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# The Folkloric Spirit Through the Form. In the Case of Tirana Recents Architectural Development

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## Abstract

*This paper aims to analyze the methodological differences of the sculptural-aesthetic form in architecture. The so-called sculptural form has always been looking for an aesthetic realization in arts, but today we see more and more architectural examples that are proposed as such. In the Pier Paolo Pasolini's short documentary 'The Shape of the City', we see contemplated the shape of the city of Orte in Viterbo, Italy, where he referred to the different as a form that destroys the complexity of the whole, but he clarifies that he is talking from an aesthetic point of view. This phenomenon, especially in Albania, is more noticeable around the central areas of the cities, where in some cases the architectural forms has been transformed, evoking some folkloristic symbols. The architect and the artist are no longer differentiated, so these phenomena can be more visible in the facades of many new buildings in the city of Tirana. Analyzing the shape of buildings in the city of Tirana in the last 10 years, we see many recent shapes through folkloric elements. This way of designing by architects working with cities like Tirana is creating disconnection with the organic parts of the city and alienating it. The new image of the city, with skyscrapers like Down Town or Skanderbeg Tower are a direct reflection of the representation of the folkloric form. The question arises spontaneously; do these forms bring sustainability for a contemporary image of the city as a representative of its time? The paper will ask the above question and at the same time examine the possibilities of these forms to be representative of the development of the city in the contemporary spirit and the appearance of at least a nationalist spirit through the form.*

**Keywords:** Tirana, shape, downtown, folklores, architecture.

## Introduction

Although the Labor Party won the 1991 elections, (Affairs) in 1992 they lost the first pluralist elections after almost 50 years of a one-party system and the party-state government fell. And a democratic government was installed soon after, in that moment the rapid change of the cities began, the additions often dictated by the need for space appeared like mushrooms everywhere, alienating the common public space. Ornamental tools up to that time almost completely absent began to appear inside the apartments and also outside it. Till that day, the fantasy was truncated by the totalitarian regime, which made it impossible to display aesthetic individuality, also because most of the dwellings other than what the vast majority of the population called adobe were state-built dwellings such as prefabricated or silicate bricks and in most cases they were built by voluntary work, which lasted until the end of the imposing collective rules. The need until that time was to build four or five floor buildings, because they were mostly for residential purposes. The communist era left a lasting impact on the city's physical and architectural landscape, with monumental structures and urban planning interventions that aimed to shape the city according to the ideology of the time (Velo, 2013). With the end of that era, Albania opened up to the influence that came from abroad, starting a process which still lasts today. During this process, in Albania, the individual took over on the role of the beautician and modifier of public space in the city by transforming it according to his image, full of effort and doubt towards an idea of personal ideal.



**Figure 1:** Skanderbeg Square, Tirana, 1990. Retrieved from online newspaper Koha.

## Vice Versa (Artist as Architect)

Throughout history, we have evidences that what happened in Albania in the 1990s is not new; a sort of aesthetic self-regulation has always existed. Perhaps this did not happen consciously in the case of the individual, but referring to what was argued in the book *Gardner's Art through the ages: A Global History* (Kleiner, 2009), many societies or rulers of the past understood the influence of art in communicating with the masses. Something that from ancient times was an idea widely accepted was designing power and propaganda

message through the facade has been very present, where one of the main roles has been the use of decor through bas-reliefs and round sculpture. For conveying these concepts, round sculptures, bas-reliefs, and other architectural decorations were particularly effective mediums. Bas-reliefs offered the chance to depict in great detail historical occurrences, mythological tales, or symbolic environments that bolstered the ruler's narrative. These pieces of art were often erected in public on the outside or on the exterior facades of important buildings for maximum impact and visibility. For example, in Egypt as was explained by Gombrich in his book *The story of art*, (Gombrich, 1995) the pharaohs decorated their temples and tombs with hieroglyphs and reliefs showing their divine status and military conquests. The Romans acted in the same way, using monumental sculptures and bas-reliefs to propagate and glorify the virtues of the empire, as in the case of Trajan's column. However, in the cases mentioned above, we are not talking about a special role of the artist or the architect, but about a practice conditioned by the intention of the commissioner. The role that the individual has claimed as his own during the 90s and taking the omnipotence of the creator par excellence has also been a kind of dilemma of its own kind which is repeated in the history of the coexistence between the artist and the architect. Regardless of today and this day, we are always amazed when we come across some of the wonders of Gothic, Renaissance, Romantic architecture, and many, many others. We are delighted by their engineering achievements, by their aesthetic beauty and by the art-works that they hold inside, as decorations, frescoes, and many more. They have transformed into symbolic expressions and sensorial bearers of aesthetic values.

There was a time, precisely the one we mentioned about above, in which the architect and the artist were one, for example Michelangelo Buonarroti, Leon Battista Alberti, Brunelleschi, Raphael, etc. There is a long list of artists who developed their practice in different disciplines during Humanism, who did not divide their art practices into architecture and fine arts. For example, the discovery of perspective was nothing more than a fragment of the same thing, a different expression of the same sensitivity. But in a writing by Marco Casamonti (Casamonti, 2014) the unification of the arts did not last long, and not due to reluctance, but due to the difficulty of combining all artistic expressions in the same aesthetic theory. The fine arts are able to express themselves to the maximum through the sublime, the imitation of nature (considered perfect because God created it), just as architecture, which by necessity builds artificial landscapes, functional to human needs, can claim to have the same status as art? Casamonti says.

This conceptual problem has been sought to be solved by means of an archetype such as that of a primitive hut, which turns into a model to be imitated. Corinthian capitals had leaves next to them, so they gave the architecture the same expressive artistic value of painting and sculpture.





**Figure 2:** Pier Paolo Pasolini, stills from the short documentary, Orte, Italy, 1974. *La Forma della Città – The Form of the City*.

### The Whole (form and detail)

Pier Paolo Pasolini, the director of Italian Neorealism, also discussed the shape of the city, his films mainly deal with the outskirts of the city. But in the case of the documentary *“La Forma della Città”* (Pasolini, 1974), he speaks in a monologue about the historic city of Orte in the province of Viterbo where he refers to social housing (which he was categorically against) which was built on the outskirts of the city of Orta in the years of the Italian economic boom, as something outside the country, as a different form that broke the complexity of the whole. Pasolini clarifies that he is talking about the aesthetic form of the city, so he speaks as an artist, not as an architect. It underlines the need for the eye not to be distracted by something that seems not to have its place there, something that alienates the profile of the city we are seeing, which is why the difference in styles and above all in some structures are very different from the sum of the style dominant, you cannot put a new modern structure in the center of an ancient city contemplates Pasolini. Trying to strengthen what was said before, let's make a modest analogy with the thought of Pasolini, and Rudolf Arnheim, the latter, tells us about form and simplicity as a need to read the general form. He states that:

« *According to the basic law of visual perception, any stimulus pattern tends to be seen in such a way that the resulting structure is as simple as the given conditions permit.* » (Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception, A Psychology of the Creative Eye*, 1974)

With this quote he tells us that depending on the stimulus, be it; shape, color, light or atmospheric conditions, the receptors of the eye and then of the mind will read the shape as simply as possible. To put it with Pasolini, if the stimulus is strong, then the eye's tendency to simplify the detail will be less, but if the stimulus is weaker, then the eye is able to simplify it better. Eliminating the distraction of the eye from the overall shape and panorama. Pasolini, in its Orte's documentary, seems to give a sense of proportion to the city's history, but what about Tirana today? What can be said? It is often argued that Tirana was not a historic city like other cities in Albania or outside of it. Or that Tirana does not have a historical skeleton of the city worth preserving.

### Towards the Centrality (Periphery)

At the beginning of this article, we discussed a little about the numerous haphazard constructions around the city, especially during the early 90s and the general cacophony where everyone was building according to their own personal idea. But it would be good to make a differentiation regarding this phenomenon

between center and periphery. The intervention of the individual in his home in the suburbs comes as a result of local cultural processes assimilated over time. Despite the lack of aesthetic unity, it is organic because it comes from below, it comes from the need to build a larger space, from the need to create facilities through the property and from the need to be identified. This conglomeration of differences that the outskirts of Tirana offers in particular, creates a unified and simultaneously diverse urban landscape.

However, we cannot simply separate the center from the periphery, as if to say that this phenomenon of individual aestheticism only occurs on the periphery. To various extents this phenomenon also manifests itself at the center and, on the contrary, from the periphery it is not organic. It seems more as if the center is an arena, a pedestal on which the sculptural volumes are raised, a theatrical stage on which a comedy is staged, all dedicated to the active and passive spectator. A form of communication with the masses is no longer the vision of the local inhabitant who tries to stand out in his peripheral locality, but that of imposition, through a well-defined image capable of capturing as much attention as possible. We must say that not all the buildings in the center are like this, the center offers several buildings from different eras that have characterized the capital, there are also skyscrapers that can be divided into two categories. On the one hand there are those with clear architectural volumes that are defining the image of Tirana in the future. And on the other side there are those buildings which, despite having clear architectural walls, insert elements of national folklore on the facade. In some cases, *folklorism* is only at the level of the pattern, colorful and in other cases it returns to the form, here there is a clear media objective of communication with the masses.

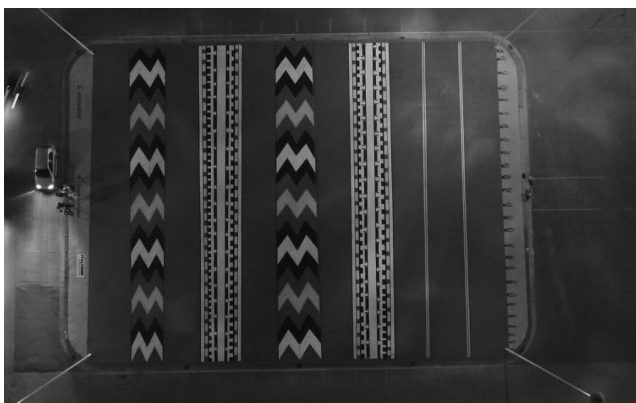
Let's dwell on this situation a bit, Tirana at the time of communism had slogans that appeared on the gray buildings of the time, and from there in the 2000s there were facades painted by the most important contemporary artists of that time, where the facade was a canvas that communicated with the passerby. And during these years, many parts of the city have disappeared to give way to multi-store concrete buildings, depriving the city of its identity, while some of these buildings use, for example: the map of Albania, Skanderbeg's head, carpets with national folklore motifs and many others. The question arises spontaneously: is it a way to dress the city in history while the very construction of those buildings has erased the history of the city?

### Pattern and Facade.

The facade is a component very important in a building, they create a relationship between what is inside and outside the building. It separates two spaces and at the same time communicates through this separation. Facade models or the patterns that represent them can be related to the symbolic and cultural context, representing historical, religious or traditional themes. Since they have a direct impact on people and the way people perceive shapes in relation to space, harmony and visual balance is important. In the book *“The Dynamics of Architectural Form”* (Arnheim, *The Dynamics of Architectural Form*, 2009)

Rudolf Arnheim emphasizes the importance of visual elements, such as patterns, in the creation and perception of art and architecture. By including the patterns found on the facades, they play an important role in guiding the viewer's perception and creating a sense of visual harmony. Based on his work, we can say that visual perception is a dynamic process that includes the interaction of the viewer's mind and the visual elements that are presented to him.

They are not created to simply have a certain visual form, but at the same time they perform several functions that are very important for the building, such as protection from the sun's radiation, winds or other climatic aspects. The materials with which the facades are built must create a very good balance between form and function. It can affect the deformation or maintenance of the facade model. Therefore, when we do an analysis of it, this approach between the operation of these elements or not should be taken into account. On the other hand, the pattern that the building conveys affects the viewer in obtaining information about the building. Back to Arnheim, he emphasizes that facades must be created in such a way that they can be perceived as elements that communicate with each other. Buildings must communicate visually with a code that pertains to the territory where they were previously built, or where a



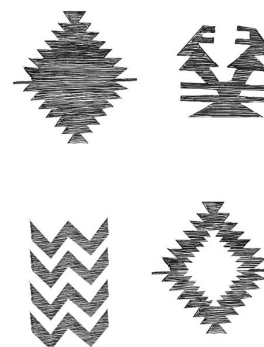
**Figure 3:** Qilimi, Mother Tresa Square, Tirana, Albania

new aesthetic element will be built.

Folkloric forms in architecture refer to design elements, architectural styles, or features derived from traditional or regional folk art, culture, and customs. These forms are often characterized by their simplicity, their connection to local traditions and the incorporation of cultural symbols or beliefs. They can be found in different types of buildings, such as houses, churches and other structures, which reflect the cultural heritage of the community to which they belong. These folkloric forms in architecture serve not only as an expression of cultural identity, but also as practical solutions adapted to the local environment and climate. They continue to inspire contemporary architecture and preserve the unique heritage of diverse communities around the world. If we go back for a moment to the architecture that was built during communism in Tirana, we can notice very well different structural parts on the facades of the buildings.

As for example in the shapes of the carpets that are repeated in the staircases of the buildings, like empty spaces that create the design through their cutting. Such elements can be found in several palace buildings of this period. While folkloristic forms, as a way of preservation of symbolic elements or materials that are part of Albania, we also see them in the square, which is built on the concept of preserving the identity of matter but not shown in an illustrated form. And other elements of the buildings around the center of Tirana are emphasizing once and more this visual need to express identity through form.

Albania is characterized by a diversity of folklore elements. Some of the reasons that make these changes possible are because of the climatic conditions, which change and affect the type of material that is chosen to create these carpets. These products being part of the family economy, we see that these conditions have made possible the interpretation of the forms by women. Where they have interpreted the shapes by putting the feelings and choosing the colors to create the shapes (Zozji, 2024). Contemporary architecture does not come out of nowhere. It is reconstructed by analyzing the buildings of the past and their adaptation to the culture and needs of the area. These forms, which are sketched above as representatives, without color and without matter, of some repeating elements in Egyptian carpets. There are also shapes that have symbolism. Since Albania has many regions, some deep and some that have had contact with other cultures, it has created a diversity of forms that are repeated. It seems that over time, these forms have been preserved, and we can say that they had many symbolic values. Below are some carpets where, in different areas, we see the same repetitions but with an interpretation in the color ratios. Like the shapes taken from the zigzag carpet. In some cases, we look at images that have emerged from the contrast between the subject and the background, where sometimes we see shapes stand out and sometimes, they appear in the background, turning into a repeated shape. Here we are talking about the symbol of the geometric shape with two heads. Drawings and interpretations of the symbol of the national flag have been interpreted in various forms in the symbolism of carpets or decor in Albania. This has come to us as a need for popular communication through the national image. To make this creative connection more. Usually, this corpse of the eagle symbolism comes from



**Figure 4:** Qilim ornaments. Ornament drawings derived from the Albanian traditional carpet. Courtesy by Armela Lamaj.

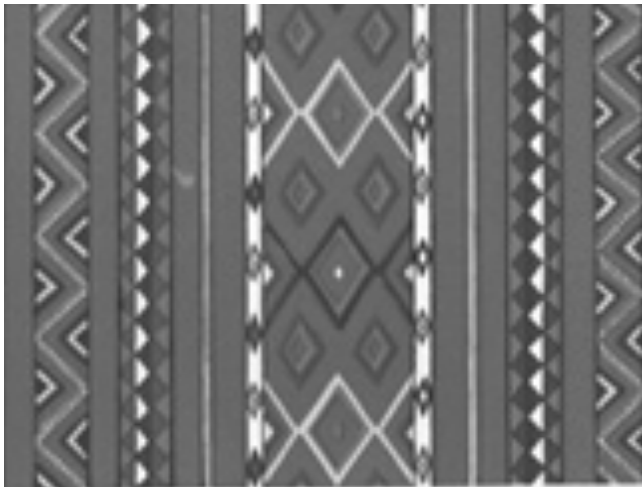


Figure 5: Carpet woven in kukes, (repetition of zig zag elements)

red as an element of an identity representative.

### Folk – Form

Following the discourse, we can say that it is a little too complex to make a differentiation between the pattern of the facade and the form, although we can say that the facade is only about the external appearance with the help of the ornament. In some cases, this becomes easy to distinguish, in other cases, as in the case of the building under construction, simply called Skanderbeg's head by most, regardless of whether it is officially called Tirana Rock, the difference between the facade and the shape becomes complex. Because through interventions in the form of balconies, walls and other architectural elements, the building is changing in its general form, that is, in its volumes.

We will return to the topic shortly afterwards, but above we have tried to argue the pattern and the ornamental interventions by means of folklore to the facades; those decorative incorporations often serve a more symbolic purpose than a practical one (Doherty, 2003). For example, we have several cases where the element "carpet" (qilimi) was used, in the case of the carpet painted as a trompe l'oeil on the facade of a government building in Tirana, as well as on the floor of Mother Teresa Square in Tirana (fig. 3). In both these cases, there is no practical and functional value in the creation of these painted facades, even the aesthetic values are not present in those facades, turning into what is described as a kitsch imagery (Baudrillard, 1981).

The art historian and critic Clement Greenberg defines kitsch as a style typified by excessive sentimentality or tackiness that is frequently devoid of actual creative worth (Greenberg, 1939). Moreover, on the same issue, Mattei Călinescu warns against using folklore-inspired motifs carelessly, as they run the risk of becoming kitsch (Calinescu, 1987). Examples of such motifs include painted trompe l'oeil carpets that we mentioned above. These decorative interventions serve largely to elicit nationalist sentiments (Smith, 1991). These embellishments, based on collective recollections of popular folklore, are meant to evoke an emotional response in the audience, instilling a sense of pride and belonging (Anderson, 1983). However, their cultural significance and aesthetic worth are diminished by the commercialization of these traditional symbols for mass consumption (Appadurai, 1986). Their original significance is lost, and they are reduced to mere imitations rather than authentic representations of cultural

heritage (Baudrillard, 1981).

Clearly, there is a dispute between authenticity and commercialism in the portrayal of national identity through architectural adornment. Although the employment of folkloric elements may appear to be a celebration of cultural heritage, unthinking appropriation for decorative purposes risks perpetuating superficial stereotypes and damaging the integrity of the cultural heritage they are meant to represent. It is necessary to move beyond superficial representations towards a more nuanced understanding of cultural heritage and identity.

Formally, there is a similar case, is the new pedestrian walkway of Shiroka in Shkodra (fig. 6) designed by the Danish studio Casanova + Hernandez under the name Albanian Carpet (Casanova+Hernandez, 2023), but this time regardless of the fact that the pattern's ornaments come from the carpet and the very name of the project is based on the carpet as an essential part of the tradition and Albanian folklore, the project has not ended in kitsch imagery. The subject of the pattern in this case is also represented by the function itself. In addition to the form, in particular, which is connected with symbolic ornaments, it also has the function of a carpet, due to the way the repetition of forms is built. Inviting you to welcome, the area is closely connected with the services of the restaurant. In this area, one can enjoy local products, like at home. The finding of this element as part of the designers' thought and concept is harmoniously connected with the surroundings. The way in which color is interpreted has a special importance in bringing back motifs from the past and also in the interpretation of forms. In this case, the colors are contained and reproduced together with the material, such as stone tiles. The painting of the road was not used, something that would invalidate this project in a very short time, which in a very subtle way conveys positive emotions and warmth from the past. As it seems in this case, regardless of the fact that folklore motifs are used, it does not fall into that kitsch imagery that Baudrillard described. We can say that it is in balance, preserving the use of folklore motifs with intelligence. Even the ornamental excess described by Clement Greenberg here is contained, without excess. Another case is the one mentioned a little above, that of Tirana Rock (Skenderbeu's head) (fig. 7), an unprecedented case in our country but with a historical precedent in world architecture, as David Brussat reminds us, and it is the Harvard Lampoon Building (Brussat, *Architecture Here and There*, 2014) in 1909 by Edmund March Wheelwright (fig. 8), bearing witness to the lasting impact of creative design throughout time and space.

If we want to just recall other cases that history teaches us, in fact, regardless of the massive use of interventions not only in the facade but also in the form, they do not manage to change the plastic of the building or structure into a sculptural volume. Although during Spanish modernism, with the well-known architect Antoni Gaudí, some attempts may have been made and perhaps some analogies can be found, in any case, they remain within the framework of biomorphic forms (Khurram, 2023).

Within our country, Tirana Rock is a unique creation that resembles more than just a typical building—rather, it embodies a sculpture bust, regardless of the fact that it is an 85 m





**Figure 6:** Shiroke, Shkoder, Albania (Albanian Carpet is a patterned plaza. Top image: it is made from blocks of granite).



**Figure 7:** Tirana Rock. Retrieved from online website, Ana shpk.



**Figure 8:** Harvard Lampoon Building. Edmund March Wheelwright, Boston, 1909.

high building according to what the construction firm, Ales Construction (Ales Construction, 2023) claims. The building is located next to Skanderbeg Square, which bears the name of our national hero, because this building also refers to this national hero, paying homage to his legacy. The designers have tried to adapt the building with its plastic moldings to give us the likeness of a bust, it refers to the bust of Odise Paskali, which is also the image of Albanian banknotes. In a statement, Winy Maas, founding partner of MVRDV, said that today cities around the world are increasingly similar to each other and encourage them to find their individual character, advocating for a comeback to personality and pleading with local governments to recover their distinct identities. Referring specifically to this building, he states that this building is an opportunity to make a difference. Although at first glance we can agree with his statement about the similarity of cities and the difficulty of having an individuality among the modern cities of our time. But this building imposes itself as a sculpture and essentially as a monument, as a means of communication with the spectator and the space using the folkloric element. Just like in the case of the carpet pattern, where it was used on the facades of buildings only because it brings with it elements capable of conveying national feeling.

The other building under construction, Tirana DownTown (MVRDV, 2019), was designed by the MVRDV studio and represents yet another noteworthy project in the field of architecture. The building is located on Bajram Curri Boulevard, at the threshold of the Lanes River. Its main facade is 140 meters high. It is planned to be a building for the following purposes: residential, office, commercial, and entertainment. Its main facade, as shown in figures 9 and 10, mostly consists of consoles. Referring to the official website of the company, it is said that each apartment or office represents a village or city, so seen from afar, these consoles form an abstract map of Albania. Maps have been used as a means of determining coordinates, places, and settlements; they have been used by travelers and different navigators throughout history. But they are also used as a means of communication with the public; in many cases, they are used by different artists. One of them was the Italian arte povera artist Luciano Fabro, who, in his 1994 work "Italia all'asta" (Rivoli, n.d.) (Italy on Auction), the outline of the geographical map of Italy is made of iron, and the reproductions were superimposed on each other in order to reverse the geographical coordinates. Crossed by a long pole, the resulting sculptural form evokes a variety of symbols. Fabro is not the only one either; even the American artist Nate Lowman, with his Maps (Lowman, 2018) of united states, addresses the fluid nature of borders. For him, maps are not fixed entities, and for this reason, his artistic practice is a bit similar to that of American pop artist Jasper Jons and his maps. However, although these artists used the shape of the map for its clear symbolism and its communicative immediacy, their choice is justified by the fact that it has exclusively artistic purposes aimed at an audience that chooses to see it or not, at an audience that the vision was not imposed on him. Therefore, the game created with

the form or its modifications remains within the scope of artistic originality and cannot be justified or compared to the decorative ornamentation of the facades of an architectural object. The project, it takes upon itself the representation of the nation through a parthen-form with a pixelated map of Albania. That plays in the same way, risking turning into kitsch for the reason that this ornamental use often also takes a chance on cultural symbolism turning into a meaningless show. This ornamental use of national symbols frequently veers dangerously close to kitsch (Radovic, 2018), where genuine historical significance is replaced by aesthetic appeal. By employing such components, we run the risk of creating a sanitized history that forces a manufactured story on the inhabitants that has no real historical roots in tradition or heritage. A manufactured past, an authentic but hollow replica of history, threatens to supplant what was once a reliable indicator of a city's identity or cultural affiliation as a result of the superposition of these layers of symbolism. The phenomenon, which is defined by the appropriation and commercialization of elements of folklore (DuBois, 1903), not only lessens the diversity of cultural heritage but also feeds back into a distorted sense of collective memory. It imposes a façade of pseudo-history, distancing the present from historical context and cultivating a disassociation from real cultural roots. To minimize this risk, architects, designers, and urban planners must exercise caution, striking a balance between the desire for innovation and a respectful recognition of cultural authenticity. Rather than succumbing to the allure of superficial embellishment, projects should strive to engage with history in a meaningful way, fostering a dialogue between past and present that



is authentically relevant to the community's lived experiences.

#### **Conclusion and Future Research.**

Regardless of the fact that this article does not aim to give a verdict on the use of folkloric ornaments on the facades or volumes of recent buildings in Tirana and Albania, it simply tries to give another perspective on the danger that these interventions create. In all cases covered in this article, it is necessary to delve deeper into the type of development of the sculptural-aesthetic form within architecture, focusing in particular on urban environments in the city of Tirana, Albania. According to the analysis provided in the text on some of the architectural trends of the last decade, it seems clear that there is a proliferation of folkloric elements included in the design of buildings, blurring the lines between architecture and art. While this phenomenon may contribute to the visual attractiveness of the urban landscape, it also raises questions about its impact on the organic integrity of urban spaces and its ability to promote a sustainable and contemporary image of the city.

In some moments of this text, the problem of not falling into kitsch aesthetics and imagery is highlighted, comparing and defining the definition of what can be defined as kitsch through the different authors who are cited in the text. In some cases, the ornamental elements through the folkloric motif have been used intelligently, as in the case of the Shiroke pedestrian walkway in Shkodra. They offer functionality and simplicity in addition to aesthetics and values that recall the cultural heritage. In a ruling, this could be the way to approach interventions that require content linked to tradition, heritage, and folklore. Skepticism is evident when talking about Tirana's skyscrapers still under construction, such as Downtown One Tirana and Tirana Rock. The word skepticism in this case encompasses the danger offered by the use of folklore motifs, the use of national symbols, and the use of shapes that are a clear reference to national geographical



shapes. According to the definition we have given to the Kitsch image group, these elements used in these two objects but also in similar cases, for example, the carpet painted on the floor of Mother Teresa Square, clearly risk being a Kitsch imageri. These interventions do not take into account the imposition of the image and the change in the visual perception of the urban landscape. Through the architectural interventions in the two skyscrapers mentioned, the volume and shape are transformed in order to impose on citizens a sort of history recreated using national folklore. When these elements overlap on different layers, where they once constituted an element of identification for the city or for the people, this is denied by occupying the place and recreating a history without a past, a false history. Ultimately, this research aims to open a discussion whether such sculptural forms contribute to the evolution of the urban landscape in terms of cultural heritage and radical thinking. By exploring the implications of these architectural choices, it aims to stimulate dialogue on the balance between tradition and innovation in shaping the urban landscape of Tirana and beyond.

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