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Selena Daly

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DEALING WITH THE MATERIAL LEGACIES OF ITALIAN FASCIST COLONIALISM IN POST-COMMUNIST TIRANA

Selena Daly

School of European Languages, Culture and Society, University College London, London, UK

Albania

architecture

difficult heritage

Fascism

Italian colonialism

Albania was Italy's most short-lived colony, under official fascist control only from the Italian invasion in 1939 until the collapse of Mussolini's regime in 1943. However, although the fascist occupation was brief, there had been a significant Italian involvement in Albania since 1923. Thus, the influence of Fascism on Albania and especially on the capital city of Tirana was immense, not least in the areas of urban planning and architecture, most of which was retained intact by the Communist dictatorship which ruled from 1944 to 1990. This essay investigates the afterlives of this fascist-era architecture in post-Communist Tirana. In the panoply of Italy's imperial territories, Albania was unique in passing from a fascist dictatorship to a Communist one and this trajectory provides important nuance to the current debates regarding the legacies of fascist heritage in the 75 years since the regime's fall and especially in the twenty-first century. This essay pays particular attention to the years 2016–2020 during which two notable examples of fascist-era architecture in Tirana, namely the city's football stadium and the National Theatre, have been at the centre of major political and public

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Selena Daly selena.daly@ucl.ac.uk

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debates about the future of the city, the country and its governance, asking what these recent cases can reveal about the memory of fascist imperialism in post-Communist, democratic Albania and contributing to ongoing debates about the management, treatment and reception of the material legacies of Italian colonialism more broadly.

Albania was Italy's most short-lived colony, under official fascist control only from the Italian invasion in 1939 until the collapse of Mussolini's regime in 1943. After a brief occupation by Nazi forces, Albania would be ruled by a Communist dictatorship, first under Enver Hoxha and then by Ramiz Alia, until 1990, although anti-communists only won their first electoral victory in March 1992. Given the brevity of the Italian occupation and the brutality of the regime that followed it, fascist colonialism in Albania is rarely afforded centre-stage either in accounts of fascist imperialism more broadly or in accounts of Albania in the twentieth century. And yet, the influence of Fascism on Albania and especially on the capital city of Tirana was immense.

Although the fascist occupation was brief, there had been a significant Italian involvement in Albania since 1923 consisting of an, at times, uneasy collaboration with King Zog, ranging from building infrastructure across the country to exploiting natural resources and propping up the national bank and currency. One of the most significant interventions by the fascist state into Albania, even before the formal occupation, was in the area of urban planning and public architecture across the country and, most importantly, in Tirana. This transformation accelerated in the years of the occupation, leading Lucas (2007, 45) to conclude that "the Italians built as though they intended to remain in Albania for a long time."

There has been a considerable amount of recent research by Albanian and Italian scholars on the architectural history of Tirana's fascist-era architecture but these studies have all concluded with the fall of the fascist regime in 1943 (Vokshi 2014; Godoli and Tramonti 2012; Giusti 2006, 2010; Miho 2003). Meanwhile, despite the enormous impact of fascist architects on the urban fabric of Tirana, it is a context that has been entirely neglected in English-language studies of Italian colonialism and colonial architecture. Overall, the architectural interventions in the most long-lasting and significant colonial territories of Italian East Africa, Libya and the Dodecanese have always received more sustained attention from both Italian and Anglophone scholars (Cianfarani 2020; Anderson 2015; McLaren 2006; Colonas 2002; Martinoli and Perotti 1999; Tripodi 1999; Gresleri, Massaretti, and Zagnoni 1993). Indeed, when it comes to the physical transformation of Italian colonial cities, it has been argued by Mia Fuller (2007, 218) that

Tirana (and Mogadishu) "are the cities least permeated by their Italian colonial past, in part due to destructions in the intervening time."

In reality, destruction of Italian colonial architecture in Tirana was very limited in scope in the post-war period, with the vast majority remaining intact and in use throughout Hoxha's dictatorial regime and beyond into the twenty-first century. As Pamela Ballinger (2018, 96) recently observed in relation to Tirana, "much of the Italian colonial legacy (including the built environment) has remained hidden in plain sight for those wishing to acknowledge it." While, on the one hand, much of the fascist architecture in Libya was destroyed under Muammar Gaddafi and, on the other, the fascist heritage of Eritrea's capital Asmara has recently been declared a UNESCO World Heritage site (Scarlett 2020; Fuller 2007, 216–218; UNESCO 2022; Denison, Ren, and Gebremedhin 2003), the case of Tirana provides a novel perspective on the reception of Italian colonial architecture today. In the panoply of Italy's imperial territories, Albania was unique in passing from a fascist dictatorship to a Communist one and this trajectory provides important nuance to the current debates regarding the legacies of fascist heritage in the 75 years since the regime's fall and particularly in the twenty-first century.

This essay is related to, but also sits apart from, the recent, vibrant debates about the post-war and contemporary reception and treatment of fascist architecture and their role as examples of "difficult heritage." To date, the focus of this sub-field of research has been on sites within Italy (Carter and Martin 2019; Malone 2017; von Henneberg 2004) as the framework of "difficult heritage" is not directly applicable to colonial contexts. As Macdonald (2006), the pioneer of this field, has discussed at length, heritage that is "undesirable" or "difficult" is one that "belongs" to a specific culture or nation rather than one that has been imposed by external perpetrators, as is the case for former colonies. Thus, only the *Routledge Companion to Italian Fascist Architecture: Reception and Legacy* published in 2020 has dedicated attention to the afterlives of fascist architecture in Italy's colonies, focusing on the Dodecanese, Mogadishu and Asmara (Jones and Pilat 2020). What is currently absent from the scholarship is a consideration of the afterlives of fascist colonial architecture in Tirana.

A comprehensive analysis of the fate of Tirana's fascist architecture between 1944 and today, however, lies outside the scope of the present work, as does an analysis of Italian views of this material legacy of Italian fascist colonialism. Rather, this essay will pay particular attention to the post-Communist period, focusing on the perspectives of the Albanian politicians, media and general public. In particular, it will focus on the years 2016–2020 during which two notable examples of fascist-era architecture in Tirana, namely the city's football stadium and the National Theatre, have been at the centre of major political and public debates about the

future of the city, the country and its governance, with their fascist history mobilized in service of particular political positions while the broader context of the legacy of fascist colonialism in Albania has been neglected as a topic of public debate. In order to explore how and why these fascist buildings have become so politically charged only in the very recent past, the latter part of this essay will examine public and political discourse through an analysis of the coverage featured in Albanian and Italian media sources, in the former case primarily the independent and best-selling newspapers *Panorama* and *Gazeta Shqiptare* and the main opposition newspaper *Rilindja Demokratike*. In so doing, this essay will investigate the multiple new meanings inscribed onto fascist buildings in a non-Italian context and what these two recent cases can reveal about the memory of fascist imperialism in post-Communist, democratic Albania.

First, however, in attempting to understand the reasons behind the reluctance to engage directly with the legacies of Fascism in Tirana which will be analysed below, it is necessary to consider how the much more extensive Communist heritage in the city has been managed and confronted. In direct contrast to the general lack of critical engagement with the fascist past, there has been a concerted and highly effective effort in recent years to confront the "difficult heritage" of the Communist regime in the city's built environment. The view of Socialist mayor of Tirana Erion Veliaj is that "we neither embrace it [the Communist heritage] nor erase it, but we definitely co-opt it" (McLaughlin 2019). A full analysis of Tirana's negotiation of its Communist past lies outside the scope of this essay, but a few salutary details can be highlighted. Since 2014, there has been a proliferation of museums opened in sites associated with the Hoxha years, notably the Bunk'Art 1 (2014) and Bunk'Art 2 (2016) museums housed in underground bunkers built by the paranoid dictator to defend against invasion and the House of Leaves (2017), the former headquarters of the Sigurimi secret police, now a museum devoted to espionage (see Bunk'Art 2022; Iacono and Këlliçi 2015; Eaton and Roshi 2014; Payne 2014). In this "museumification" and commodification of Communist heritage as sites of "dark tourism" (Dragićević Šešić and Mijatović 2014; Kersel 2014; Foley and Lennon 1996), Albania is very much following in the example of other post-socialist countries in central Europe (see Diener and Hagen 2013; Macdonald 2009, 5–6; Williams 2008). These examples in Tirana are also powerful examples of the way in which Macdonald has recently suggested that "the act of publicly addressing terrible historical acts undertaken by the collective is no longer necessarily a disruption to positive identity formation" (Macdonald 2015, 19).

Grappling with the tangible traces of the Communist dictatorship, which ended little more than thirty years ago and which had such a devastating impact on the social, political and economic fabric of Albania, has,

perhaps understandably, taken precedence over a critical consideration of the material legacies of the fascist occupation, generally interpreted, in comparative terms, as shall be seen below, as far more benign and less consequential than what followed it. Thus, there has been little political bandwidth available to also confront Albania's history as a colony of Italy. For the ruling Socialist Party, the overriding priority has been the cost-effective realization of modern infrastructural projects, deemed to be fitting for a twenty-first-century European capital city, such as the city's football stadium and the National Theatre.

In order to appropriately contextualize the current debates about the fates of these two fascist-era buildings and the treatment of the remnants of fascist colonialism more broadly, this essay will begin by offering an overview of the Italo-Albanian relationship from the early twentieth century up to 1943, with a focus on the transformation of Tirana's urban landscape, before briefly considering the management of this built heritage during Hoxha's dictatorship and the transition to democracy.

Italo-Albanian relations and the transformation of Tirana, 1912–1943

Italy's strategic interest in Albania dates from the early twentieth century and intensified after Albania gained independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1912. Although Italy's First World War designs on Albanian territory were thwarted by Woodrow Wilson in 1920 when Albania's sovereignty was protected as a full member of the League of Nations, the 1925 election of Ahmed Zogu as President of the Albanian Republic facilitated a consolidation of relations between the two countries. Zogu's whole republic (declared a monarchy in 1928; as king Zogu called himself Zog I) was underwritten by an Italian loan – worth 50 million gold francs – from the newly established Society for the Economic Development of Albania (Roselli 2006). Italian interests in turn established a virtual monopoly over Albanian shipping and trade and much of the investment in the country was expressly to serve Italian interests through constructing infrastructure such as bridges, roads and ports. Through two military pacts in 1926 and 1927, a significant Italian military presence was put in place and the autonomy of the Albanian army was severely limited. By the 1930s, Albania's financial dependence on Italy was near total and Italian influence was pervasive: Italian "advisors" were installed in all government ministries to shape policy; Italian settlers were introduced into Albania; Italian was to be taught in all schools and by 1939, Italy accounted for 92.1 percent of Albanian exports and 82.5 percent of imports (Vickers 2001, 132–137).

This control was consolidated when Italian forces invaded in April 1939, causing King Zog to flee to Greece and allowing the fascists to install a puppet regime in which all power rested with Italy. Thus, Albania became the "quinta sponda" (fifth shore) of the Italian Empire (Libya had been the "fourth shore" since 1912). Armed resistance began in 1940 leading to severe repression by the Italians and later the Nazis after the collapse of Mussolini's government in 1943. Tirana was liberated from the Nazis on November 17, 1944 and the Communist resistance fighter Enver Hoxha entered the city as the head of the Provisional Government (see Gurakuqi 2018; Villari 2007; Fischer 1999). Over the following four decades, Hoxha would create in Albania one of the world's most repressive Communist regimes, resulting in crippling poverty and near total isolation from the outside world, which came to an end only in 1992 (see Fevziu 2016; Woodcock 2016; Abrahams 2015; de Waal 2013).

When Tirana had become the capital of Albania in 1920, it had a mere 15,000 inhabitants and was a typical Islamic town in its urban design. By 1944, it would boast a population of 60,000 and had been utterly transformed by twenty years of architectural and urban planning interventions at the hands of Italian architects, first supervised by King Zog and later deployed as part of the fascist occupation (Pojani 2015; Capolino 2011). Between 1924 and 1929, various plans for transforming Tirana into a modern capital city were put forward by Italian architects who had already distinguished themselves elsewhere in Italy's overseas colonies. The first plan by Armando Brasini, drawn up in 1924–1925, although never realized, would influence all subsequent plans for the city (Shkreli 2012; Procida 2012). In 1928, Florestano di Fausto, fresh from working in the Italian colonies of Rhodes and Kos, implemented a modified version of Brasini's vision and oversaw the construction of the main plaza Skanderbeg Square, six ministry buildings and the town hall, all built in a style reminiscent of the Italian Renaissance (Migliaccio 2012; Tramonti 2012; Stigliano 2009). The pace of change was rapid. One Italian journalist noted that in 1929 Tirana had only "a few ugly horribly paved streets, extremely muddy in winter, extremely dusty in summer, barely illuminated with oil lamps […] with public offices and Ministries housed in shacks," while on a return visit the following year he noted that the centre was gradually taking on the aspect of a modern city with "wide, spacious streets, electric light, hotels, cafes, every day an old hovel falls and is replaced with modern buildings" (Azaïs 1930, 221–222).

Aside from the government buildings, other important Italian-built constructions in central Tirana were the National Bank of Albania, designed by Vittorio Ballio Morpurgo in Skanderbeg Square and opened in October 1938, and the Circolo Italo-Albanese Skanderbeg cultural centre, designed by Giulio Bertè in 1938 and opened in 1939. Unlike di Fausto's

neo-Renaissance style, Morpurgo's Bank was of a strictly Rationalist design with a columned semi-circular entranceway leading onto a domed, oval lobby decorated with a large-scale mosaic by Giulio Rosso entitled "The Activities of the Albanian People," featuring locals picking grapes, tending livestock, harvesting wheat and fishing. The Circolo Italo-Albanese Skanderbeg was commissioned by Italy's Foreign Minister and Mussolini's son-in-law Galeazzo Ciano with the aim of cultivating good relations between Italians and Albanians through sport and culture. It boasted a theatre-cum-cinema, gym, tennis courts, swimming pool, restaurant, ball room and library arranged around a central garden in two wings linked by a portico (Consociazione Turistica Italiana 1940, 152; Menghini 2019). The style was typical of Rationalist pared-down simplicity but the means of construction were innovative: in line with Italy's autarkic policies, the building components of wood and cement were prefabricated in Italy and then sent to Tirana for assembly.

The years of the fascist occupation would bring about even greater change in the urban fabric of Tirana when the Italians finally had a free hand to impose their architectural will without recourse to any other authority. The definitive transformation of Tirana into a fascist city was implemented by Gherardo Bosio, who was appointed as head of the newly established Central Office for Building and Town Planning (Vokshi 2012; Renzi 2012; Billeri 1966). A building frenzy ensued in the earliest years of the occupation in order to structurally confirm the regime's authority, despite claims by Italian journalists that "the money will be used for useful undertakings, not in luxury works" (Tajani 1940, 83). As Mia Fuller (2007, 7) has argued with regard to colonial architecture in East Africa, Libya and the Dodecanese, "impressive buildings, monuments, and broad avenues […] lent Italian rule an air of solidity, independent of that rule's unreliable effectiveness," and this statement also holds true for the case of Tirana.

Bosio extended the main boulevard southwards towards a new monumental square called Piazza Littorio in previously unexploited land which would house the Casa del Fascio (Fascist Party headquarters), the Casa del Opera del Dopolavoro Albanese (the headquarters of the after-work organization) and Casa della Gioventù Littoria Albanese (the headquarters of the youth organization) as well as a sports stadium. In designing this new urban axis and centre, Bosio took the bold and unprecedented step of literally inscribing Fascism onto the map of the city by arranging these elements in the shape of the fascist symbol, the "fascio littorio" (fasces), the bound bundle of sticks with an axe head emerging from one side. The boulevard was the bundle and the stadium represented the axe head. All the hallmarks of the fascist occupation were to be sited along the main boulevard, fittingly named Viale dell'Impero (Empire Avenue): these included the administrative seat of the Italian Crown in Albania, the military and air force headquarters,

the Forestry Corps, the fascist National Institute for Labour Accident Insurance, and a modern hotel to accommodate Italian dignitaries and tourists. In architectural terms, the Casa del Fascio was the most noteworthy building. It replicated, on a smaller scale, elements of the imposing Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana in the EUR district of Rome and incorporated features reminiscent of the traditional northern Albanian tower-like dwellings known as "kulla" (Vokshi 2012, 74). Construction in Tirana halted, however, upon the Italian launch of its invasion into Greece from Albania in October 1940, at which point only the landmark buildings of the monumental Piazza Littorio had been completed (Capolino 2011, 610).

The fate of fascist architecture under Hoxha and the transition to democracy, 1944–1992

Albania emerged from the Second World War "as easily the most backward country in Europe" (Vickers 2001, 165). A third of all buildings and livestock had been destroyed, almost all transport and industrial infrastructure was damaged or with very limited functionality, many thousands were homeless and food was in short supply. Nonetheless, in 1948, Hoxha announced major plans to redevelop Tirana so that it would "become the most beloved city of the people [with …] architects […] respect[ing] our folk styles" (cited in Pojani 2015, 76). But despite this rhetoric, actual progress was slow and detailed plans for the city's redevelopment were only drawn up in 1963 and 1974. Most of the buildings that had been completed by Italian architects under King Zog were uncontroversial to retain for the new Albanian republic and continued to be used for their original function, notably the ministry buildings and the Bank of Albania headquarters in and surrounding Skanderbeg Square. The Circolo Italo-Albanese, which housed the theatre and leisure facilities, was renamed the Cinema Kossova in 1945 and became the site of the National Theatre (Teatri Kombëtar) in 1954 (Menghini 2019).

The approach adopted by Hoxha regarding the architectural and infrastructural legacies of the fascist occupation was similar to that employed by the post-fascist and post-Nazi authorities in Italy and West Germany (see Carter 2020; Macdonald 2009). Overt symbols of the previous regime were removed but pragmatism was the order of the day: finished buildings were left intact while unfinished ones, such as the stadium, were completed in the immediate post-war period. The new avowedly anti-fascist regime appropriated the previous hierarchy's physical legacies and repurposed them to showcase the superiority and confidence of the new Albanian republic. This repurposing of fascist-era architecture by the Communist regime can

be seen as an example of the "adaptive re-use" approach (Hökerberg 2017, 67; Maulsby 2019), with the ex-Casa del Fascio becoming the seat of the State University of Tirana and notably the seat of the Italian Crown in Albania becoming the palace of Prime Minister Hoxha in 1945. A number of other fascist-built buildings were also at the centre of Albania's nation-building and Hoxha's regime-building in the years immediately following 1943. From December 1944 to April 1945, the Circolo Italo-Albanese was used as a special court to try sixty political and public figures accused of collaboration (Fevziu 2016, 348) and the Dopolavoro building became the site for the first meeting in January 1946 of the People's Assembly that was formed after the December 1945 elections, at which it was virtually impossible to cast a vote for anyone but the Communists (Fevziu 2016, 428). Thus, it can be seen that already in the earliest years of Hoxha's dictatorship, the buildings of the fascist occupation were becoming palimpsests with new layers of meaning overlayed upon them and were being transformed into sites of collective memory for the new regime (on architectural sites as palimpsests see Carter 2020; Malone 2019).

An intervention into Tirana's urban landscape that could be immediately achieved, and at virtually no cost, to "deal with" the fascist heritage was the renaming of key streets and sites. Across post-war Europe, two approaches emerged: a reinstatement of the pre-fascist and pre-Nazi names or a wholesale renaming of streets according to the values of the new society, whether democratic or Communist (Azaryahu 2012). In order to legitimize and spatially confirm the Communist future of Albania, north of Skanderbeg Square, the main boulevard formerly named after Italy's King Vittorio Emanuele II became Stalin Boulevard while Viale dell'Impero was dedicated to the Martyrs of the Nation (Dëshmorët e Kombit) and Piazza Littorio became simply University Square (Sheshi I Universitetit). Such renamings achieved the dual goal of highlighting the end of Italian authority over the city (and country) and the establishment of a new hierarchy of those deemed worthy of commemoration. One of the most striking, and pointed, renamings was not of a street but of the football stadium, situated to the side of the former Piazza Littorio. By early 1945, in a kind of nominative score-settling, the football stadium was named after Qemal Stafa, the fallen communist hero who had been executed by the fascist forces in 1942 (Fevziu 2016, 424).

As the regime progressed, some specific interventions were undertaken to amplify the Communist character of fascist-era buildings in the city. In the 1970s, large-scale bas-reliefs of Albanian soldiers, workers, peasants and athletes were commissioned to adorn the exteriors of the Palace of the Prime Minister and the National Stadium (Gallicchio 2019, 111–114). Although demolition was a frequent tactic employed by Hoxha's regime as it embarked on its redevelopment plans for Tirana, it was usually religious buildings

rather than relics of the fascist period that were the targets (Fevziu 2016, 628; Abrahams 2015, 21). The only fascist-era building in Tirana that was demolished during the Communist period was the Town Hall in Skanderbeg Square, which was removed in 1980 to make way for the National Museum.

The fate of fascist architecture in twenty-first-century Tirana

From the 1980s to the 2010s, Tirana's fascist-era architecture received little attention. The death of Enver Hoxha in 1985 did not immediately herald the end of Communism and it was not until March of 1991 that the first multiparty elections would be held. In terms of urban planning, there was a moratorium on construction in city-centre Tirana for much of the 1990s in order that the city's unique character not be immediately destroyed in the post-Communist transition period. Skanderbeg Square, the areas around it and the central boulevard, including all of the fascist-era structures, received protected status (Pojani 2015, 79; Pompejano 2020). However, at the same time, illegal construction boomed. It is estimated that at least 70 percent of buildings constructed in the city between 1990 and 2003 did not have the required permits and it was only in 1998, after the severe civil unrest following a countrywide collapsed pyramid scheme the previous year, that attention was devoted to Tirana's urban development in any meaningful way (Aliaj, Lulo, and Myftiu 2003, 66–73). The Socialist Party politician Edi Rama, mayor of Tirana from 2000 to 2011 and Prime Minister of Albania from 2013 to today, has been at the forefront of the city's transformation over the last two decades. His background as a contemporary artist led him to launch the urban renewal project "A Return to Identity" in the early 2000s, which consisted of painting the city's drab Communist-era buildings in bright colours and geometric patterns. Renewal plans soon became more ambitious with international calls to redevelop the city launched in 2004, 2008 and 2012 with the aim of transforming Tirana into a modern European capital. Rama's approach was notable for its repeated condemnation of the relics of the Communist built environment and his romanticization of the city's Italian heritage (Pojani 2015, 82).

Today, the overriding response to the architecture left behind by the fascists is one of praise. In a statement that, as shall be observed below, reflects the view of both Prime Minister Edi Rama and Tirana mayor Erion Veliaj, Albania's bestselling daily newspaper *Panorama* concluded in 2016 that: "Despite what Fascism represented as an ideology, even today, Tirana is proud of the buildings erected during this period, in the late '30s and early '40s" ("Rilindja e Shqipërisë" 2016). For the most part, the fascist-era buildings remain in use today with broadly the same functions they had under

Communism. The former seat of the fascist Accident Insurance Institute is the site of the Albanian Parliament and the former seat of the Italian Crown in Albania remains the seat of the Council of Ministers. Since 2015, Rama has situated a Centre for Openness and Dialogue on the ground floor "to transform a part of the headquarters of the Council of Ministers into a space in the service of citizens, to convey the message of openness, transparency and transformation" (Center for Openness and Dialogue 2022; see also Gallicchio 2019, 119–121).

Other of the most significant fascist-era buildings remain in use for either their original or modified functions. In Mother Teresa Square (formerly Piazza Littorio), the Casa del Fascio remains the site of the Polytechnic University of Tirana, the former Dopolavoro is the home of the Fine Arts Academy, and the Gioventù Littoria Albanese is the site of the university library and archaeological museum. The headquarters of the National Bank of Albania is still Morpurgo's Rationalist building in Skanderbeg Square, its lobby adorned by Rosso's mosaic. Recent publicity materials produced by the Bank simultaneously acknowledge that Morpurgo was one of Mussolini's favoured architects while also praising the elegance of the building's design (Bank of Albania 2007, 3, 7). However, since 2016, two of the fascist-era buildings in central Tirana have been at the centre of major political and cultural controversies, namely the National Stadium and the National Theatre. The former was entirely demolished in 2016 with only a small part of the original construction restored, while the latter was entirely torn down in May 2020. The debates surrounding the fates of these two structures are illustrative of the ways in which the memory of Fascism is both navigated and neglected in contemporary Albania.

From Qemal Stafa stadium to Arena Kombëtare to Air Albania stadium, 2013–2019

After decades of under-investment, in November 2013, it was announced by UEFA that international football matches could no longer be played at the Qemal Stafa Stadium in Tirana as it did not meet the required safety standards ("Alarmi i UEFA-s" 2013). This decision finally provided the required impetus to the government to seriously consider the future of the country's most important sports stadium after previous attempts to renovate it had failed. On April 21, 2016, Prime Minister Rama unveiled plans for the new stadium, the Arena Kombëtare (National Arena), which would be constructed using a public–private partnership model to allow the stadium to be built with limited recourse to public funds. In addition to the construction of the stadium, which was predicted to seat 22,000 people and cost €50 million

(the final cost would be upwards of €70 million), these plans gave the development firm AlbStar the rights to build a hotel and commercial activities on the site, with the Florentine architecture firm Archea Associati headed by Marco Casamonti awarded the design tender.

The public–private partnership (PPP) model has been favoured by Rama and his Socialist Party for many years but has been criticized by both domestic actors and foreign bodies. In 2018 and 2019, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) highlighted its concerns about the prevalence of PPPs in Albania, urging the country to "reduce the fragmented decision-making and strengthen risk assessment processes at the Ministry of Finance" and to make greater attempts to contain the financial and budgetary risks inherent in the model (Koleka 2019; IMF 2018). In the case of the National Stadium, following the announcement of the construction plan, serious questions were raised about the lack of transparency in the choice of AlbStar without an open tender process and irregularities regarding the necessary building permits ("Government Favorites Line Up for Stadium Construction" 2016). The approach has always been robustly defended by the ruling Socialist Party, with mayor Veliaj stating: "We have a €70 million stadium without spending a penny of public money. […] If I was mayor of London or Paris I could afford to foot the bill, but I'm mayor of Tirana. People want London or Paris quality with the taxes of Tirana" (McLaughlin 2019).

But it was not only the economic model underpinning the construction of the new stadium that led to objections from the public, the media and opposition politicians. At the initial presentation of the concept and project, it was clear that no part of the original stadium was intended to be retained ("Prezantimi i projektit të stadiumit të ri kombëtar" 2016), which led to a considerable public outcry. The plan to entirely demolish the stadium was met with swift objection from both opposition politicians and media. Questions were immediately raised by *Rilindja Demokratike*, the newspaper of the opposition Democratic Party, about how the wholesale demolition of the stadium could go ahead given the protected status of Mother Teresa Square in which it stood. Architect, academic and Democratic Party councillor on Tirana's municipal council, Besnik Aliaj, decried the plans in stark terms, arguing that neither the Communist regime nor Italy's democratic post-war governments had demolished Tirana's fascist-era architecture. He accused Rama of hypocrisy for having objected strenuously to the proposed demolition a decade earlier of the Pyramid, the museum dedicated to Hoxha built in 1985, and summed up his view on the stadium plans as: "Let us not destroy and Talibanize even the little history and identity we have left!" ("Prishja e stadiumit" 2016).

These and other vociferous objections forced Rama into a U-turn and just a week after the announcement of the stadium design, he revealed a modified plan that would preserve Gherardo Bosio's façade and monumental staircase,

in his view "the only thing of value in that ruin" ("Akuzat për stadiumin" 2016). Rama's initial suggestion that the original fascist-era façade would be preserved in a museum inside the stadium was soon dropped in favour of disassembling it piece by piece and then reintegrating it, in its original position, into the new design ("Portat e stadiumit do hapen brenda 15 muajve" 2017). Rama was adamant, however, that the two Communist-era bas-reliefs that had been embedded into the façade in 1974 be removed and destroyed, declaring: "Those bas-reliefs […] shamed even socialist realism. They have fulfilled their mission of ugliness and do not possess any cultural heritage value" ("Rama, përgjegjësi penale për prishjen e fasadës së stadiumit" 2016). Thus, in the highly charged rhetoric surrounding the plans for the stadium, the fascist architecture of Bosio was set up as an aesthetically pleasing and historically significant counterpoint to the worthless Communist-era interventions, the implication being that unlike Communist heritage, the legacies of the fascist occupation could be uncontroversially celebrated and preserved as significant elements of Albania's collective cultural memory. During the three-year-long construction period and notwithstanding the intense public interest in the project's development, at no point were attempts made to contextualize the original structure by Bosio within the history of the fascist occupation and how this experience of dictatorship might be incorporated into Albania's national memory building.

In this approach, Tirana is not alone. When the Italian media reported on the new stadium, it was with pride that, after Bosio, a second Florentine architect, Casamonti, had been selected to redevelop the stadium (Fatucchi 2019; Pierotti 2019). In an article emblematic of the widespread "colonial amnesia" at work in contemporary Italian society, centrist daily newspaper *La Repubblica* reported on the recent influx of Italian immigrants and companies to Albania as "bordering on an invasion." Rather than relating the notion of invasion to the actual fascist invasion of the country in 1939, the journalist opted to compare it to the "invasion" of Albanian refugees to Italy in the 1990s (Zanuttini 2016).

Throughout the construction period, the attitude of chief architect, Marco Casamonti, who had contributed to Tirana's urban redevelopment for over a decade before being awarded the stadium contract and who is a close collaborator of both Rama and fellow-Socialist Party member Tirana mayor Erion Veliaj, was resolutely ahistorical. Casamonti declined ever to mention the word "Fascism," preferring merely to refer to the "façade from the 1930s" by Bosio (Casamonti 2020). In Casamonti's design, the reconstructed monumental façade and staircase lead to the VIP stand, which comprises one of the four stands surrounding the football pitch. When Hoxha first unveiled the stadium in 1946 and for the entirety of the regime that followed, the Communist government entered the stadium and the viewing stand reserved for them in exactly the same way. As Casamonti stated, "[we have maintained] in fact

unchanged the monumental access from before through which today the authorities will still enter" (Casamonti, quoted in "Nuovo Stadio Nazionale dell'Albania" 2020). Whether or not such a clear continuity between fascist architectural planning, the Communist regime and contemporary democratic society was desirable was never addressed, either by the architect or the ruling politicians, and the erasure of any reference to the fascist occupation and its relationship to the original construction of the stadium has been absolute. Casamonti has also spoken of his desire to adopt "a respectful approach" and that the façade had been reassembled "by way of homage" (Casamonti, interviewed by Toscana TV 2019). Whether the retention of Bosio's façade was intended as an "homage" to the fascist regime that had occupied Albania and repressed all resistance to its rule, including executing Qemal Stafa, the national hero after whom the stadium was originally named, was never clarified by Casamonti or by Rama.

The stadium, newly dubbed the Air Albania Stadium after sponsorship rights were sold, was finally opened to great fanfare in November 2019 for a Euro 2020 qualifying match between Albania and France. Despite objections by those who had been persecuted by the Communist regime, the name of the anti-fascist Resistance fighter Qemal Stafa now adorns the main stand, with the remaining three supporters' terraces named after famous Albanian footballers ("Debati për emrin e stadiumit 'Qemal Stafa'" 2019). However, just as one controversy surrounding the fate of fascist-era architecture in contemporary Tirana was seemingly put to bed, another, which would become an even more significant topic of national debate, was about to rise up.

The national theatre of Albania/Teatri Kombëtar, 2018–2020

The fate of the National Theatre in Tirana's city centre, just beside Skanderbeg Square, had been at the centre of considerable debate since 2018 but reached a dramatic climax in May 2020 when, with no advance warning, on the final day of Albania's restrictions to deal with the first wave of COVID-19, the theatre was entirely demolished. This act of destruction became the major news story in Albania and had already been receiving attention from media outlets across Europe.

Discussions about the future of the National Theatre building had been ongoing since 1998: renovation plans were included in the city's Masterplan in 2002 but the decision to demolish it outright was only announced by Rama in 2018. As had been the case for the redevelopment of the stadium, a public–private partnership was preferred which limited the state's financial investment but also handed a piece of prime city-centre real estate to a private

company (see Colluto 2018). The commission was awarded to the Danish firm Bjarke Ingels Group, who were to design and construct not only a new theatre but also a shopping centre, hotel, apartments and offices on the site. Rama defended this position by stating that the 1930s building was "without any cultural heritage value" and declaring "that that object is still standing is an affront to fate, as it could fall at any moment, it is unfit to be this country's National Theatre building. If it had been destroyed years ago, it would've been better" ("Rama vs. Rama" 2018).

The response from Albania's arts sector was swift. For the following 27 months until May 2020, the building was protected from destruction by an activist group of actors, directors, artists and citizens, engaged in a round-the-clock occupation, continuing to present a programme of public events and performances despite the electricity supply to the building being cut. Even the deal with the private contractors falling apart in February 2020 did not herald a reprieve for the theatre and mayor Veliaj confirmed that the demolition would go ahead using public funds. Such was the concern at the prospect of demolition that the influential lobby group for the protection of Europe's cultural heritage, founded in 1963, Europa Nostra, included the theatre in its biannual "7 Most Endangered" list of 2020, just two months before its destruction (Europa Nostra 2022).

Aside from the parliamentary opposition, the main group objecting to the demolition was the Alliance for the Protection of the Theatre, whose arguments centred on two main issues: the first regarded the role of the National Theatre in the history of modern Albania as the place where the national opera and ballet companies had been established, as the home of the National Experimental Theatre, the state philharmonic orchestra and even the first art gallery as well as being the site of the first trial under Hoxha which resulted in the execution of eleven anti-communists. Secondly, the theatre was defended on architectural grounds, as a "unique monument of urban architecture, […] the only post-futurist [*sic*] style [building] in Albania and the only one built with the technique, then experimental, of prefabricated panels with wood fiber and cement" ("Artistët i kërkojnë ndihmë ndërkombëtarëve" 2018). Rama continued to dismiss all objections, succinctly stating at a press conference in 2019 that "there are many people who confuse walls with history" ("Teatri do prishet, do habiteni me kullat" 2019). The project was also mired from the outset in accusations of corruption, illegality, clientelism and lack of transparency, echoing criticisms also made regarding the construction of the new stadium a mile down the road ("Albanian National Theater Building" 2019).

Despite calls made a week earlier by Mariya Gabriel, the European Union's Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth Commissioner, to delay the demolition, the theatre was torn down in a dawn raid on May 17, 2020 when protesting actors were still inside. Defying COVID restrictions, a crowd

of 1,000 people gathered outside to demonstrate against the action. Condemnation from opposition leader Lulzim Basha of the Democratic Party was swift, arguing that the demolition had been carried out unlawfully. More notable, however, was the intervention by Albania's President Ilir Meta, who holds a largely ceremonial role. He lodged his objections with Albania's constitutional court and dubbed the demolition a "legal, moral and constitutional crime" (Koleka 2020). Following the demolition, the rhetoric surrounding the theatre became even more highly charged. The National Theatre took on meanings that stretched far beyond the history and architecture of the structure, instead becoming a symbol of the future of Tirana and of the governing style of Edi Rama and his Socialist Party. For many, the wholesale removal of such a significant building brought back memories of Hoxha's wanton destruction of religious and other historical buildings that were not to his ideological taste. As film director Edmond Budina stated, "This is not the destruction of a building. This is also the installation of a dictatorship" (Erebara 2020). In a similar vein, a group of Italian architects who had extensively researched the building's history asked, "What difference is there with the regime of the last century when it ends up denigrating all the intellectuals who have opposed this massacre?" (Petreschi et al. 2020). The theatre, overcoming its history as an edifice built by the Italian fascist dictatorship, became a symbol of Albanian democracy, or lack thereof, in the eyes of many opposition figures. As former Education Minister and member of the opposition Democratic Party Mirela Karabina remarked: "This is the first protest of its kind in Albania. We are here to build our democracy and show Albanian citizens that if something is wrong, we have to act" (McLaughlin 2019).

In the weeks following the demolition, amidst continued public outrage, Socialist mayor Veliaj defended the action, stating that the building was seriously deteriorated and an inadequate space for a modern theatre, contrasting its destruction with the solidly built fascist-era municipal buildings "that we can always preserve." Branding the theatre which had undergone various modifications under Hoxha a "Frankenstein," he also claimed that the structure had been judged to be "without value" by the fascists, Nazis, Communists and previous democratic governments although, as has been seen above, the building has been deemed noteworthy by some contemporary architects for its construction style. On the whole, the arguments employed by Veliaj to defend his position were somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, he accused those campaigning against the demolition of "neo-colonialism," asking why Tirana should be denied a modern theatre in a central location as was the case for other European cities. On the other, he explicitly praised exactly those who had been responsible for colonialism in the Albanian context and cast the fascists in a favourable light, claiming that, "The last people on the right who did something in Tirana were the fascists. The

Albanian right has not done anything" (Veliaj, interviewed by Tonelli 2020). In the months that followed, the demolition of the theatre continued to be employed by the opposition Democratic Party as a political stick with which to beat the government. Opposition leader Basha used the occasion of International Cultural Heritage Day in September 2020 to draw attention to the "'barbarism and hatred that this government nurtures for the values and institutions of our nation' and to cast the ruling party as a 'regime' working against the desires of the citizenry at large" ("Basha mesazh" 2020). As of autumn 2021, the debate rumbles on with campaigners pushing for the theatre to be rebuilt as it was in the same location but, so far, without winning any concessions.

Conclusion

In the cases of the National Stadium and National Theatre, while the fascist past of each building was consistently highlighted in positive terms, the debates since 2016 have been dominated almost exclusively by architectural and aesthetic arguments. Historians have been notably absent from the public rhetoric surrounding these two controversial episodes. While it was the architectural value of Bosio's façade that was primarily at the centre of the debates surrounding the National Stadium, the "fascist-ness" of the National Theatre was far more explicitly mobilized by both sides to bolster their positions. However, this heated debate took place in a largely ahistorical vacuum with no sustained or serious consideration of the place of such architectural projects within the memory of fascist colonialism in the country.

In fact, both structures can be observed to have largely superseded the contexts of their original construction. Both, and most especially the National Theatre, have been transformed into palimpsests with competing memory regimes overlaid on one another. As Jones and Pilat have remarked with regard to other cases, fascist buildings can be regarded as powerful.

> reminders of the fragility of the connection between meaning and architectural form. […] The architects of Fascism do not get the final say on what their buildings mean; instead, subsequent generations will continue to deconstruct their meanings and reoccupy their spaces. (Jones and Pilat 2020, 2)

This is undoubtedly the reality for both cases under examination here. The partial or complete demolition of the stadium and theatre did not prompt reflections on the legacies of fascist colonialism and heritage for post-Communist, democratic Albania. Rather, any such consideration has been

overtaken by the lived experience of the sites in subsequent decades, overshadowing their origins and establishing them as symbols not of fascist colonialism but of the survival of sport and the arts in Albania despite the years of oppressive Communist dictatorship and, latterly, as symbols of the importance of democratic transparency in contemporary Albania.

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ORCID

Selena Daly http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2728-785X

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