham was one of these travellers who visited the Balkans by the end of nineteenth-beginning of twentieth century. She wrote many books about Albania and has been criticized for her pro-Albanian and against Serbian attitude.

On the other hand internal developments such as the administrative division of the Ottoman Empire in *millets*<sup>12</sup> influenced awakening of feelings of belonging to communities based on religion.

In terms of heritage the traveler's attention was initially drawn to monuments of classical antiquity that were finally made available<sup>13</sup>. European interest to classical antiquity and then to byzantine monuments will later influence the perception that Balkan countries will have of their own heritage.

Ottoman Empire left behind a very rich heritage. Their occupation guaranteed long periods without internal wars known as "*Pax Ottomanica*" and the development of a rich industrial cities network. The existing cities urban system was slowly modified in order to correspond to the ottoman liberal urbanism and Muslim way of life. Many other cities such as Tirana, Tetovo, Sarajevo, Banja Luka, Elbasan, Kavala, Tripoli etc, were born in the crossroads of production and commerce system. Most of Balkan cities by the beginning of the twentieth century look very much the same. The urban landscape was composed of wooden timber houses in the middle of green gardens and mosques that dominated the skyline. Most cities had a bazaar in which social life was displayed and conversations were held in different languages according to the necessity<sup>14</sup>.

Two different reactions towards ottoman heritage can be observed. The first reaction was denial, followed by destruction. Many architectural ensembles, bazaars and religious buildings were demolished in the name of modernism dictated by nationalism. Machiel Kiel brings us shocking numbers of mosques destroyed in Serbia, Greece, Bulgaria, FYROM and Albania<sup>15</sup>. As he writes the Ottoman Turkish had the misfortune to be the last conquerors of Balkans, therefore it was very possible for them to be designated as "the other" the enemy which heritage should be decimated to create place for a new heritage more national.

The second reaction was appropriation. This is especially pertinent in the approach to vernacular architecture. This heritage was assimilated from most countries and named traditional or popular, as it was the case in the communist countries. The same type of house was called typical Albanian in Albania, typical Greek in Greece, Macedonian in Macedonia or typical Serbian in Serbia. Authors like N.C. Moutsopoulos<sup>16</sup>, Shkodra<sup>17</sup> and Gabrian<sup>18</sup> spent their entire life, trying to relate the nineteenth century house of their country to the ancient one<sup>19</sup>. However the spatial organization, the façade and every architectural element of these houses, with little variations in different regions, was dictated by the Muslim way of living and Ottoman urban regulations. Neither the fact that elements like "*hayat*", "*chardak*", "*sofa*" words with mostly Arab or Persian origins, were the same for all Balkans traditional houses, didn't draw their studies to consider the ottoman origins of

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<sup>12</sup> Millet is a term for confessional communities the Ottoman Empire. Administrative division was based in the respect of "personal law" or religion law, under which communities with different religions were supposed to rule their selves.

<sup>13</sup> Until then European painters who would like to discover classical art and architecture, they couldn't visit Balkans. Instead they would visit ancient Greek colonies in Italy and Sicily.

<sup>14</sup> Marylise Ortiz, Jean-Arnault Dérens et Laurent Geslin, *Bazars ottomans des Balkans*, Éditions Non Lieu, Paris, 2009.

<sup>15</sup> Machiel Kiel, « *Un héritage non désiré : le patrimoine architectural islamique ottoman dans l'Europe du Sud Est, 1370-1912* », *Etudes Balkaniques*, 12, 2005, 15-82.

<sup>16</sup> *Architecture vernaculaire des Balkans*,

<sup>17</sup> Zija, SHKODRA, « *La ville albanaise au cours de la renaissance nationale* », Tirana, Académie des Sciences de la RPS d'Albanie – Institut d'Histoire, 1988.

<sup>18</sup> D, GABRIAN "*Makedonska Kuca*". Ljdoske Pravice 1955. Ljubljana.

<sup>19</sup> N.C. Moutsopoulos, *La maison populaire grecque, Etude de l'architecture vernaculaire dans les Balkans*, UNESCO document, available online at <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0006/000688/068880fb.pdf>

this heritage. Somehow we estimate that the designation of the heritage as “*traditional*” of the respective countries as right. This heritage is traditional Greek, Albanian, Serbian, and Macedonian because it was built by the autochthones. After all the Balkans passed five centuries under the Ottoman Empire and became ottomans.

Beside the existing heritage a new one was being created. Massive constructions in what would be considered as “national style” would host governmental institutions of the new State Nations. Carmen Popescu points out that: “... *the creation of a national architecture represented for these countries the concretization of their emancipation...*” In opposition to the nationalist architecture in the occidental Europe, where architects would be inspired by vernacular architecture, for the Balkan architects it was out of question to rely on regional vernacular models as they were mostly ottoman. National styles would be inspired by the glorious past, the one before the Ottoman occupation. Therefore classical ancient Greek architecture and the byzantine style would be the two biggest sources of inspiration that gave birth to many buildings in “neo-classical”, “serbo-byzantine”, bulgaro- byzantine style. The use of byzantine style was for orthodox communities a reference to their religion. One of the initial causes of national awakening; the administrative division in millets, thus in confessional communities during the Ottoman Empire, persist also in the development of national styles. Once again Balkan countries couldn’t make it to escape from their ottoman past, so deeply rooted in the collective memory.

Carmen Popescu <sup>20</sup> argues on the high efficacy of architecture as public art that displays to the foreign visitor the quintessence of the country that built it. The image of a country is constructed at the same time as its architecture; this image should be prestigious and distinctive. By selecting carefully and prioritizing a category of memories and monuments from the past and placing them under the label of cultural heritage, political choices are made towards defining the identity of a community. National identity and cultural heritage develop at the same rhythm. Thus producing and interpreting heritage does not involve a direct engagement with the study of the past.

The process of building national identity in South Eastern Europe may have been at its peak in the end of the 19th century and in the beginning of the 20th, but it has definitely not stopped there. It is an on-going process nowadays. A vivid example is the case of Skopje 2014 urban plan. To celebrate the tenth anniversary of independence of FYROM from Yugoslavia a pharaonic urban project was launched. This project steers controversy by implanting governmental buildings and symbols to a city that didn’t have the right urban structures and monuments to be a capital. The project has been intensely opposed by architects and heritage specialists, who debate it to be the result of a political decision more than a real urban development need.

The different architectonic styles variant from neo-classical to neo-byzantine, the mixing of elements from roman period, antiquity and Slavic period are controversial and usually misplaced. They correspond once again to the European image of the Balkans in the past century and are a mixture of all architectonic styles privileged by their neighbors during the creation of their own national styles. Their use tries to testify a continuous and uninterrupted presence of “*Macedonians*” in the Balkans. At the same time by prioritizing one’s community heritage to the others this project contributes to creating a nation of homogenous population. The representations of the heritage

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<sup>20</sup> Carmen Popescu, *Un patrimoine de l’identité : l’architecture à l’ecoute des nationalismes*, Etudes balkaniques, 12, 2005, 135-171.

source are chosen in accordance with the present demands and in the intention of creating an imagined future. Finally the heritage is less about tangible historic facts than it is about the meaning placed on them in a certain moment of history.

## 2. CREATION OF ALBANIAN IDENTITY

The creation of Albanian national identity developed more or less the same way as its neighboring countries. It followed the same patterns of rejecting the ottoman past, embracing the modern European future and was based on the revival of ancient Albanian origins.

As Pirro Misha <sup>21</sup> says the Albanian National Awakening “Rilindja” started at the same time as other Balkans countries, during the 1830-1840. This movement was first provoked by external causes, the writings of western scholars, travelers, poets and ethnographers and internal ones, weakening of the Ottoman Empire, administrative division. Misha argues that even though Albanians had all the reasons to be among the first to experience the national awakening, (their geographical position and their role in initiating resistance to ottoman invasion), for a number of reasons Albanian nationalism didn’t develop at the same pace as their neighbors.

One of the reasons for this delay was isolation of Albania from the external world, and isolation in within the country itself due to a strategy of control that the Sublime Porte has elaborated to keep the borderland defensive belt intact and have an importance source of “*cheap cannon- fodder*”. Albanian territories were divided in 4 *villayets* composed by people of different ethnic, religious and linguistic background. Under such conditions the only element of cohesion was language.”...*the language question and that of education in the Albanian language became the basic demand of Albanian nationalism, a demand which was soon transformed from a simple question into a political one*” Misha writes.

Another point, where Albanian national identity differs from their neighbor countries, is the role of religion. Even though they were composed of a Muslim majority, religion didn’t become a pillar of nationalism as it did in Greece, Serbia, Romania and Bulgaria. Bashkim Iseni <sup>22</sup> argues that the transformation from *millet* to nation took different routes in each ethno-linguistic group and there are important differences even between Muslim communities their selves. Nationalism developed differently for Albanians from Albania, Albanians from Kosovo or Macedonia and for Bosnians.

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<sup>21</sup> Pirro Misha, *Albanian Identities Myth and History*, C.Hurst & Co Ltd, London, 2002.

<sup>22</sup> Bashkim Iseni, “*National Identity, Islam and Politics in the Balkans*”, papers from “Bosnischer Islam” für Europa, Brückenschläge –Akademie der Diözese Rottenburg-Stuttgart, Stuttgart-Hohenheim, novembre 2009, available on line at [http://downloads.akademie-rs.de/interreligioeser-dialog/091120\\_iseni\\_balkan.pdf](http://downloads.akademie-rs.de/interreligioeser-dialog/091120_iseni_balkan.pdf)

### 3. ROLE OF NATIONALISM IN THE PERCEPTION OF ALBANIAN CULTURAL HERITAGE

Nationalist discourse initiated by Pashko Vasa and then continued by the Frashëri<sup>23</sup> brothers Faik Konica and other patriots, aimed to give Albanian people three important elements of a nation<sup>24</sup>; a common history<sup>25</sup>, the legitimacy over a national common territory and the building up of a common language, all of this while moderately rejecting the Ottoman past.

These elements would influence the perception of Albanian national heritage later, as they are, at the same time, the pillars on which the concept of heritage stands. The first pillar is the antiquity of heritage, which conveys respect and a status of antecedence. An old monument is the material evidence of our continuous existence. Continuity implies cultural evolution through time; therefore an old culture is an elaborated culture. In these terms proving the antiquity of Albanian language was an essential necessity.

The decorative mosaic on the façade of the National Museum of Albania in Tirana inaugurated in 1981 illustrates the idea of continuous history. From left to the right of the image we can observe the most important stages of Albanian history and the main actors. You will find there the Illyrian fighter, the Arbër fighter, the Nationalist patriot (rilindas), the partisan from the Second World War resistance and in the middle the modern man who is the worker of the socialist Albania. From thirteen figures represented in this image eleven of them are armed fighters, one of them is an intellectual (the patriot fourth figure on the left) and one of them is a worker. This mosaic as well as the building of the Museum itself, represents the “struggle” of the Albanian nation through history.



Fig 1. Image of the mosaic on the façade of the National Museum in Tirana©Wikipedia

Brian Graham and Peter Howard<sup>26</sup> talk about the importance of the past in heritage as it provides a sense of termination and allows us to locate ourselves in the linear narrative that connects the past, the present and the future, “...it provides a point of validation or legitimation for the present in which actions and policies are justified by continuing references to representations and narratives of

<sup>23</sup> Sami Frashëri, Naim Frashëri and Abdul Frashëri were writers, diplomats and politicians. They are three prominent figures of Albanian National Awakening ( Rilindja Kombetare)

<sup>24</sup> Uğur Bahadır Bayraktar, « *Mythifying the Albanians: A Historiographical Discussion on Vasa Efendi's "Albania and the Albanians"* », *Balkanologie*, Vol. XIII, n° 1-2 | décembre 2011, available online at <http://balkanologie.revues.org/index2272.html>

<sup>25</sup> In his book “*The truth about Albania and Albanians*” Pashko Vasa claims that Albanians ancestors were the Pelasgi. This would position them in the same place in history as Greek or even better, and would definitely contradict the Serbian thesis. Pelasgi origins were later on exchanged for Illyrian origins as these last were easier to prove.

<sup>26</sup> Brian Graham and Peter Howard “*Heritage and Identity*”, The Ashgate Research Companion, Edited by Graham Howard, 2008, 474 pages

*the past...*”. In these terms the representation of the ideal Albanian as a fighter through history, was very convenient to the communist propaganda in the conditions of an isolated Albania “against the whole world”.

Second pillar is the link between cultural heritage and the territory. The artifacts or the urban remains of a certain community to the land acquire a symbolic importance as they are material proves of an uninterrupted presence. It explains the appropriation of ottoman vernacular heritage and its appellation as proper to the place. By doing so a heritage that belongs to a period that we prefer to erase from the history becomes linked to the territory.

### 3.1 Reinvention of Albanian national identity in between the two World Wars

Independence proclaimed in 1912, found Albania with no infrastructure or public constructions. Lack of public administration, infrastructure and communication, together with lack of support from the Great Powers were the main difficulties that the country needed to obstruct. During this period Albanian identity building would work towards the transformation of Albanian people in Europeans. King Zogu paid special attention to the transforming of Tirana from an oriental city to a modern capital<sup>27</sup>. He incites Albanian people to get closer to the west they belong, according to him, due to Albania geographical position and their character. However despite Zogu’s attempts to build a modern society, his discourse represents only a cultural and economical elite<sup>28</sup>.

In this context, a political and economical collaboration, with Italy is established. Many students of Albanian history nowadays consider this relation as a colonization of Albania from Italy while Italian historical studies on colonialism, focus mainly in the African colonies. Thus doubts raise about the architecture of Albanian interwar period, whether it is a colonial architecture or an italian influenced architecture. We will consider the second option, leaving to historians the time to bring more facts that prove the colonialist thesis.

A massive urban plan was designed from Italian architects and implemented with the funding of “*Societa per lo Sviluppo Economico dell’Albania*” - S.V.E.A. and of National Bank of Albania (also financed in majority by italian investors). This plan tend to transform Tirana from an ottoman city, descibed by Evliya Celebi<sup>29</sup> into a modern European capital.

Analyzing national identify influence in the nineteenth twentieth century architecture, Carmen Popescu<sup>30</sup> recognizes three distinctive phases; phase one is the invention of Balkans from Europe. European architects are invited to understand and absorb the essence of the country and to express it then in their buildings. They were inspired by the exotic and put the accent on their orientalism reproducing elements from traditional buildings. During the second phase, Balkan architects invent their own art, under an attentive eye of Europe. In the third phase the architects have assumed the

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<sup>27</sup> Herald Qyqja, *Tirana la Nuova Capitale da Brasini a Morpurgo*, Periodic Forum A+P 1, Polis University

<sup>28</sup> Besnik Pula, *Becoming citizens of empire: Albanian nationalism and fascist empire, 1939-1943*, Published online at <http://www.springerlink.com/content/m4p2u00247097448/> 18 April 2008.

<sup>29</sup> Elsie, Robert. “1662, Evliya Chelebi: *Seyahatname - a Journey through Northern Albania and Montenegro.*” *Texts and Documents of Albanian History*. Available at <http://www.albanianhistory.net/texts16-18/AH1662.html>

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 5



nationalism and will proceed on their own to architectural reproductions. In the Italian- Albanian collaboration we recognize the first phase mentioned by Popescu. Italian architects would implement in Albania, theories they knew and practice in their country without searching any translation of the esthetic into the Albanian context.

Two eventual perspectives of the urban future of the city were discussed in 1920 as Indrit Blea<sup>31</sup> says. The first one tented to conserve parts of the ottoman city as an exotic attraction for tourists. The second one which prevailed consisted in opening of large arteries and didn't take in consideration the traditional urban fabric. Starting from renaissance styles to develop later the fascist dictatorial style of the buildings, very little inspiration was taken from the originary architecture of the city. Apart from isolated cases when traditional architecture of Northern Albanian *Kulla* served as inspiration for the façade design<sup>32</sup>, the new architecture is alien to the city. Western architecture starts being present also in vernacular architecture as rich merchants wanted to build their houses in “European style” and live modern life. These buildings testify the passage of vernacular architecture from oriental to occidental.



Fig2 . Houses in Tetovo Macedonia 2010© Nikelina Bineri

### 3.2 “Re-reinvention” of Albanian identity during the communist regime

The end of the Second World War found Albanian infrastructure in a devastated state. The communist party, which came in power, had the difficult task to build up the country and its national identity. The state assumed a central role in the modernization process, cultural and economic. By modernization the communist wouldn't mean the same thing as king Zogu and intellectuals of the previous period meant. Zogu attempts to modernize Albania with Italian add, was considered as “selling the country” to the enemy. However the architecture inherited from Fascism was not destroyed, but instead was restored and reused. Blea<sup>33</sup> arguments as this architecture was present in a short time the image wasn't yet part of collective memory, so it could be easily arranged. Moreover very few people were living in Tirana in between wars, this demographic was insignificant comparing to the one predicted for the communist capital. Likewise most of the buildings and public works created from the previous regime were suitable to the new one being both dictatorial.

<sup>31</sup> Indrit Blea, *Influences of Political Regime shifts on the urban scene of a capital city*, Case study Tirana, PhD thesis Middle East Technical University , 2010, pg 58

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 10, pg61

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 10

The real source of strength for socialism is the people and all the cultural aspects related to vernacular were magnified. A careful distinction was made however between the “truly” national (folklore, crafts, traditional costumes etc) and what was considered as inherited from centuries of foreign domination, refereeing in this case to ottomans. The myth of the real Albanian, the descendant of the Illyrians not contaminated from ottoman rule, was nurtured through folkloric manifestations, cinema, and discourse. Heritage that couldn’t be destroyed was assimilated and reinterpreted, as it was the case of fascist architecture and vernacular architecture.

Vernacular architecture, called «*popular architecture*” had a very privileged place among other types of heritage. It represented the people, which constitute the basis of a socialist regime, thus it had to be conserved and restored. The Institute of Cultural Monuments was created in 1965 to host experts and enhance studies of heritage. As Emin Riza affirms Albania start relatively early to protect the cultural heritage<sup>34</sup> as many buildings, mainly residences, and even architectural ensembles were put under state protection<sup>35</sup>.

In a few cases vernacular architecture served as inspiration to public buildings such as The Congress Palace in Tirana and the Museum of Bajram Curri in Tropoje.



Fig3. Traditional timber frame house in Gjirokastrë served as inspiration to The Congress Palace in Tirana © Wikipedia, Nikelina Bineri



Fig 4. Building in traditional architecture of North Albania ©Donald Kokona, Barjam Curri Muzeum, ©Wikipedia

<sup>34</sup> Emin Riza, *Qyteti Muze i Gjirokastrës*, Shtëpia Botuese « 8 nentori » Tirane, 1981, 346pg

<sup>35</sup> With Ministerial Decree Nr.172, dt.2.6.1961 the city of Berat, the “Old Bazaar” of Kruja, underground of Durrës and the city of Gjirokastrë were designed as protected areas

### 3.3 Nowadays dilemma of National Identity

Since the fall of the dictatorial regime Albania is trying to re-invent its national identity and to fill the ideological vacuum after communism. The same pattern of denial of the previous period prevails. Europe before 1990 built its identity based on the confrontation with “*the other*” which was the Soviet Union. For all countries that went out of the URSS, creating national identity would mean breaking with the communist past in order to acquire the European Identity<sup>36</sup>. Rejecting the Muslim past corresponds, for Albania, to the new trend in European identity. Since the communist “*other*” is not valid anymore, the Muslim “*other*” was created.

There is now, in Albania, a higher interest on identity than ever, as an increasing number of authors try to understand which elements of the past are persistent in the collective memory. In the attempt to integrate to the European Union, Tirana reinvents itself as a modern city. History keeps repeating itself once again and Albanian national identity construction starts almost from the beginning.

In the last ten years, every time there has been an important need for urban development or emblematic buildings, international competitions have been organized and international architecture studios were assigned as winners. Back to the first phase expressed by Popescu<sup>37</sup>, European architects are invited to absorb the essence of the country and then to express it in what they believe are representative buildings of Albania. In its fourth re-invention, Albanian identity in architecture continues being shaped as a reflection of western architecture.

No matter how hard Albanians have tried to picture their selves as a non Muslim and modern country, the image that the civilized west has is still based on religion and on the communist past.

One example is the new TID tower which is being constructed in center of Tirana. The project was selected during an international competition and the winner was the Belgium architecture studio 51N4E. The tower location is in the center of Tirana, in the place assigned by Tirana City Center urban plan, designed by the French Architecture Studio, another winner of a previous international competition. 51N4E studio failed in the effort to understand the “essence” or the history of Tirana as a capital which they consider <sup>38</sup>“... *diverse, with a number of unresolved wars, riots, dictatorships, and pyramid economics.*” They also failed to get rid of their prejudice about Albania which according to them “... *is based on the Kanun, a set of traditional Albanian social laws often related to blood revenge.*”

Amazed by the quality of light, 51N4E architects designed a façade inspired by *moucharabieh* which are not an architectural element of Balkan traditional architecture but rather North African countries of Maghreb. They were criticized by the client because their façade was “*too Muslim*”

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<sup>36</sup> Survey of National Identity and Deep-Seated Attitudes towards European Integration in the Ten Applicant Countries of Central and Eastern Europe, EUROPEAN COMMISSION FORWARD STUDIES UNIT, available online at [http://www.pedz.unimannheim.de/daten/edz-mr/pbs/00/survey\\_of\\_national\\_identity.pdf](http://www.pedz.unimannheim.de/daten/edz-mr/pbs/00/survey_of_national_identity.pdf)

<sup>37</sup> Ibid,5

<sup>38</sup> Re-Inventing Construction, Building a Tower the Tirana Way available online at 51N4E website <http://www.51n4e.com/publication/re-inventing-construction>

and “*too communist*» and obliged to change their façade. In conclusion the façade lost the two main inspirational sources and became as the studio says “...*something new: not local, not foreign, but something new, yet to be appropriated*”.

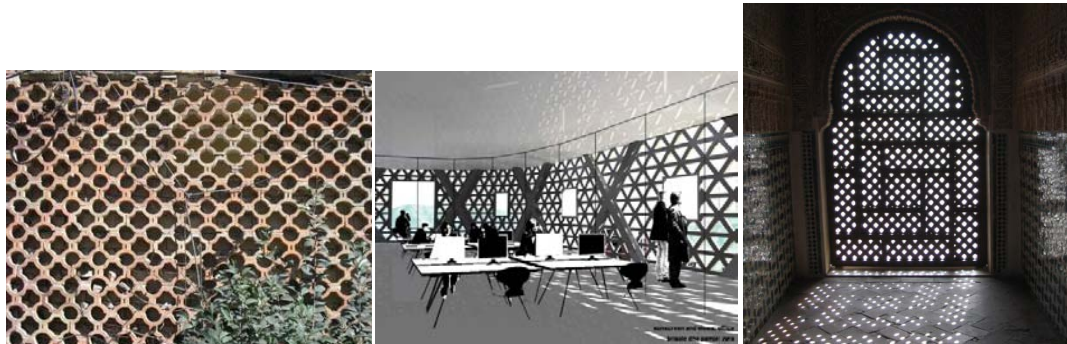


Fig5. brisoileil from residences build during communism in Albania, moucharabieh, interior from TID Tower initial project © Wikipedia



Fig6. a) Initial project of TID Tower, b) the final project of the building under construction ©Wikipedia

This is not the only example in Albania since international competitions are almost a yearly event. Another very significant case which steers huge controversy nowadays is the decision to demolish the International Cultural Centre better known as the “*pyramid*”. The building, located on the intersection between Lana creek and the boulevard “*Dëshmorët e Kombit*”, was built in 1988 to host the Museum of Enver Hoxha on his 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary. After the fall of the regime the building was modified and renamed International Cultural Centre. Since then it has been an important element in the cultural and economic life of Albania.



Fig7. International Cultural Center Tirana Albania ©Wikipedia

Arguments against the pyramid, consider it as a heritage that reminds of the painful period of the communist regime. This is not a new practice in the construction of Albanian National Identity. After the destruction of ottoman heritage from communist, now communist and fascist heritage is being considered for demolition from the actual government.

In the name of bad memories and of war against everything communist, the decision was taken to erase all evidence of the previous regime. History is full of monuments that were built on the death of people. Uncountable number of people died during construction of the gardens of Versailles. This doesn't stop us from considering it a cultural heritage of incredible beauty. Native Americans died in hundreds during the construction of New York City skyscrapers<sup>39</sup>. The Egypt pyramids were built on the bodies of thousands of slaves. They are however monuments of the humanity.

Only foreign architecture studios participated in the international competition for the project of the new parliament building that will replace the "pyramid". In the reproduction of elements borrowed from fascist period architecture, communist period architecture of Tirana and others imported from Middle East architecture<sup>40</sup> is easy to spot the image they have of Albania.

Ironically in both examples, TID tower and the Parliament Building, the employment of foreign architects produced the opposite effect to the one desired. The client is usually disappointed to see instead of the modern western architecture he desired, reproductions of the images from communism, fascism, and orientalism he is trying to escape from.

Albanian law on Cultural Heritage considers as heritage buildings starting from 100 years old<sup>41</sup> therefore the pyramid doesn't represent a monument under legislative protection. What this beautiful modern building charged with history represents though, is the heritage of tomorrow.

In the Strategy of Sectorial Development of Culture (Strategjia e Zhvillimit Sektorial te Kultures)<sup>42</sup> of the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports of Albania, the number one objective is "Protecting

<sup>39</sup> Norton, Sherif, *A People & A Nation*, Wadsworth, Boston, 2010, 909 pages.

<sup>40</sup> Projects of the international competition for the project of the new Albanian Parliament. The winner is project T available online at [http://www.parlament.al/web/Si\\_te\\_votoni\\_11982\\_1.php](http://www.parlament.al/web/Si_te_votoni_11982_1.php)

<sup>41</sup> LIGJ Nr.9048, date 7.4.2003 PER TRASHHEGIMINE KULTURORE, Neni 4, available online [http://www.mtkrs.gov.al/web/Ligji\\_per\\_Trashegimine\\_Kulturore\\_362\\_1.php](http://www.mtkrs.gov.al/web/Ligji_per_Trashegimine_Kulturore_362_1.php)

*National Identity*". Not only it is very unusual to find such an expression in a strategy, but is also an impossible task. You can protect cultural heritage and this convey to protecting the national identity, but you cannot protect national identity. Moreover what is Albanian National Identity? Maybe the first objective of the strategy could be to define the national identity, and only after the long process this very difficult task might take, find the ways to protect it.

Are Albanians Illyrians, Arbër , Ottomans, Communist, Muslim and future modern Europeans? Establishing Albanian tormented national identity means to make a compromise and chose one of them? These are the questions to answer, or at least to accept before our cultural heritage disappears.

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<sup>42</sup> Strategy of Sectorial Development of Culture (Strategjia e Zhvillimit Sektorial te Kultures), available [http://www.mtkrs.gov.al/web/Strategjia\\_e\\_Zhvillimit\\_te\\_Sektorit\\_te\\_Trashegimise\\_Kulturore\\_233\\_1.php](http://www.mtkrs.gov.al/web/Strategjia_e_Zhvillimit_te_Sektorit_te_Trashegimise_Kulturore_233_1.php)