Architecture as Metaphor: Politics and Aesthetics in the Modernist City

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Architecture is not an isolated discipline but is one of the manifold manifestations of the human activity. It is effectively capable of transmitting different ideological and political meanings, using its formal and aesthetical modalities to participate in the organization of the city space and human life. Thus, architecture has always contributed as a signifier of the ideology of political power, embodying in itself the fundamental components of a political will. The organizational differences in left or right regimes are completely visible in the architectural discourse financed by political actions throughout the history. While in some cases there is a heteronomic component made possible by the openness and exchanges with the outside world, the main characteristic of architecture in certain states was formal and propagandistic autonomy, generating a strong self-referential style, outside the main stylistic debates of the time.

This research aims to discuss architecture's implication with political discourses, power and ideology, within modernity. We presume that there is a certain line of political thought, which is elevated to an ideological level and produces an architecture that is referential to that ideology. But more than simply being a product of political decisions, different architectures emerging in different historical contexts, are also used as instruments to signify and determine future politics. In this context, this research renders architecture as a metaphor that facilitates communication between aesthetics and political power, as presented in the city space.

The discussion is focused on the interplay of modern aesthetics and politics in the context of Eastern Europe, particularly Western Balkans. The objective is to trace in parallel the main architectural and urban peculiarities between countries that essentially shared very different ideas of architectural aesthetics and political ideologies. Using some key historical buildings of the respective regimes, the aim is to decipher the critical points where ideology marks alternative paths in such countries. Alongside historical studies we would question if the impact of these regimes, even after their end, still continue to determine the urban development and architecture of the respective cities.

1. Introduction

Architectural practice is not self-referential and autonomous, but it is conditioned by and conditions a political *and* ideological reality. Manfredo Tafuri's work enfolds architecture – when it is most itself, most pure, most rational, most attendant to its own techniques – as the most efficient ideological agent of political planification (Hays, 1998). The political, as well as the ideological, are not an imposed function on architecture, but they are inherent to

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the very function of each architecture, in "*representing a symbolic and imaginary field of visibility of a society for itself and others*" (Šuvaković, 2014, p. 12). In this context, architecture has the function of a metaphor in the process of transmitting and materializing a political will into the city space. The utilization of the metaphor is based on Plato, who employed the architect as a metaphor in his attempt to define the philosopher. He introduces the term *'poiesis'* – which means *creation*: a thing emerging from non-existence into existence (Karatani, 1995) – to imply an architectural work. In this line, this research deals with the emergence of political ideas creating or impacting the discourse on aesthetics through architecture as metaphor.

Architectural theory had consistently brought into question the fact that architecture, more than any other discipline, relates to politics and the exercise of power (Thoenes & Evers, 2015). In this research, the study on architecture's ideological and political function is largely influenced by the Frankfurt School and the legacy of Walter Benjamin. It also denotes the philosophical tradition of Hegel and Marx, continuing with Tafuri, Benevolo, Giedion, Rancière and others. Within this discourse we have a co-existence at the same level of the key terms of this research, both in theory (i.e., the generality of concepts) and practice (i.e., the particularity of practices): *architecture, aesthetics, ideology, politics.* And, in order for this co-existence to be understood, we cannot refer exclusively to buildings, but we must include large-scale urban structures and socio-political contexts.

This research focuses on defining the political and aesthetical compatibility in *modernity*, and deciphering its implication with power forces. Bruno Zevi (1978) posited that modernity emerges when values are acquired from a state of crisis, a concept derived from Jean Baudrillard (1975). In this regard, modernity is inherent within the very notion of crisis, which, in order to engender values, must necessarily detonate and deconstruct codified languages. Deconstruction, at this juncture, entails resetting a language and advocating for a disruptive aesthetics vis-à-vis institutionalized paradigms (Baudrillard, 1975; Zevi, 1978). Thus, we can consider modernity as a manifestation in modern architecture in the sense that it has completely changed the previous coordinates, creating a new aesthetic. In this case it is interesting to explain in a critical way how this architecture became an ideological instrument and how the modern principles have been utilized by the political regime.

We are particularly dealing with the emergence of various architectural languages within the modern movement, in the case of former socialist states in Eastern Europe, after the Second World War. Taking into account the rapid political developments and the general economic, technological and cultural changes, we understand that the messages transmitted by the architecture of the time are more assertive, as we are dealing with sings that transform into clear and strong political goals. For comparative reasons we are using examples from non-socialist states in Europe, to analyze how specific architectural styles were used to express the premises on which the left or the right constructed their ideas regarding to the political as well as social, economic or cultural development.

The study is contextualized by comparing political conditions and modernist aesthetics in Socialist Yugoslavia and Albania. The two cases shared an intermediate political position between the East and West, and yet they represent very different socio-political developments occurring simultaneously in the same region and producing specific outcomes. In terms of morphology and aesthetics, due to regime changes, architecture was both a representation of the influences from the international debate on modernism, and of local and individual design principles, in line with those promoted by dominant ideologies.

Using methods such as literature review, discourse analysis, and typological and stylistic analysis, we will create a network of politically charged architectures, a catalogue that will present the similarities and critical differences of political contexts and their aesthetical product. The selected case studies present and aim to validate the hidden dimension of buildings and plans which used to express political and social values. They are used as clear reflections of the tensions and conflicts that existed within society around the issues such as power, identity and social justice, placing architecture on an influential level by showing its power in the context of a tool or instrument of social control.

2. Modern Architecture as Politics

Architecture was always used by the state as the most efficient agent of communicating its political power and its vision for the society. For illustration, the political tensions resulting from the arrival of the Nazi to power, created a new environment in which modern architecture and architects could not survive. This fact was taken as a demonstration *ad absurdum* that modern architecture was appropriate to the Republican climate, while the new fascist regime would choose Neoclassicism as their formal aesthetic language (Bonta, 1979). Thus, we can consider that specific architectural languages are adapted in order to address specific political programs, impacting our reading of the city space and the politics behind those buildings. In order to interpret this in the context of the modern movement it is interesting to refer to the German Pavilion for the 1929 International Exposition in Barcelona designed by Mies van der Rohe, particularly to Mies' speech at a meeting of the Architectural Association in London in 1959:

> "One day I received a call from the German Government. I was told that the French and the British would have a pavilion too. I said: "what is a pavilion? I have not the slightest ideas". I was told: "We need a pavilion. Design it, and not too much class!'...If the British and the French had not had a pavilion, there would have been no pavilion in Barcelona erected by German (Bonta, 1979, p. 151).

The function that the German Pavilion played was essentially political: it represented the political positioning of Germany on a peaceful competition of nations, and was its first entry into an international affair since the First

Figure 1. Mies van der Rohe, *The German Pavilion***, Barcelona, 1929 (source: https://miesbcn.com/thepavilion/).**

World War, symbolizing Germany's appeasement in the post-war years (Bonta, 1979). The very first public interpretation of the pavilion came from the German *Kommissar*, Dr. von Schnitzler, who transmitted the intention of the state: "*We have wanted to show here what we can do, what we are and how we feel today. We do not want anything more than clarity, simplicity and integrity*" (Bonta, 1979, p. 156). In this case, *clarity*, *simplicity* and *integrity* (or *sachlichkeit*, to use the parlance of German architectural circles of the time) are means of the architectural concept conveying the political statement proclaimed by the Pavilion (Bonta, 1979). Here, architecture conceals nothing and is utilized as political metaphor. Everything is open both in terms of form, aesthetics and meaning, directly reflecting von Schnitzler's speech [**Fig. 1**].

In terms of urban scale, Leonardo Benevolo argued that there is a strong relationship between the practice of architecture and urbanism with that of ideology and politics. One of the fundamental thesis of Benevolo, introduced in his well-known work *The Origins of Modern Town Planning* (1963), emphasizes that it is important that reforms in city planning should be realized alongside general political and social reforms (Benevolo, 1963). From Benevolo, we understand that even the most technical attempts for improving the methods of modern city planning, bear an ideological charge, as they do not simply correspond with the beginnings of modern socialism, but they mirror modern socialist ideology (Benevolo, 1963).

From the works of Walter Benjamin, later Manfredo Tafuri (1979) and most recently Jacques Rancière (2018/2022), we understand that there exists a multiplicity of modernity that is related to different contexts and produces various types of urban products within modern architecture and city planning. Thus, modern architecture is not homogenous in the sense of perceived architectural and ideological rationality and functionality (Jerliu & Navakazi, 2018). In this context, different political programmes – based on the vision that different countries embraced after the Second World War – produced various approaches and solutions regarding architectural and urban aesthetics (Jerliu & Navakazi, 2018).

From the 1920s to the Second World War, the architectural proposal was interrelated with the urban model on which it was developed, and the economic and technological premises on which it was based, the public ownership of the city soil and industrialized building enterprises (Tafuri, 1979, p. 114). Architecture and city planning were thus integrated to an ideological and political level and can be interpreted as their maximum expression. Ernst May's proposal of urban settlements and all his work in Frankfurt – for which Nazi propaganda would speak of as *constructed socialism* – can be taken as example (Tafuri, 1979).

Following Le Corbusier, the modern architect was not simply a designer of objects but an organizer and a mediator between the intellectual initiative and the *civilisation machiniste*. His task should be the rendering of the public as an active and participant consumer of the architectural product. In this context, it was the institution of CIAM that took, at a political level, the role of an authority capable of connecting the planning of building production and urbanism with the programs of civil organization (Tafuri, 1979, p. 126). Le Corbusier's architecture contained the level of social utopia that could support the reformist ideas regarding the city planning. As Tafuri suggests (1979), when such utopianism is present, the architect takes the role of the idealist and architecture takes the task of rendering its work "political", aiming the continual invention of advanced solutions at the most applicable level.

3. Communicating Between Architectural Works and Political Discourses

There are many examples in the modern history in which architecture gave concrete form to political ideologies, and many countries that have a tradition in developing action programs for architecture simultaneously with the development of new political agendas. The ideological and organizational differences in left or right regimes are completely visible in the architectural discourse financed by political actions throughout the twentieth century. While in some cases there is a heteronomic component, made possible by the openness and exchanges with the outside world, the main characteristic of architecture in certain states was formal and propagandistic autonomy, generating a strong self-referential style, outside the main stylistic debates of the time.

Figure 2. Karl Friedrich Richter, *Neue Reichskanzlei,* **Berlin, 1939 (source: https:// www.zukunft-braucht-erinnerung.de/die-neue-reichskanzlei/)**

Figure 3. Giuseppe Terragni, *Casa del Fascio,* **Como, 1932-1936 (source: https://www.archdaily.com/312 877/ad-classics-casa-del-fascio-giuseppe-terragni).**

For instance, both in Italy and Germany in the pre-World War II period, architecture was the most efficient instrument of the state propaganda. The two countries shared the same Fascist ideological and political system, aiming at the production of an autonomous, *national*, architectural language characterized by monumentality. However, the aesthetical differences were fundamental. City planning and architecture in Italy contained premises of modernism represented by Italian Rationalism – as a relation of the technical, typological and aesthetic elements of European modernism, – combined with the regime's need for self-representation (Therborn, 2017). It was an appeal to history that distinguished Italian architects of the time from other European modernists, but nevertheless their buildings were similar: strict lines, simple forms, flat roofs and no decorations. While in Germany the architectural programme was based on a classical revival and modernism saw its influence and dominance diminished (Therborn, 2017). Once the center of modern architecture strongly transmitted by the Bauhaus school, the German urban landscape was transformed into a field of neoclassical and eclectic architectural and urban models.

While Albert Speer was the key figure during Hitler's regime, Mussolini was open to several architects with modernist inclinations such as Marcelo Piacentini, Giuseppe Terragni and Giovanni Guerrini (Therborn, 2017, p. 185). In Germany, the central buildings of power were transformed by the political regime. Here we have the case of renovated buildings in neoclassical style, such as the Palazzo Venezia, or extended-renovated, such as the new Reichskanzlei, both in Berlin (Therborn, 2017, p. 193) [**Fig. 2**]. In Italy on the other side, we have Giuseppe Terragni's famous Casa del Fascio in Como, as an example of modernist architecture [**Fig. 3**]. Following the modern principles of transparency and open, continuous spaces, Terragni intended to show that "*fascism is a glass house that everyone can look into*", rendering architecture as metaphor for a political will.

In the context of socialist states, in Stalin's Soviet Union, modernist architecture first reflected the idea of improving

the conditions of the working class, achieving social equality, etc., through uniform buildings within regular grids, characterized with minimal utilization of space. However, Constructivism's inherent proletarian and rational spirit – an architecture made by the people and for the people – was soon to be replaced by Social Realism, as an instrument of propaganda aiming to the construction of a "national form of architecture" (Levine, 2018). Urban and architectural developments in the country were overseen by the USSR Union of Architects. With this, architectural production and planning were completely centralized and transformed into tools in the control of the state (Zubovich, 2021). The discussion of this implication of politics in architecture, was central even to the organization of CIAM. In a letter to Le Corbusier in 1933, Giedion, who itself was a socialist and believed in the spirit of the Russian Revolution, presented two alternatives for the public stand of the CIAM:

> "Technicians or politicians? 1. Technicians: the only possibility to have an international influence at the moment. But when the true social development becomes really effective, we will be turned out instantly, without a doubt. 2. Politicians: impossible for us to have an influence with anyone important at the moment. Only means to have influence is a socialist situation" (Therborn, 2017, pp. 251–252).

4. Contextualization: Post-World War II Aesthetics in Western Balkans

The end of the Second World War marks a new condition for the modern movement to realize its objectives regarding formal and aesthetical developments. In Europe, this was in part possible for two reasons: 1) due to the defeat of fascism and with that the abandonment of neoclassical and eclectic forms, and the emergence of new socialist and capitalist states favoring the principles of modernist architecture; 2) the destruction of existing urban structures during the war, imposing the necessity of building new architectural works and carrying out new interventions within the city space. The first reason depends essentially on the complexity of

the political situation, i.e., the formation of Western Bloc and Eastern Bloc.

4.1. Background

With the emergence of Socialist states which adapted the ideology of Marxism Leninism, the dimensions of Communism – its working-class identity, its idea of the importance of the nation, its rule of inherited underdevelopment and its centralized internal power structure – provided a framework for architecture and urbanism (Therborn, 2017, p. 212). However these dimensions took different expressions between the states, ruling parties and different periods. Changes in domestic politics of socialist states and their positioning in the international arena (e.g. the distancing of Socialist Yugoslavia and Albania from the Soviet Union, the creation of the Non-Aligned Movement, etc.), impacted the architectural practice, opening way to the domination of different modernist languages.

In the years before the Second World War, particularly in CIAM's Charter of Athens, less attention was given to the identity of the city or to its central identification function (Therborn, 2017, p. 237). The CIAM leaders – Le Corbusier, Giedion and Sert –became aware of this lack, therefore, during and after the war they started discussing for a modern expression of "monumentality". While the Eastern European Communists, who learned from the pre-war Moscow programme the relevance of the city center (its function, style and form), aimed to realize it in a political and social way in the post-war period (Therborn, 2017).

In the Soviet Union, the new guideline "socialist in content, national in form", was asserted between 1949–50 (Therborn, 2017, p. 217). Monumentality was expressed through state-commissioned architectural programmes conveying the Soviet identity. An example is the 1947 project carried out by Soviet architects and engineers for the transformation of Moscow's cityscape through the introduction of the skyscraper typology [**Fig. 4**]. Through their architecture, the skyscrapers signified a shift in the way the Soviet Union positioned itself in the global scene (Zubovich, 2021). In transforming the skyscraper from the image of capitalist triumph into a symbol of socialism, Moscow architects conveyed the message of the message of Soviet supremacy beyond socialist borders (Zubovich, 2021, p. 20). At this point, the Soviet Union was the center of all developments of socialist modernist architecture and city planning, producing formal and stylistic models that would influence the building programmes in other socialist states, particularly in Western Balkans.

4.2. The case of Socialist Yugoslavia and Albania

First conceived as "satellites" of the Soviet Union, Socialist states such as Albania and Socialist Yugoslavia, followed the Marxist-Leninist ideological direction adapted initially by the Soviets, and the whole architectural programme was not so much about socialism as it was about finding a modern national style (Therborn, 2017, p. 216). Following the principles set up by Socialist Realism, the aim of new, monumental architecture, was the creation


Figure 4. Vladimir Gelfreikh, Mikhail Posokhin, et al., *The Leningradskaya Hotel***, Moscow, 1953 (source:** **https://www.rferl.org/a/stalins-seven-sisters-the-skyscrapers-of-moscow/29496621.html)**

of a "national form". Albania promoted the programme for an architecture "national in form and socialist in content", while architecture in Yugoslavia – where the "national form" was influenced by Byzantine, Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian early modernist elements – was spared by the *pastiches*, as Fredric Jameson would put it (Jameson, 1991). This happened due to the Tito-Stalin split in 1948 and Yugoslavia's positioning in the Non-Aligned Movement, and the aim of architecture became the construction of a modernist "Yugoslav Identity", very different from the Soviet Social Realism.

Modern architecture was instrumentalized to represent the Yugoslav socialism, which, together with the country's intermediate place between the Eastern and Western Blocs, was conditioned by the need for symbolic differentiation from both state socialism and capitalism (Mrduljaš & Kulić, 2012). Thus, architecture signified a socialism "*oscillating tactically*" between East and West, with modernism and functionalism as the main *formal* and *linguistic* options that were never questioned (Mrduljaš & Kulić, 2012, p. 8).

An important phase of modernist urbanization for the cities in Yugoslavia occurs between 1960s and 1980s. Domestic decentralization, and the socialist orientation with emerging liberalist premises, created a condition in which architectural discipline was not centralized and controlled, but it was rather open towards the international debate and influences. The discipline of architecture during this period is characterized with an expression of different stages of modernity, from the *Existenzminimum* and the *Functionalist City* promoted by CIAM, to the emergence of other modernist languages such as regionalism, structuralism, functionalism, metabolism and brutalism. Examples of this phenomenon are the New Belgrade following in detail the principles set up by CIAM's Charter of Athens, Kenzo Tange's masterplan for the reconstruction of Skopje after the earthquake of 1963, or the masterplan for the University Center in Prishtina [**Fig. 5**]. In the city of Prishtina for in-
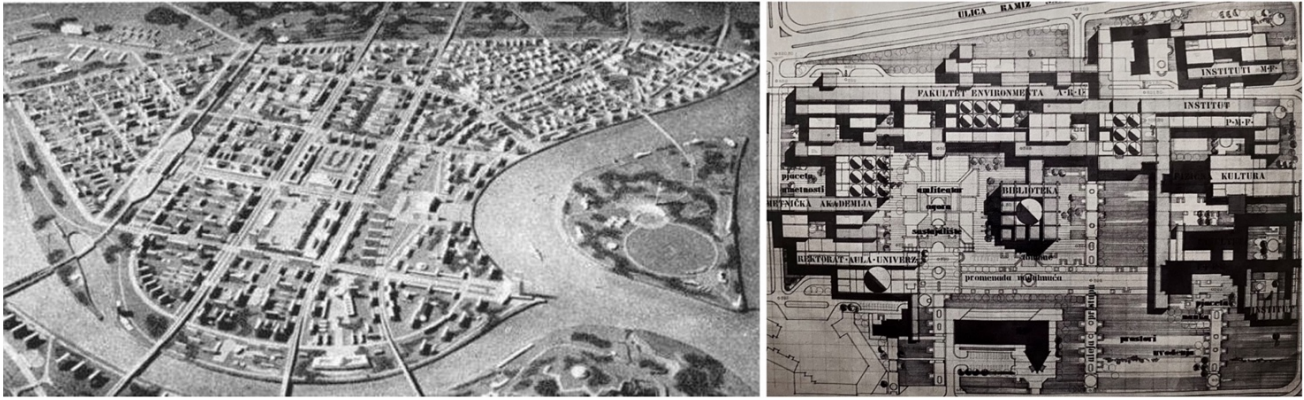
Figure 5. <u>Left</u>: **Belgrade Institute of Urban Planning,** *Conceptual Plan of New Belgrade*, **Belgrade, 1948 (source:https://www.researchgate.net/publication/ [331288730_Historical_Enquiry_as_a_Critical_Method_in_Urban_Riverscape_Revisions_The_Case_of_Belgrade's_Con](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331288730) [fluence/figures?lo=1](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331288730)).** <u>Right</u>: **Bashkim Fehmiu,** *The University Centre*, **Prishtina, 1971 (source: Sadiki, 2020, p. 35).**

stance, architecture between 1968-1989 was an expressions of different modernist aesthetic and technological features, unfolding multiple layers of modernity. The National Library incorporated features of Regionalism by using the combination of cubes and domes, representing layers of Islamic and Byzantine architecture to be found in Kosovo and the region. The Palace of Youth and Sports is an example of Metabolist architecture and the idea of megastructures. The brutalist style is embodied in the Rilindja Publishing House, while the former Ljubljanska Bank is associated to the curved glass facades of postmodern architecture [**Fig.6**].

Contrary to the case of Socialist Yugoslavia, in postwar Albania there was an ambivalence between the institutional approach which constantly dictated the method of Socialist Realism, as well as some individual attempts to incorporate elements of modern architecture within the framework of Socialist Realism (Llubani et al., 2021). In the first post-war years, the political relations with the Soviet Union were influential in Gani Strazimiri's urban plan of 1953 for the capital Tirana: a proposal in the form of a perspective drawing, based on the formal and aesthetical principles of the 1935 Moscow's plan [**Fig. 7**]. From the 1950s, to the 1960s-1970s and 1980s, in line with the developments in state's political affairs, the architectural discourse changed a lot. The distancing of Albania from the Eastern Bloc in early 1960s and the relations with China, imposed new formal and stylistic systems. In the following years, the state promoted its own programme for an architecture "national in form and socialist in content". New buildings of power were positioned along the boulevard, and monumental modernist buildings were erected at city center convening the Albanian modernism and nationalism, represented through the cases of the National Historical Museum or the Palace of Culture [**Fig. 8**].

5. Conclusions and Further Discussion

Reflecting on modern architectural works as political instruments, offers the possibility of dealing with some fundamental issues on the discipline of architecture itself, such as its emergence from ideology and the ability to resist

it, the interplay with power forces, the import of international models and their adaption to local contexts. From the cases presented here, we are able to unfold multiple layers of twentieth century modernity, as well as dominant political discourses that are put in play in the processes of city planning and building production. As a result we have power forces such as fascism and socialism, emerging differently in different political contexts and producing specific architectures and urbanities, each conveying particular architectural languages occurring simultaneously.

From this research we understand that architecture operates as a political *metaphor* in the sense that it gives formal and aesthetic values to abstract political ideas. In fascist Italy, modern architecture was introduced within the frame of Italian Rationalism, oscillating between modernist European influences, abstract classicism and monumentalism, while in fascist Germany was completely rejected, and in the Soviet Union was the fundamental premise of constructing socialism and improving the conditions of the working class. In the post–World War II period, the Soviet Social Realism was in search of a national aesthetic model which was not influenced by foreign architectural theories and practices, but would rather compete with them. A similar development occurred in Albania, where the only stylistic exchanges with the outside world were those with the Soviet Union and China during short periods of time. While in Socialist Yugoslavia, the architectural discourse was open to the international debate, importing models from both the East and West, while generating an original and individual modern style.

The projects completed during these regimes remain evidence of the modernist city of the time, containing all the advantages and failures of the twentieth century architecture and urban planning. They have become an integral part of the urban identities which are no longer perceived through the frame of political ideology, but rather through the functional, spatial and aesthetic qualities of architecture, interrelating it to the urban environment, social context and users. We suggest that such architectural works evolve in time and can be brought back to autonomous
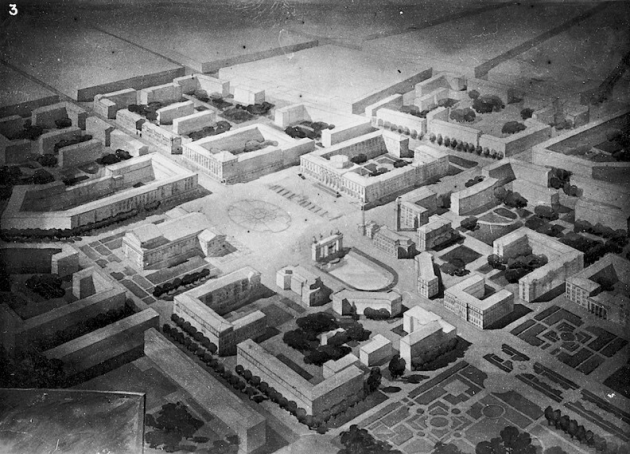
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Figure 7. Gani Strazimiri, *Plan of Tirana's city center,* **1953 (source: Albanian Central Archive)**

Figure 8. *Skanderbeg Square in Tirana and Socialist Landmarks,* **Tirana, 1960s (source: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/316313873_Place_Attachment_in_a_Tirana_Neighborhood_The_Influence_of_the_Rebirth_of_the_City_Project/figures?lo=1)**

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