

The interpretation of the vernacular in the modern work of Gherardo Bosio: the Albanian experience

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Abstract

The essay investigates the relationship between some exponents of the Modern Movement and their architectural expression with the vernacular tradition. Gherardo Bosio (1903-1941) was one of the most emblematic architects of the modern transformation of Tirana. His work represents the desire to construct the image of the new city while preserving the relationship with the characters and values of tradition. Bosio's work can be ascribed to the particular trend of the Modern Movement that works in continuity with time, tradition and context. The material and immaterial cultural value of these architectures, in addition to the loss of part of the historical vernacular heritage that happens in some cases, represents the chance for the community to recognize and identify itself in a given historical and cultural contest. The relevance of the knowledge and enhancement of these assets aims to preserve the identity of a community from a process of globalization and homologation that is destroying its traces. The studio investigates the architecture of Gherardo Bosio, in his experience in Tirana. Significant in this work is the reference and reinterpretation of the vernacular Albanian Kulla. It is a typical Albanian architecture, distinguished by compact shapes and a massive structure, conceived as a defence fortification against enemy attacks. The essay investigates the contribution of vernacular architecture in some cases of Modern culture, in an effort to identify a national identity: a modernity that brings together past and future, tradition and innovation. Today, with the right distance in time, these architectures represent the contribution of the Modern in the writing of the palimpsest. These works are relevant in the definition and recognition of the characters on which to structure the values of society. The dissemination of knowledge and appreciation is useful in the constitution of a sense of local community.

Keywords: *Modern Heritage; Tradition and Innovation; Cultural Identity; Modern Vernacular*

1. Introduction

The contribution aims to highlight the relationship between the vernacular tradition and Modern architecture, through the work of the Florentine architect Gherardo Bosio (1903-1941) in his Albanian experience. The study focuses the

attention on an oriented cultural strand of the modern movement, the one that seeks values in tradition and stands out for its ability to reinterpret the identity features of the local culture that are translated into singular works of great testimonial value. Architects who have considered rural architecture as a source and model of

inspiration for a new architectural writing, sometimes to create a new national language in relation to local tradition. An atypical modern which works in strong continuity with history and the built heritage, without neglecting the innovative features related to the materials of the time, but reinterpreting forms, relationships and elements typical of an autochthonous culture. This paper focuses on the importance of Gerardo Bosio's work, which attempts to synthesize innovation and tradition, in the establishment of a new architectural language capable of characterizing the construction and definition of a country then emerging. The research aims to investigate the contribution of this approach in defining the character of the city, specifically of Tirana, and to underline the importance of some works in defining the identity of the place, through a virtuous operation of synthesis between typical elements of Albanian tradition and modernity. The research in heritage education represents a fundamental instrument of knowledge, preservation, and antidote to uncontrolled globalization that is flattening cultural identities and frequently erasing their traces.

1.1. Tradition and Modernity

The vernacular adjective comes from the Latin *vernaculus*, "domestic", "familiar", which concerns the vernacular. Although at first, it had a derogatory meaning, since speaking in "vernacular" meant not using a refined lexicon and not knowing neither Greek nor Latin: the vernacular was the language of the plebs, of the humble and uneducated. However, today the adjective refers to the second meaning of the term, which is linked to the "local" characteristics of a specific limited territorial area. It takes on a positive meaning, as it represents something we could almost define as unique and refers to the specificities of a community, to the cultural features that distinguish it and define its identity. *"The interest in spontaneous architecture in Italy had indeed a long tradition: since the book of Pagano and Daniel Rural Architecture in*

Italy, it was considered the natural ally of rational architecture as it demonstrated a connection between the natural way and the functional way of building." (Gregotti, 1969). The value of rural architecture was revived and highlighted already in the 1920s by various figures such as Pagano, Daniel, Michelucci, Group 7, although with different approaches and interpretations. The aim of the knowledge and analysis of vernacular architecture is to stimulate the understanding of the minor built in order to generate a sincere contemporary architecture, capable of assimilating tradition: *"Not to point it out as an example but to see the beauty of this proud modesty so similar to the feeling of contemporary architecture and to remind how necessary is the coherence with the time, with the climate, with the technique and the economic life to do an honest architectural work"* (Pagano 1936). The research aims to identify the contribution of Gherardo Bosio's work in his brief but intense experience in Tirana.

2. Gherardo Bosio and the Albanian experience

Tirana became the capital of Albania in 1923 and underwent a radical transformation in a few years. Thanks to the synergic relationship with Italy, which immediately deals with an investment program of public works (S.V.E.A.) (Giusti, 2006), a process of urban modification was set in motion right away. The first design dates back to the 1920s with interventions by Giulio Bertè and Armando Brasini, followed by Florestano di Fausto. These were years of great development, the ground was fertile for the creation of a new urban model, *"the result of the interest and encounter of several Italian "schools", from Rome and Florence"* (Giusti, 2006). In 1939, Gherardo Bosio went to Tirana as director of the Central Office for Construction and Urban Planning of Albania. *"He observed and analyzed the existing city which, unlike other Albanian cities, did not have a historical core of great interest, due to the absence of buildings of major importance, exclud-*

ing the two main mosques, the old Mosque and the Mosque of Eth'hem Bej, the former Royal Villa and the old Bazaar. Tirana was a conglomerate of Pisè built houses, plastered and white, with overhanging roofs, private gardens and winding streets, a city heavily affected by the eastern influence for having been under the rule of the Ottoman Empire for many centuries” (Vokshi, 2012). Gherardo Bosio was an integral architect, his work developed between 1939 and 1943, his contribution will be fundamental to the definition of the *Forma Urbis* of the Albanian city: an approach that begins with the understanding and study of the existing city and is aimed at establishing a dialogue, while respecting the few pre-existing environmental elements (Rogers, 1957). The Florentine architect's contribution played a crucial role in determining a modern conception of construction reinterpreting Italian and Albanian vernacular features in a classicist way. In this sense, an approach to tradition is determined, “mediated by a populist vision of local folklore” (Giusti, 2006). The interest in the vernacular is therefore placed in a context of profound change which stimulates reflections on the environment and the relationship between man and nature, on technological progress, on the relationship between craft production and industrial production, and between modernity and tradition. The search is for an «architectural style» that was able to express a new and clear national identity. The research for a language of national style often looks at vernacular architecture, at rural craftsmanship. “Architecture seems to have always sought, especially in the moments of its own re-foundation, a “native” or rustic antecedent, as a first sign of change (and tradition)” (Pane, 2010). “Italian rational architecture in Albania was filtered through elements of rural architecture and medieval cities. Towers, loggias and houses of various types were analyzed, transformed and reinterpreted. The Mediterranean architecture and the spontaneous Albanian one constituted an inexhaustible deposit from which to draw, in which from

immemorial time, those principles of constructive honesty, functional clarity and economy, typical of the Modern Movement, were preserved” (Vokshi, 2012). For most of the regime's architects, who had espoused the Fascist ideology, rural architecture resulted in a catalogue of forms to be inspired by in the research for a new style based on tradition as a recognizable “part of the ongoing modernization process, in which a mutual influence between modern and ordinary architecture can be observed, representative cases of affirmation of modernity in ordinary architecture, vernacular and traditional” (Rossi, 2015). Although the city of Tirana did not have a deeply historicized fabric, the architects who were involved in the design expressed certain attention to the few pre-existing environmental elements. In particular, “with the process of rediscovery of tradition in relation to the context (...) we can see the possibility of establishing a relationship with a specific place, not through a process of mimesis, but as a cognitive instrument of culture and traditions, capable of becoming a device for the construction of urban aggregates and the rediscovery of the values of ordinary architecture as a design reference” (Rossi, 2015). Repeating the concept of tradition stated by Adolf Loos “a tradition is not the repetition of past formal models, but a profound understanding of the principles and reasons which generated traditional architectural forms. Only the knowledge of these profound reasons can avoid the “picturesque” repetition of past forms, and can facilitate their innovation, in order to adapt them to changing needs and new technical possibilities” (Loos, 1972). In this sense, the work of Bosio and his colleagues in Tirana is significant and interesting from a double point of view: on the one hand, in the definition of general principles and rules for urban design, which, relying on the lessons of the past, reinterpreted the elements of the pre-existing city: loggias, porticoes, dimensional relationships; on the other hand, in a clear reinterpretation of

some models of rural architecture, for instance the Kulla, a fortified house, widely present in Albania and Kosovo (Fig.1).



Fig. 1. Kulla houses (Peter Moore)

The Albanian "kulla" is a dwelling *"of elevated type, sometimes crenellated with a few windows at the top, while at the bottom it has only one entrance door, resulting in a prevalence of solid surfaces"* (Cresti, 1996). It is a typical vernacular architecture, a domestic house designed mainly for the wealthy class: generally with a square plan, built with thick masonry, to defend families from possible enemy attacks (Fig.2). This reference, reinterpreted and combined with the desire to create an iconic architecture, was fundamental in the construction of the *Casa del Fascio* in Tirana. The Casa del Fascio 1939-1940 (today the Polytechnic University of Tirana), is quite probably the most iconic building of the fascist regime in Albania; placed at the back of the Brasini axis, it was to mark the southern limit and be the culmination of the new axis. Placed in prominence on a base, it is a scenographic and highly symbolic piece of architecture composed of a continuous slat that intersects a compact block in the center: the tower.

The Piazza del Littorio, also designed by Bosio, tried to define a new public space. The urban system and the relationship with the buildings of

the National Stadium, the "Gioventù Albanese" and the "Opera del Dopolavoro Albanese", defined and configured the end of the monumental axis. The Casa del Fascio is a formal and linguistic reinterpretation of the vernacular character of the Albanian model of the Kulla, mixing it with the tradition of the Florentine Renaissance palace, revisited in a modern key. At the same time, it expresses, through a courtly, academic, and modern language, the affirmation of the young forces of imperial Italy (Fig.3).



Fig. 2. Residence of Kulle type (Mat, Albania)

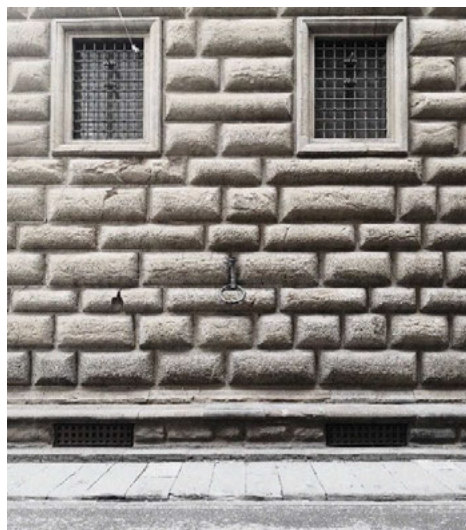


Fig. 3. Florence, Palazzo Pitti (Corrado Castagnaro, 2021)

A language which is presented by Bosio himself at the Levante fair in Bari and at the Prima Mostra Triennale delle Terre Italiane d'Oltremare in Naples *defining the lines of his new way of designing, made up of massive, rationally arranged elements, always aggregated in parts but made solemn by a widespread use of stone on the surface, rusticated or not, as in the best Italian historical examples* (Renzi, 2012). In its compositional and formal simplicity, the work contains meticulous attention to detail (Fig. 4).

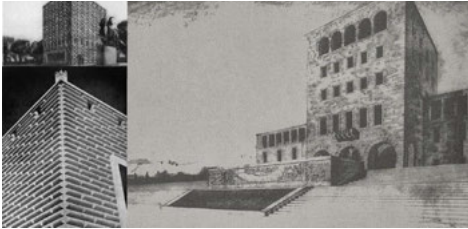


Fig. 4. Pavilion of Albania: Fiera del Levante in Bari top-left; Pavilion of Albania: Mostra d'Oltremare in Naples bottom-left; Casa del Fascio in Tirana, right in *Giusti M.A. 2006, AQTN*. (Collage: Corrado Castagnaro 2022)

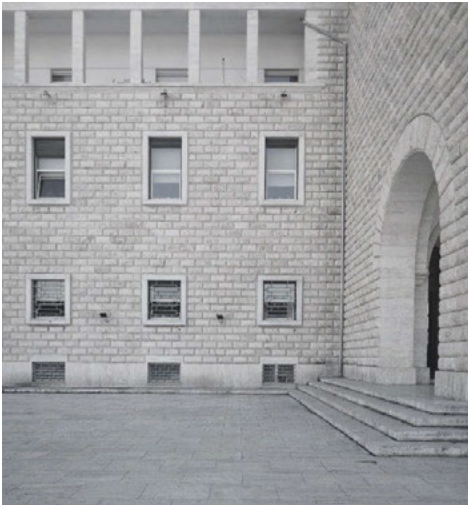


Fig. 5. Former Casa del Fascio (Corrado Castagnaro, 2019)

The architecture is full of contrasts: it oscillates between the expression of a vernacular Mediterranean character and an austere monumentality. A compact block, with a severe element, defined by a clear and regular scanning in the definition of the perforations, elegantly highlighted with a travertine frame (Fig.5).

The surface is entirely covered by ashlar blocks, and its continuous façade generates interesting chiaroscuros whose gradations of light and shade make it almost appears as vibrating. *The Casa del Fascio is not conceived as an isolated building or as disconnected from the overall compositional language; on the contrary, it dictates a new system of figurative references capable of becoming a new symbol of the city and the country* (Renzi, 2012) (Fig.6).

3. Conclusions

Today, with the right temporal distance, these architectures represent the contribution of the Modern to the writing of the palimpsest, but mainly in the definition of those characters in which we can recognize and structure the material and immaterial values of the collectivity for the construction of the sense of local community. In a context as complex as the Albanian one, the knowledge and valorization of these assets are aimed at making the local community and the political class aware of the need to safeguard their identity and cultural heritage from a process of globalization and homologation that is, unfortunately, destroying its traces. Tirana seems to live, despite the temporal distance, the same story as the Walls of Sana described in Pier Paolo Pasolini's wonderful documentary on the destruction of Yemen's heritage. In this masterpiece, he talks about the importance of being aware of the preciousness of the country's identity and he points out, moreover, unpleasant parallelisms all over the world. Just think that in 2016 the stadium designed by Gherardo Bosio in the Piazza del Littorio next to the Casa del Fascio was demolished (Giusti, 2021) in order to allow the construction of a new facility, the Air Albania Stadium designed by Archea Associati. More recently on 17th May 2020 the National Theatre of Tirana, the former Italo-Albanian Skanderbeg Club, was demolished, testimony to the *extraordinary creativity in the use of traditional and autochthonous building materials and in the creation of new patents, developed by Italian technicians thanks to the*

synergy between manufacturers and designers (Menghini, 2019). Virtuous example of experimental architecture, realized through the use of *autarchic materials* (Pretelli, 2021) such as the Popolit to make way for Albania's new national theatre designed by Bjarke Ingels Group. Dramatic episodes, leading to the erasure of fragments of history and the loss of collective memory. In an area that has been a laboratory of the Modern with several significant architectural episodes that define the identity of that place, undermining the preservation of those elements is dangerous for the safeguard and definition of the city's sense of community and character.

Today the image of most architectural interventions in Tirana is superficial, ephemeral, it responds to mass society, focuses its attention and research on generating attractive and persuasive images, almost as if they were shop windows, without focusing on their intrinsic nature and without reflecting on the true essence of architecture as the art of building. *Today's globalized image-architecture claims the territories of the*

world market economy, the last phase of globalized capitalism (Pallasmaa, 2014). It is necessary to profoundly reflect on space, matter, place, and context. A return to the origins and to simplicity in terms of association of cultural values and to actions of constructions, which have always marked the spaces of our cities and of the collective living. Knowledge, attention, and education about the heritage of pre-existence are fundamental. The preservation and enhancement of these architectures are fundamental for the protection of the features of the city and the cultural identity of the people who are reflected in them. At a time when the overwhelming force of globalization tends to produce cultural homogenization, in society as in architecture, it is essential to focus the attention on knowledge and education about material and immaterial cultural heritage. Examples such as Gherardo Bosio's architecture are essential in shaping the local community's sense of belonging and it is vital to protect and preserve them.



Fig. 6. Former Casa del Fascio (Saikko editing by Corrado Castagnaro, 2021)

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