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Central Technical Archive of Construction in Tirana, between two totalitarian political systems

Abstract

The Central Technical Construction Archive (AQTN) represents a key institution for the preservation of technical documentary heritage in Albania, safeguarding valuable materials that span a wide historical period, from the early years of the communist regime to the present day. This archival structure contains construction projects, technical documentation, urban plans, building standards, and graphic materials that reflect the country's urban, architectural, and engineering development over the decades. This paper presents a chronological and thematic analysis of the organization of AQTN, including its division according to historical periods and the main categories of preserved documentation. Special attention is given to the archive's importance for scientific research, urban planning, and the protection of technical heritage, as well as to the

challenges related to digitization and public access to its collections.

Through specific examples of preserved projects, the paper highlights the transformation of construction and planning concepts in Albania, revealing the intertwining of ideological, technical, and economic influences in the development of the built environment. This work aims to raise awareness of AQTN's significance as a unique resource for interdisciplinary studies in the fields of architecture, engineering, urban history, and cultural heritage.

Keywords:

archives of architecture, Tirana, totalitarian architecture, forbidden architecture, representation of architecture

INTRODUCTION

This article seeks to evaluate and analyze one of the most interesting state public archives of architecture and urban planning in Albania, which is now called the Central Technical Archive of Construction (AQTN) and is in Tirana. The archive has the basic base of various architectural and engineering projects of Albanian territories which have been realized by various Albanian and foreign professionals. The archive is clear evidence of facts that are closely related to the strong historical and political developments of the country and that further prove the result of various urban, architectural developments, interventions in the landscape or in the interior, but also of the relationship with materials and technology over the years. The Central Technical Archive of Construction has under its administration an intellectual treasure, consisting of architectural and engineering materials systematized in 60,450 files, or more precisely about 800,000 sheets of drawings or various project materials. The first document of this archive is a project carried out in 1911 with the name "Reconstruction of the Buna Bridge" over the Buna River, Shkodra. So, before that we do not have any data on archiving different projects and apparently this also marks the beginning of a process of archiving and documenting projects. Thus, starting from 1911 until today, a process of maintenance, administration and processing of technical documents began from this time and continuously until today.

This rare wealth of different periods was opened to the public after the collapse of the totalitarian system of communism, starting in 1993, based on the law of Parliament No. 7726, dated 29.06.1993 "On the National Archival Fund and Archives". The periods that arouse special research and professional interest are those before the 1990s. They can be easily divided into important historical phases, which coincide with strong urban and architectural stratifications in the Albanian territory. These periods are:

a) the first period can be called the part of the monarchy period until 1939,

b) the second period can be called during the period of fascism 1939-1943

c) the third period can be called during the period of relations with the Soviet Union until 1963

d) and then during the period after the breakdown of relations with the Soviet Union until 1990.

These periods have left evident signs, and they extend and intertwine almost throughout the entire territory of Albania, but they are best evidenced in its capital, Tirana. This is also because the beginning of archiving coincides with the founding of the new Albanian state, which was formed in 1912, after a long period of occupation, spanning five centuries, under the Ottoman Empire, but especially after its consolidation in the twenties, and with the selection of Tirana as the capital.

The materials, which have now been open to the public for three decades, offer considerable public interest for research and professional issues and these materials, for organizational reasons, are divided into several main categories according to the relevant fields:

- Urban Planning,

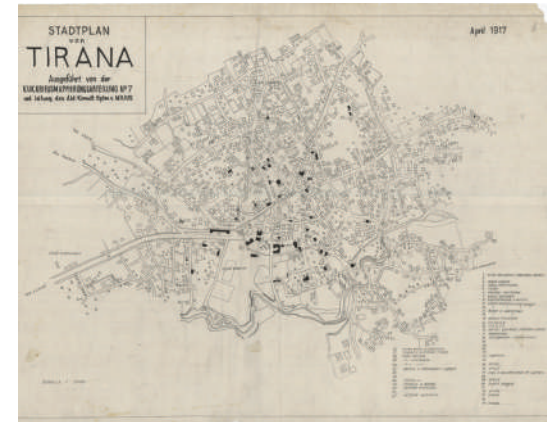
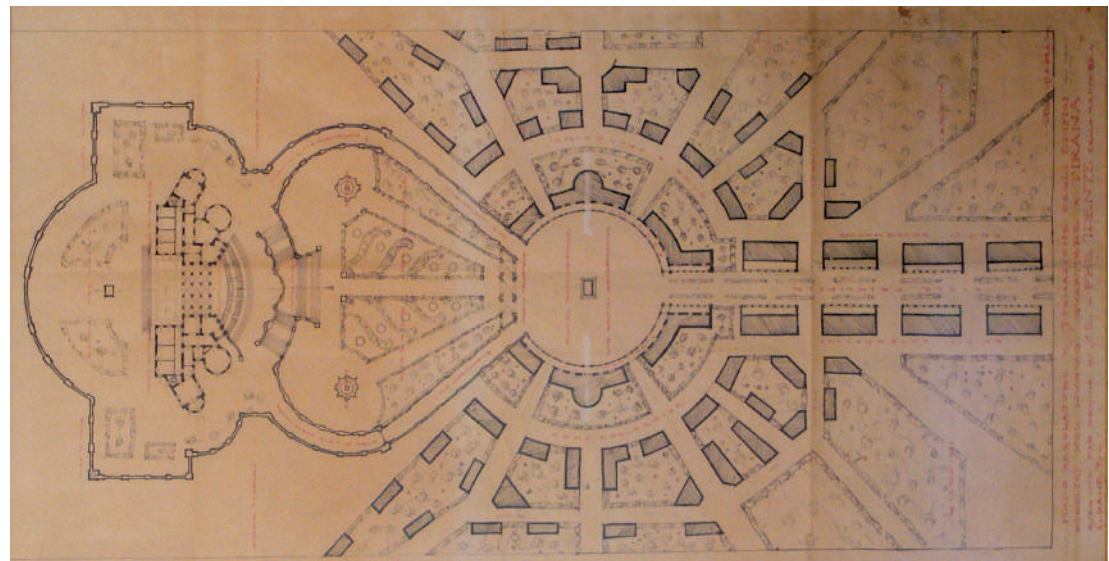


Fig. 1 - Map of Tirana city in 1917 produced by the Austro-Hungarian army. (Central Technical Archives of Construction)

Fig. 2 - A. Brasini, Regulatory plan for Tirana city expansion, new boulevard extension, Tirana, 1926. (Central Technical Archives of Construction)

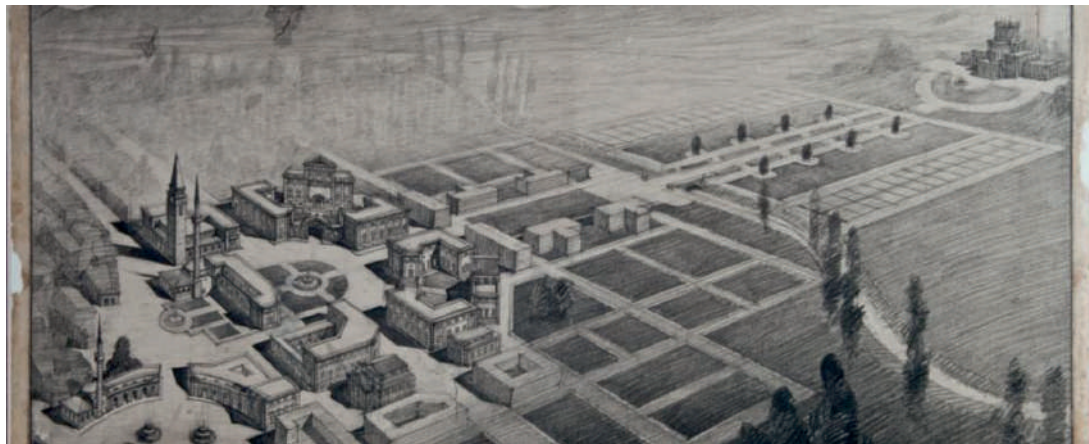


- Architecture,
 - Industrial Construction,
 - Infrastructure
 - and Professional Historical Photography.
- The Urban Planning and Architecture Section administers and maintains a rich fund of about 8490 files, which can be considered about 50,000 documents (graphic and written) of urban planning projects with a time span from 1917 to 1990. These projects are organized into two large categories:
- Files with building permits of owners before the end of World War II
 - Files after the end of World War II, which are the files of urban planning projects where regulatory plans, urban studies, reliefs, etc. can be evidenced.

Meanwhile, part of these urban planning materials for different cities are also written documents and reports in the form of laws, regulations or various technical reports. The oldest documentation is the "Survey Map of Tirana" realized by the engineers of the Austro-Hungarian military troops in 1917 for strategic military purposes.

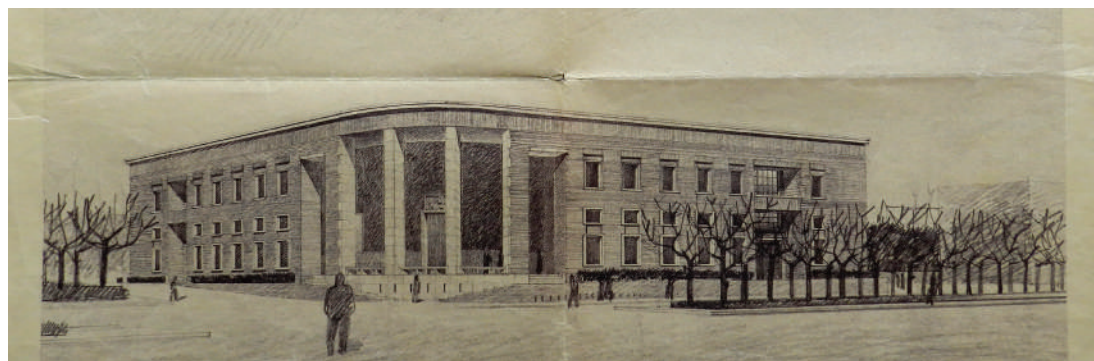
The Public and Industrial Constructions Section administers and maintains a fund of about 8400 files consisting of about 350,000 sheets of documentation in the form of graphic and written materials, which are part of the projects of Industrial buildings, especially from 1945 to 1990. They are specified in:

- Documentation of various industrial buildings.
- Documentation of buildings of various social ty-



F. Di Fausto, View of the Regulatory Plan, a boulevard systematization version, Tirana, 1930 (Central Technical Archives of Construction)

Fig. 4 - V. B. Morpurgo, Albanian National Bank, Tirana, 1936, perspective of Skanderbeg Square. (Central Technical Archives of Construction)



pologies.

- Documentation of social and industrial buildings realized by architects or foreign groups of architects.

- Documentation of social - cultural buildings before and after the end of the Second World War

The Infrastructure Section administers a fund with about 4860 files (about 35,000 sheets), while the Photography Section has inherited about 2,000 files (26,000 photographs), which present photographs of various Albanian cities, various residential buildings, or industrial buildings, which are photographed in different phases of their construction.

SECTION WITH MATERIALS BEFORE AND DURING THE MONARCHY PERIOD UNTIL 1939

In this period, which begins with the first projects realized after independence in 1912, and continues with projects up to 1925 - 39, the time when the government was under the strong influence of Ahmet Zog, who was proclaimed king during his political dominance. In these years we can say that the first and most important transformations took place in the main Albanian cities, where the greatest impact occurred in Tirana, in the newly named capital. The numerous materials in the AQTN can testify especially to the changes of Tirana, which

passes through the work of many authors who work especially in the city of Tirana at this time. The most significant part of these architects come from Italy. Although they operate in the Albanian context, they bring their approach of the moment as if they were working in Italy. We can say that at the same time in Italy, although at different times with ups and downs, the debate on architectural and urban interventions was very strong, as the totalitarian fascist power was seeking to present the new transformative face of the fascist state through architecture. The results of this debate in practice were impressive and quite different in different periods. These strong concepts would also extend to Tirana during the two periods. Practically, with the main axis of the new city, around which today Tirana is developed and stratified, which comes with three urban plans: in 1925 with the plan of Armando Brasini, in 1930 with the plan of Frashëri, Kohler and Florestano Di Fausto, it can be confirmed that the main identity base of the new Albanian capital was created.

In addition to these important figures, the archives also contain dignified projects by important architects of Italian architecture of the time, such as Vittorio Ballio Morpurgo, Cesare Valle, Giulio Berte. The interesting community of talented young Albanian architects of the time also stands out: Kolë Hidromeno, Qemal Butka, Anton Lufi, Skender Luarasi, Ibrahim Prushi, Kristo Sotiri, etc. They were formed in the early and mid-1930s and began to make an interesting contribution to the construction of the country at that time. However, the king would entrust the main urban plans on a large scale to well-known Italian and Austrian architects. The first plan of 1925 was entrusted to the Roman architect Armando Brasini, who came up with the idea of a monumental boulevard surrounded by the main government headquarters. This boulevard is a coordinating axis for urban development and a condenser for the new centralization, with different degrees. The perspectives for the new squares were attached to the regulatory plan, the monumental center of the ministries, Skanderbeg Square and finally the Presidential Palace. The boulevard path enters

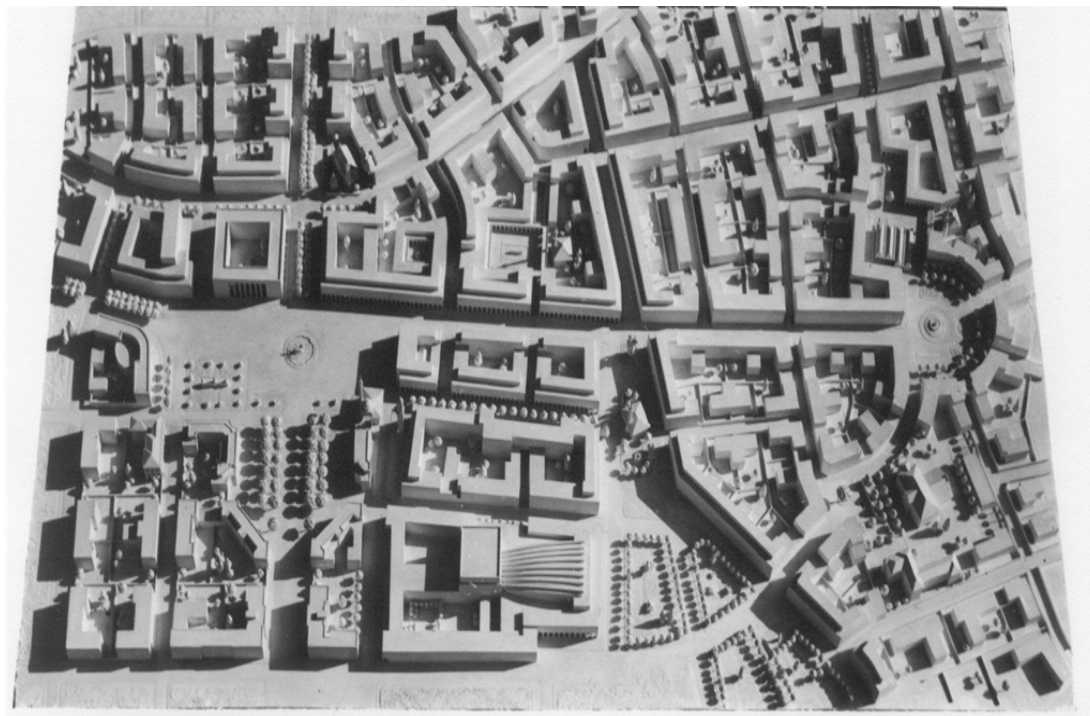


Fig. 5 - G. Bosio, Skanderbeg Square project, Tirana, 1939, general plan of the final version of the square, construction model. (Central Technical Archives of Construction)

the city through an important point, which is Skanderbeg Square, which became the main axis of the new urban image.

SECTION WITH MATERIALS DURING THE PERIOD OF FASCISM 1939-1943

The fascist government, during the four-year fascist occupation, sent to Tirana a group of young architects headed by Gherardo Bosio, for whom in October 1939 the decree for the creation of the Central Office of Construction and Urban Planning of Albania was signed. Bosio entrusted the

work to his collaborators under the direction of Ferdinando Poggi, before his death in 1941. The working group, in addition to Poggi, at that time included Giuseppe Paladini, Ivo Lambertini, Ferrante Orzali, Bruno Moz, Emilio Antonino Cocola, Leone Carmignani, Giovanni Contessi, all based in Albania and the architect Albertoni who followed the works from Rome. They dealt with the Regulatory Plan of Tirana as well as all the main Albanian cities.

Studies on various plans, especially the Tirana plan, began in September 1939 with the design and then realization of the square and boulevard of fascist ideology. In October of the same year,

work began on the idea of the regulatory plan that ended with a draft plan approved by law 71, on March 7, 1940.

In 1938, studies began on the road and urban network, and, above all, studies began on the plan limited to the area between the "Vittorio Emanuele III" street (today "Zogu I") and the old road to Shkodër. A specific plan with a certain organic unity was prepared for the area called "New Tirana", which included the Lana River in the south and the hill where the artificial lake is located today and to the east by the Elbasan Road.

What can be seen in these plans is quite important for understanding the historical and urban transition that Tirana and Albania were experiencing at that difficult historical time, plans that would also be quite valuable during the period of the communist dictatorship. The Communist Party of Albania would declare the plans that emerged from this period as plans of the invaders, completely denying them, but we still have new cases of bringing different proposals at different times during the five decades of the dictatorship.

SECTION WITH MATERIALS DURING THE PERIOD OF RELATIONS WITH THE SOVIET UNION UNTIL 1963

The period of communist dictatorship, under the strong regime of the Albanian Communist Party, extends from 1945 to 1990, as long as the seizure of power after World War II lasted until the fall of communist dictatorships throughout the Eastern Bloc. This long period is generally in complete harmony with the historical and architectural developments in these countries in the Soviet Union or in the countries associated with it. Even if Albania would completely stop relations with this great Bloc, from the point of view of architectural product we have no differences with them. So in Albania too, this period is divided into two major periods, which are closely related to the historical and architectural developments precisely in the Soviet Union, when after Stalin's death, Khrushchev radically changed course regarding the Stalinist approach in every direction, including here

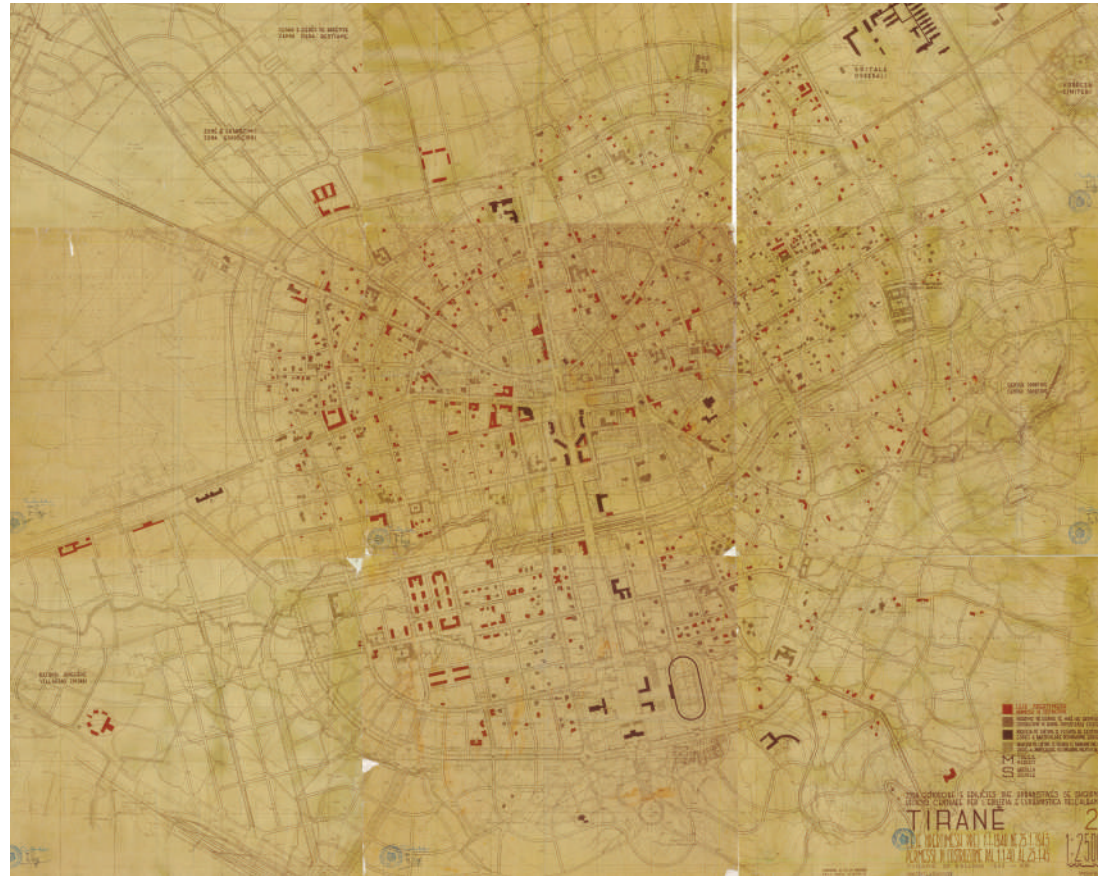


Fig. 6 - G. Bosio, F. Poggi, I. Lambertini. Tirana city plan, 1943, construction permits from 01.01.1940 - 25.01.1943. (Central Technical Archives of Construction)

also in the model of Soviet neoclassical architecture, so beloved and sought after by Stalin.

So in the AQTN both of these periods are quite well documented with abundant and complete materials which show quite well the contribution of the architects of these two periods, within the ideological frameworks defined by the communist regime.

Having said this, it is immediately understood that the same reflection of these ideas and declarations must have been the new buildings of



Fig. 7 - Tirana, former "Stalin" Textile Factory, implemented according to the project from the Soviet Union. (photo by A. Vokshi, 2013)

Fig. 8 - Palace of Culture, implemented according to the project received from the Soviet Union during years 1960-64. (photo by A. Vokshi, 2020)

ideology, erected everywhere and especially in the new capital, Tirana. The appearance of state architecture had to imprint, in its genetic code, the sign of the power and greatness of the people who would make it possible and in accordance with its scale and dimensions. However, the architecture of these buildings, according to the debate of the period, ready to establish the full relationship of socialism with the nation and with their people, had to reflect, in their forms and dimensions, the aspirations of the people for a happy and harmonious life.

In the fifties, in the struggle for the representation of "authentic proletarian art", a new rejection of new architecture was created in favor of the rise of neo-classical architecture, which created, as a result, an architectural trend in the eastern countries, unique in the international context, as a fusion of modern and classical architecture. This can be seen for example in the building of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, on the boulevard and in the central buildings in the area of the Combine and the Kinostudio. The intention to transmit in its entirety, its design, the grandeur and power in the new ideology and the new world. For this period we have a considerable amount of projects related to the reconstruction of the damages of the Second World War, but also to the needs of the Albanian Communist Party to produce new architecture for the so-called "New Man" [1]. Worthy here, in addition to Albanian architects such as Anton Lufi, Skender Luarasi, Ibrahim Prushi, etc., a series of Russian, Bulgarian architects, etc. can also be counted. The people who manage to produce a considerable amount and quite close to the architecture liked by Stalin are the Albanian authors: Gani Strazimiri, Eqrem Dobi, etc.

SECTION WITH MATERIALS AFTER THE PERIOD AFTER THE BREAKING OF RELATIONS WITH THE SOVIET UNION UNTIL 1990

The break with the Soviet Union and the ideological pursuit of the Stalinist line of the Albanian Communist Party did not result in the same process of architectural production. The return

of Albanian students who had studied in the departments of architecture of various countries of the Eastern Communist Bloc brought with it the wind of changing the language of architecture, once again embracing the architecture of modernist lines. Although without an open debate on what this new architecture should represent, the process is represented by quite dignified projects realized by Valentina Pistoli, the first female Albanian architect, Koço Çomi, Koço Miho, Enver Faja, Besim Daja and others of this level. These figures, together with the older architects, managed to establish the School of Architecture in Albania, which would also form future generations of architects who made contributions in different periods.

Petraq Kolevica and Maks Velo belong to the group of the most prominent architects of Albanian architecture during the communist dictatorship that emerged from this school. Although in

a very difficult time, they have left strong traces in the course of the history of Albanian architecture. They demonstrated a high level of general cultural formation and expression of their creative capacity. From their orientation and from the architectural product, they and all the names cited above fully belong to the concepts of the Modern Movement. This is clearly evidenced by many of their residential buildings or even public buildings, which not only belong to the circle of the most important achievements of modern Albanian architecture, but with the power and progress of the ideas applied, they anticipate phenomena that had not previously developed in the works of their modern contemporaries in Albania. Precisely these, multi-family residential buildings or other public buildings, for which there was very little finance made available by the totalitarian regime, reflect the creative orientation of the time of Maks Velo and Petraq Kolevica, their authentic approach as well as the complete individuality

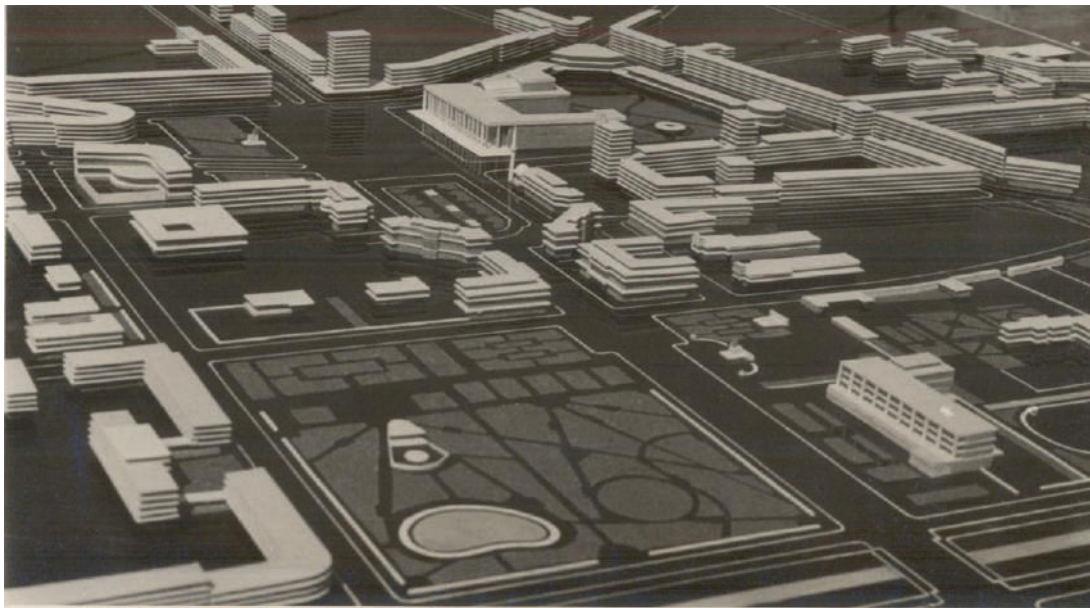


Fig. 9 - The Support Plan of Tirana city, according to the situation of 1953, the General Plan where the construction permits can be identified in the fifties, as well as the presence of the "Stalin" Textile Factory and "Shqipëria e Re" film studio. (Central Technical Archives of Construction)

Fig. 10 - Palace of Culture and Tirana Hotel, the model of Skanderbeg Square, 1960. (Central Technical Archives of Construction)

Fig. 11 - E. Faja, National Gallery of Arts, Perspectives on a possible alternative to the final project of the Gallery, 1974. (Central Technical Archives of Construction)





Fig. 12 - Regulatory Plan of Tirana city, according to the 1974 situation, General Plan where the areas for construction permits with high constructions can be identified, Scale 1:10000. (Central Technical Archives of Construction)

Fig. 13 - M. Velo, "Building with Cubes", Residential building at the entrance of Dibra Street dedicated to writers, 1973, Perspective of the front part. (Central Technical Archives of Construction)

of their creative expression. Unfortunately, these buildings were marked as "expressions of an architectural language inappropriate" for the ideological parameters of the communist dictatorship and remained taboo in the attention of professionals and the wider public. In reality, they turned into serious accusations for both architects, after the seventies, to the extreme consequences of a prison sentence for architect Maks Velo and exclusion from the profession and removal from the city of Tirana for Petraq Kolevica. These are quite serious facts, which come after the beginning of a fruitful production of the two authors. Their attack had malicious purposes of censorship and self-censorship for the different generations of architects during that period, which undoubtedly stopped the rapid momentum in the development of modern Albanian architecture.

CONCLUSIONS

AQTN manages to have several elements that make it very special. First, during the period of the communist dictatorship this archive was not open and consultable for citizens and researchers for reasons of strict political censorship, linking the architectural language of these periods with the political ideology of the time to which they belonged. One of the taboo topics that was forbidden to talk about were the projects of Italian architects who left a considerable legacy in the Albanian territories, starting from 1916 in the city of Vlora and coming and intensifying, especially in the years 1939-43 during the occupation period. In these years it is noticeable how the strong debate in Italy on the presentation of the required architecture is exported to Albania, leaving important signs of the time. AQTN collected various projects even from the period of the communist dictatorship where projects were carried out only in some construction institutes, and therefore the archive

fund consisted of materials of technical construction projects of public institutions for the period before 1990, that is, before the fall of the totalitarian system. AQTN has served after two thousand years as an inexhaustible supplier of materials on which the mosaic of projects and architects who produced those projects was finally formed, reaching important publications and conclusions regarding the periods. In this sense, the Archive is not only a reference tool for specialists in the field, but also a source of great importance for researchers of urban history, architecture and Albanian culture. Therefore, the preservation, digitization and promotion of this archive constitutes an important institutional task and an opportunity to restore attention to the material and ideological heritage built over decades.

NOTE

[1]The concept of the “new man” aimed to create a new socialist individual, conscious, disciplined and committed to the collectivity. This individual had to be freed from the influences of the bourgeois past and embrace the new socialist values.

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