

After 30 years of transition, Albania still aspires to a new culture of spatial planning. Its main planning strategies thus far have resulted in notions like the ‘vaporized city’, ‘informal city’, and ‘archipelago city’, offering a rather clear insight into how Albania’s main cities have developed up until now. While politicians repeatedly invite international architects to participate in prestige projects that are hardly ever realized, Albanian architects have meanwhile developed a rich palette of answers to deal with pop-up peripheries and leftover plots in the city centre. In this instalment, we focus on the projects and ambitions that have recast Albania into a fascinating laboratory of urban concepts.

# Projecting Albania’s future

TEXT: SAIMIR KRISTO, SOTIR DHAMO, BESNIK ALIAJ, JOANA DHIAMANDI



After centuries of isolation and suppression under one of the harshest communist dictatorships, Albania has made great efforts in opening up towards modernization and freedom. Although the nation faces many difficulties similar to its neighbours, the way it deals with them is different. In order to respond to its problems and create a new identity, the Albanian capital of Tirana is searching for original solutions, and has become a place where rational and bizarre elements coexist, generating an identity that is not permanent, but rather always on the verge of change. This leads to a mosaic-like portrait of a city that provokes architects to dare more often, while at the same time setting them before its monumental ruins.

Once known for strict, government-controlled spatial planning, many former communist cities in the Western Balkans have been transformed by feverish, uncontrolled urban growth. After 30 years of transition, the region is still looking for a way to create a new spatial

planning culture in an environment where not only residents, but even architects and urban planners may feel excluded from such developments. Tirana is situated in the middle of a major European transit corridor connecting Southern Europe with the Near East, and closely connected geographically and economically to the nearby harbour city of Durrës. This situation is the main driver of the country’s economic and cultural development, and the area is continuously expanding into a super-regional metropolis.

In this edition of *Eurovision*, we examine Albania’s evolutionary process, focusing on the capital’s ambitions in as it aspires to become a competitive Balkan metropolis. It is an attempt to understand the generative points that lead to this innovative and experimental ‘island’ in a territorial ‘sea’ of ex-communist nations that are denying change and thus remaining hidden in the shadow of the past. ◀



## POLIS University & Tirana Architecture Week

Higher education in Albania is a product of the 20th century. The private sector alternative is the result of reforms over the last two decades of post-communist transition. POLIS University aims for a clear break from such tradition, while appreciating the real values of creative Albanian and regional educational heritage, enriching it with some of the most contemporary international experiences. Two leading examples of this new drive are POLIS University and Tirana Architecture Week, the guest editors of this instalment.

POLIS University (U\_POLIS) initiated a leading Albanian school of territorial policies in 2006 that explores issues regarding architecture, planning, and design at the level of academic and professional practice. Through applied and scientific research, U\_POLIS develops and promotes scientific excellence and innovation. Its origin is the establishment of the Co-PLAN Institute for Habitat Development (1995) as a professional institute and civic movement of participatory planning and good governance. In early 2000, Co-PLAN established a ‘Training and Exchange Centre’ which evolved into ‘POLIS, International School of Architecture & Urban Development Policies’ in 2006. The school is institutionally and programmatically accredited since 2009, and again in 2013 with various programmes in bachelor, master, and doctorate levels, and with international partnerships with HIS/Erasmus University of Rotterdam (NL), University of Ferrara (IT), Lawrence Tech University (Michigan, US), and other universities in Europe and the United States.

Tirana Architecture Week (TAW) is a biennial event that aims to promote international knowledge exchange among professionals, as well as enhance public interest in architecture, art, and design, with respect to contemporary urban development. Inspired by the strong philosophy of POLIS University in creating a local platform for architectural and urban debate, we organize lectures, workshops, exhibitions, and public events. The aim is to reactivate Balkan cities that have undergone radical social and economic changes, resulting in diverse and often uncontrollable development. With great respect to their history, and also recognizing their needs for future development, TAW desires to give opportunities to students, young professionals, and the citizens of Tirana to generate clearer ideas and proposals in order to illustrate the future, not only for Albania’s capital, but also for all the cities of the Balkan region, which face common struggles and issues in their respective urban and rural fabrics. The most recent edition, TAW 2014 ‘[En]visioning Future Cities’, reflected upon the challenges of today, inspiring growth for tomorrow. ◀

Info [www.universitetipolis.edu.al](http://www.universitetipolis.edu.al), [www.tiranaarchitectureweek.com](http://www.tiranaarchitectureweek.com)



1 Eurovision guest editors, from left to right: Besnik Aliaj (Rector and co-founder of POLIS University), Saimir Kristo (Curricula Manager and Director of Tirana Architecture Week), and Sotir Dhamo (Administrator and co-founder of POLIS University)  
 2 POLIS University Campus, Tirana, Albania  
 3 The Pyramid of Tirana  
 4 Awards ceremony of the Lost Architecture Competition inside the Pyramid of Tirana, organized by Tirana Architecture Week

# Tirana: From organic city to greater metropolis



↑ Lengthening of Rruga e Durrës and Rruga e Kavajës in the mid-20th century (image taken from Skanderbeg Square)

Tirana began as an organic city in the 17th century, and has since been shaped by the continuous interaction between spontaneous developments and planning decisions. It remained a small town, until it was declared the capital of Albania in 1920. Starting from the beginning of the '20s, under the monarchy, the first attempts to move from spontaneous to organized urban planning were initiated. Typical of this period is the ceremonial complex of the government buildings, the opening or stretching of several main avenues, such as Rruga e Durrës, and the central axis of the boulevard, first designed by Armando Brasini. These kinds of interventions were significantly intensified during the period of Italian occupation (1939–1943). The new centre, located at the extreme south of the extended boulevard – a monumentality separated from the social reality – is still clearly visible in today's urban fabric.

Florentine architect Gherardo Bossio and engineer Ferdinando Poggi formulated the first regulatory plan for Tirana in 1942. For the first time, this plan established a zoning structure and the shape of Tirana based on the combination of rings and radials. The 1942 plan served as an important reference for all plans that followed. The boulevard was included in this plan as a central element, mediating a dialogue between the geographic and human scales. From 1944 to 1991, under the centralized economy, significant changes occurred in the city's structure. Architecture and urban planning were called upon to influence the creation of a new social reality. A

↓ Crowds bring down the statue of the former dictator, Enver Hoxha, marking the start of a period of transition for Albania.



massive erasure of traditional neighbourhoods, old bazaars, and religious centres was executed to free space for the construction of low-cost, four- to five-storey standardized buildings, which would supposedly be the incubators for a new social model. By the end of the 1980s, Tirana's population was around 250,000 inhabitants, although only 35 per cent of the entire nation's population was living in urban areas, while the agricultural sector still comprised 55 per cent of the Albanian economy.

The decay of the socialist project at the beginning of the 1990s was the catalyst for the rapid and uncontrolled urbanization of Tirana. Public space was gradually reduced through progressive infill, and the city expanded five-fold. This 'informal city' was like a return to the organic city but bigger, more shapeless, and more unstable. While state institutions were lagging behind, NGOs such as Co-PLAN started the first interventions in Tirana North Periphery (1995), adopting schemes to upgrade neighbourhoods based on participatory planning and an incremental approach. It was only a few years later that the central government began to formulate the creation of 'visions'. The Strategic Plan for Greater Tirana (SPGT) in 2001 projected the coordination for developments in the Greater Tirana Region, a metropolitan area comprising eleven local government units. This strategy proposed the compacting of the city combined with a polycentric vision based around newly created poles; the stabilization of physical limits of urbanization through green belts

↓ Tirana in 1937



↓ Tirana in 1960



↓ Tirana in 1995



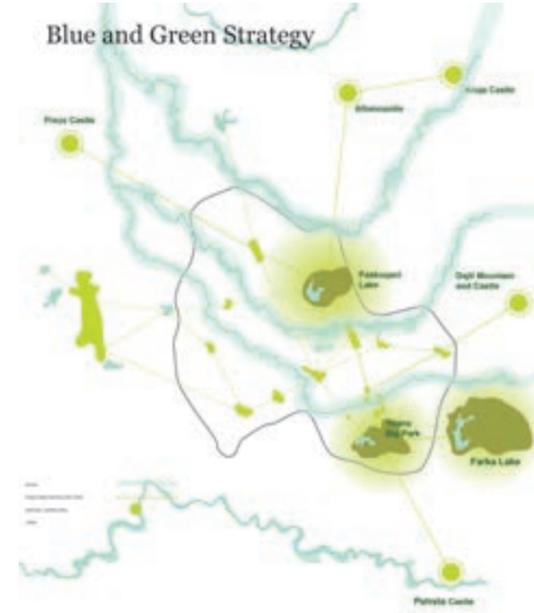
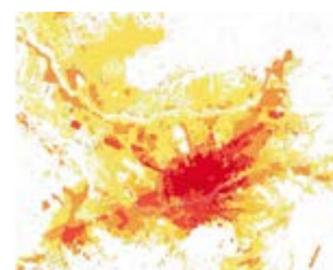
↓ Tirana in 2000



↓ Tirana in 2007



↓ Tirana in 2010



↑ Northern Boulevard Extension and Tirana River Competition by KCAP



↑ Tirana Central Area Masterplan by Architecture Studio



↑ Tirana's skyline, with the TID Tower designed by 51N4E in the centre

and land preservation; two light rail connections to the centre and the airport; and most importantly, administrative measures such as the establishment of Metropolitan Authorities. Due to disagreements between local and central institutions, this plan was never fully approved.

Tirana Metropolis is another strategic vision offered by the Berlage Institute in 2004. The city is seen as an archipelago, with complementary centralities outside the city centre. A parallel ring aims to give identity to the existing sprawl, tying together various urban patterns, along with monumental axes and natural features. Following a similar logic, 'Durana' is used as a tool to think about the metropolitan region on a larger scale: Tirana and Durrës as an eventual fusion of two cities into a new, single metropolis with a green heart in between. Only in 2012 was a plan officially approved, which contains a series of vague proposals consisting mostly of the reconfirmation of the circulation schemes proposed by many other plans. This plan determined new building intensities, which were satisfying developers' needs rather than

public interests. Many independent professionals and associations have criticized this fact.

Meanwhile, the governing bodies had found a new toy: international competitions. Within a few years, Tirana, one of the most forgotten cities of the Eastern Bloc, became an arena for numerous international architects. The first important international competition was the Tirana Central Area Masterplan, won by Architecture Studio, a French group. Among others, some of the most important proposals of this plan included a new design for Skanderbeg Square, the pedestrianization of some sectors along the central axes, the creation of Tirana Central Park, a series of towers to increase the visibility of the central axes (one of the most debated issues), and so on.

Some international competitions were realized, however, like the competition for two towers in the city centre. The first was won by the Belgian studio 51N4E (see A10 #57); the second was given to Archea Studio. Also under construction is 'Urban Complex', won by Winy Maas of MVRDV. Cancelled icons

include 'Tirana Rocks' (a rather preposterous design by MVRDV) and the New Albanian Parliament by Wolf Prix of Coop Himmelb(l)au. The New Mosque by BIG is still under discussion.

During the last two years, attention has mainly focused on those projects that can give a new dimension to the city, like the extension of the main Tirana Boulevard. Important international studios participated; among others, KCAP, Grimshaw Architects, West8, Cino Zucchi Architetti, Albert Speer and Partners, and DAR Group. The competition was won by Grimshaw Architects. The project area, impacted by the extension of the three-kilometre boulevard and the organization of a seven-kilometre riverside park, covers a fifth of the city's overall area. Grimshaw proposed the creation of sequences of 'living rooms' along the boulevard and the park that would reflect Tirana's Mediterranean outdoor culture. It remains to be seen whether the city has the professional experience, political stability, and craftsmanship to actually realize the design as envisioned. ◀



↑ The New Mosque and Museum of Religious Harmony by Bjarke Ingels Group



↑ Aerial view of how Skanderbeg Square in Tirana appears today



↑ New Parliament of Albania by Coop Himmelb(l)au (competition winner)

# Planning an Albania for the 21st century

From 2010 until present, a more moderate trend has become visible in Tirana's construction industry and urbanization. The city is not lacking in projects or ideas, but rather the concrete actions needed to implement projects and guarantee continuity based on a mid- to long-term vision. Tirana, however, is a city moving between dreams and reality – from the small organic town to the urban 'cosmic axis' of the boulevard; from concentric rings to the 'archipelago city'; from a solely spontaneous entity to a designed city; from 'Tirana' to 'Durana'; and from small to big.

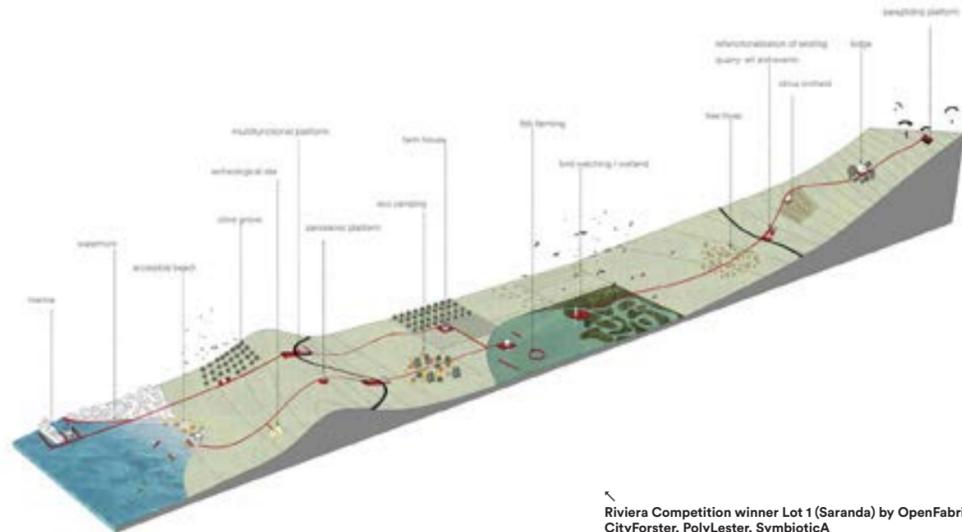
At least two political projects have impacted trends in Tirana during the last fifteen years, and will continue to impact its future. The first is the project of the former mayor of Tirana (2000–2011), Edi Rama, now Prime Minister of Albania, while the second is the project of the current mayor, Lulzim Basha (2011–2015).

As mayor, Edi Rama, had focused on urban beautification and modernization (e.g. facade colouring projects) and upgrading parts of the city (e.g. widening streets, bringing back green space, demolishing informal settlements), encouraging the cultural and artistic life of the city through the Tirana International Art Biennial (TICAB), and branding it internationally. His charismatic, top-down approach gave citizens new hope and confidence.

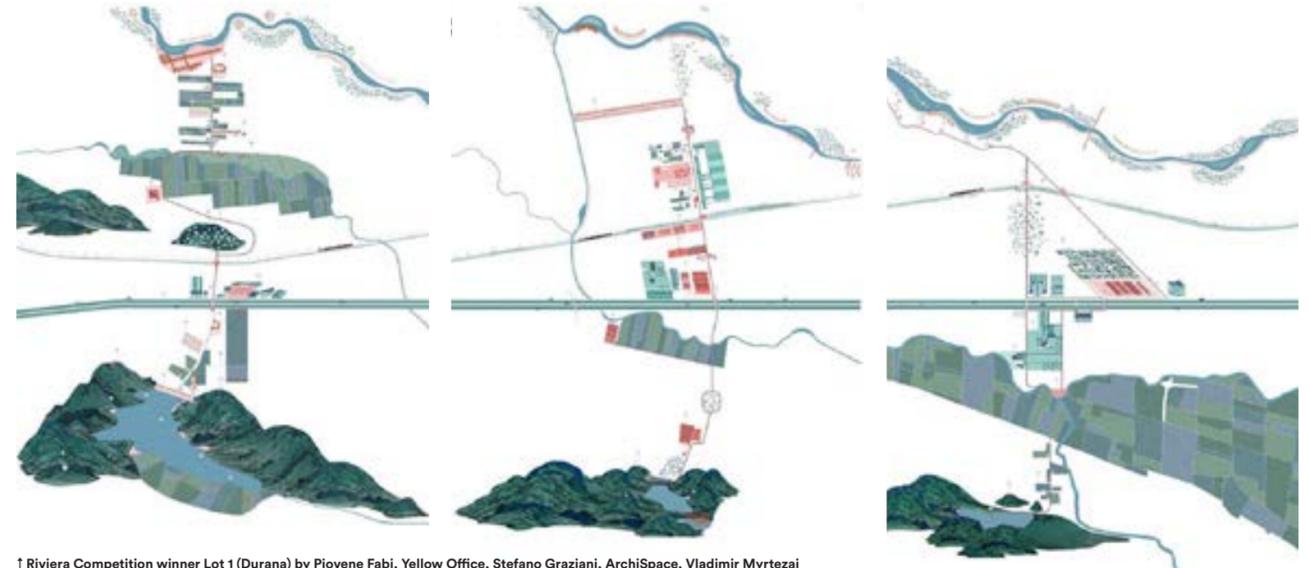
The present mayor, Lulzim Basha, is recognized for applying a more holistic and systematic approach. His regulatory plan of the city, the first since the collapse of centralized economy, got started after a process of formalizing extra-legal assets, introducing low taxes, and encouraging self-employment and an atmosphere conducive to business. It also included new strategic infrastructural projects, like extending the main city boulevard towards informal

settlements to the north and a new city ring, an alternative northern green park, and an integrated public transport system.

**Boulevard extension**  
Despite affirming a highly divided city in terms of political positioning, the competition to extend Tirana's main boulevard served as a good public/professional 'educational' event, and a democratic exercise in terms of decision-making. The final winning project by Grimshaw Architects mediates between maximizing real estate and infrastructure while restoring public space. The implementation of the project has already started, and the core financing is already available. But realization remains burdened by the extreme politicizations of Albanian public life, especially following the political change in the central government during the 2013 parliamentary elections.

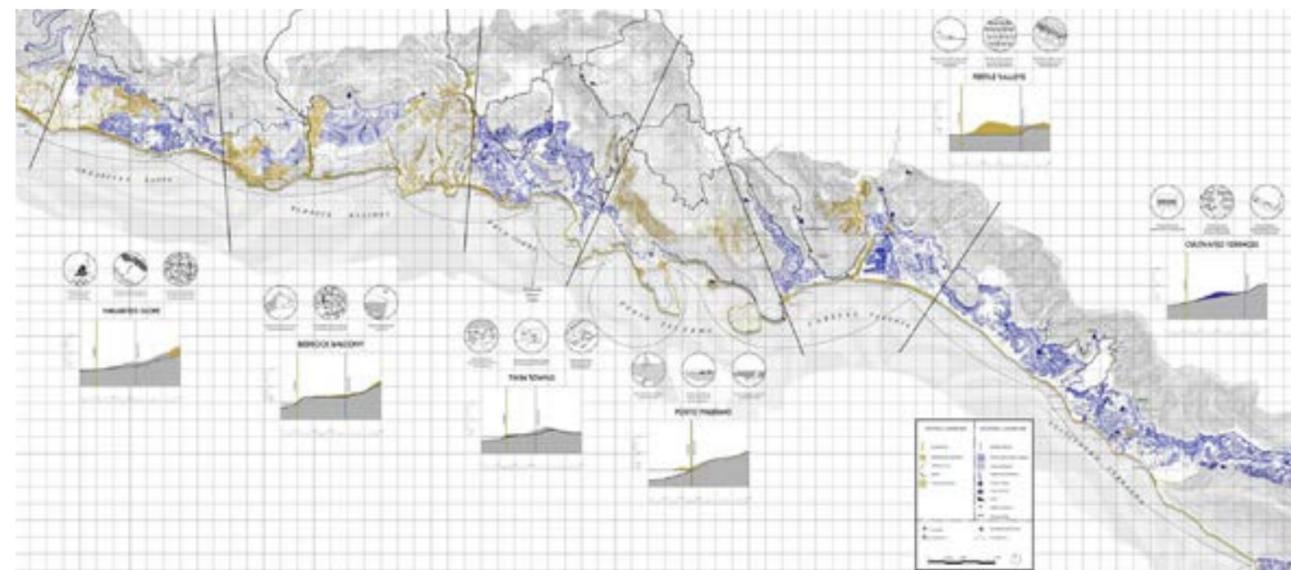


Riviera Competition winner Lot 1 (Saranda) by OpenFabric, CityForster, PolyLester, SymbioticA



↑ Riviera Competition winner Lot 1 (Durana) by Piovene Fabi, Yellow Office, Stefano Graziani, ArchiSpace, Vladimir Myrtezai

↓ Riviera Competition winner Lot 2 (Himara) by Burea Bas Smets, Vadim Vosters, Transsolar, Erik de Waele, Son Engineering & Construction



← Masterplan proposal for the Northern Boulevard and Tirana River Competition by Grimshaw Architects



→ This new tower is part of the Northern Boulevard and Tirana River Competition proposal by Grimshaw Architects.

Yet, the urban regeneration of public space along the Lanë river, the tram and multimodal station project, and the competition for the new northern boulevard of Tirana and implementation thereof are indeed events that happen once in a lifetime. They have a magnitude and impact similar to the forceful operations undertaken by Zog I, the former king, in a heroic phase of urban and national development, by establishing a modern Tirana, the real European capital of Albanians. This is already a mental jump for the rational and good governance of our cities in Albania. It is a change in thinking and practice, despite the low interest, nitty-gritty fights.

**Fusing two cities**  
'Strategic Planning for Greater Tirana', a study conducted in 2001 by the Municipality of Tirana, showed a massive population expansion in the metropolitan

region encompassing Tirana and Durrës, a harbour city just 30 kilometres away, creating a chaotic situation. Today the area accommodates one third of the Albanian population. It is one of the nation's main circulation axes, connecting its two largest cities and linking them both to the airport. The region has become an economic corridor that brings large revenues to the country. Presently, the need to improve urban conditions along this corridor has been identified. The concept of 'Durana' is used as a tool to think about the metropolitan region on a larger scale: Tirana and Durrës as one city; an eventual fusion of the two into a new metropolis with a green heart in between.

**Riviera region**  
Together with the Durana Competition (2014), the focus of studies moved outside of Tirana for the first

time with the announcement of a competition for the southern coastal strip. The aim was to extend the tourism season in order to generate sustainable development by bringing back this seasonal population shift. The Riviera Competition opened the way towards the revitalization of key formerly rural areas that had been forgotten after the rapid urbanization of Tirana. In 2014, the Albanian government declared the nation's coastal area to be a strategic corridor, putting it under a temporary development 'freeze', until the preparation of the National Territorial Plan and specific master plans for strategic areas like the Ionian coast (Southern Albania). Meanwhile, three international competitions are being implemented, including branding the new image of Albania, redesigning the Vloora waterfront, and planning the development of the Riviera region on the Ionian coast. ←

# Recent works by local studios

A result of the isolation that architecture in Albania suffered since the beginning of the authoritarian regime, the turbulent skyline of the nation's capital stands amidst its previously vivid colours, which are slowly fading until the tension and necessity for more contemporary approaches spurs new action by locally based practices such as these.



**1**  
**NATIONAL FOOD AUTHORITY ALBANIA, 2010**  
 The project consists of twelve regional laboratories and offices at twelve diverse locations (five detailed by SymbioticA). Giving a common standard and nationwide identity for all twelve buildings has been the main design driver for the strategic study of the proposed locations for the regional laboratory and office buildings. In cooperation with Iproplan.



**2**  
**DEMOCRATIC PARTY HEADQUARTERS EXTENSION, TIRANA, 2014**  
 The project is an architectural readaptation of the existing structure that adds a public square, creating a vital public space for the city.



**1**  
**CENTRAL VETERINARY LABORATORY OF ALBANIA, TIRANA, 2010**  
 The laboratory is planned to be the most technologically advanced and important of its kind. It was nominated for the Mies van der Rohe Award in 2015, and developed in cooperation with plan-consult and Iproplan.



**2**  
**WATERFRONT, VLORA, 2014 (1ST LOCAL OFFICE PRIZE)**  
 This proposal tries to control the city's informal growth by creating a system that connects the new waterfront and the existing urban fabric. In cooperation with Xaveer de Geyter Architects.



**3**  
**'AKADEMIA' HOUSING UNIT, TIRANA, 2008**  
 The project represents an interesting attempt to bring a breath of rational architecture into the dense and typologically mixed area of ex-Blok.



**4**  
**YELLOW PALACE, TIRANA, 2005**  
 The Yellow Palace is a small and intimate facility in Tirana, a palazzetto funded by six households, each having a floor of 125 m<sup>2</sup>, and with a ground floor for shops.



**5**  
**RADIO BUILDING, SHKODRA, 2012**  
 This office and residential building offers a clean architectural language in the transitional era of Albania, with high standards and state-of-the-art technical details.



**4**  
**THE TWINS, TIRANA, 2010**  
 This apartment building uses a minimalistic gesture, expands its functional space, and constitutes a strong enzyme for generating its own architecture.

**1**

**SYMBIOTICA**

Founded in September 2007 in Krefeld (DE), SymbioticA is currently based in Tirana. Its main activities are located in the south-west Balkan region. The studio's work in Albania brought a new perspective and dynamic to the architectural scene, considering and emphasizing 'more opportunities that must be given to the Albanian practices, having more faith in the Albanian architects,' according to principal and founder Ulrike Bega. SymbioticA is an office of researchers, urban designers, and architects specialized in designing, coordinating, and supervising complex architectural and urban design projects. Their specific expertise is consultation and mediation between private and public clients on project development of all scales and during every stage – from project preparation to actual implementation.

Info [www.symbiotica.net](http://www.symbiotica.net)

**2**

**METRO\_POLIS**

Created in 2007, Metro\_POLIS studio is registered in Albania as an independent architectural practice focused on architecture and urban and landscape design. Since its establishment, Metro\_POLIS has been affiliated with the Research & Development Institute of POLIS University as a strategic but autonomous partner with its own offices located on the university campus. As a 'professional coalition' in design and architecture, focused on projects of different scales, it responds to a broad spectrum of issues for contemporary Albania, taking part in numerous competitions and local projects, and working in parallel with research and architectural practice.

Info [www.metropolis.al](http://www.metropolis.al)

**3**

**STUDIO B&L**

Ermal Blea, Roland Lika, and Doriana Bozgo founded Studio B&L in 2000. Practicing architecture in many locations in Albania, with apartments and residential objects, urban masterplans and complex architecture, the office aims to manifest an analytical process that questions actual architectural practice by determining a pure architecture. It is responsive to the functional requirements of architecture through the use of architectural language to make a difference in the city, with minimal but also necessary statements for the city. While taking part in different competitions at the national level, Studio B&L are also working on the implementation project of the strategic masterplan for the Tirana-Durrës corridor, in collaboration with DOGMA Studio, as part of the latest Durana Competition.

Info [www.arkitekt-bl.com](http://www.arkitekt-bl.com)

**4**

**STUDIO RAÇA ARKITEKTURA**

Since 1993, Artan Raça has headed his independent practice, based in Tirana, where answers to concrete conditions create the primary language and separates his architecture from self-referentiality, or having the idea of a predetermined style. His Yellow Palace was nominated for the Mies van der Rohe Award in 2013, and won the Albanian Architect of the Year Award given by the Albanian Union of Architects. Through his architectural statements, Raça has proven to be one of the most established architects in Albania. Isolation brought a positive aspect for Raça, an architect who was educated during the authoritarian regime: 'Communism saved me from post-modernism, giving me the opportunity to study the great modernists, among which stand Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier.'

Info [www.ec2.it/artanraca](http://www.ec2.it/artanraca)

**5**

**[SPACE]**

'Space architektur stadtplanung design' was founded in 1998 by Gjon Radovani as a studio of architecture, interior design, and urban design. It initially started in Stuttgart (DE), with other branches emerging at the places where the studio develops its projects. Since 2006, the studio has also been located in Tirana, and collaborates on local and international levels. Its focus is mostly practical, with the realization of housing, commercial, and public function projects not only in Albania, but also Kosovo.

# Designing for contradictory realities

TEXT: INDIRA VAN 'T KLOOSTER

In the background are the sounds of a stage being built, beverages being delivered, chairs being put in place. Destil, the hostel where we have gathered for this conversation, is both a community for young creatives, a music festival, a debate centre, and an architecture office – in no particular order. Tonight is the kick-off of a new edition of De-Sound, and bands from Albania, Kosovo, and Macedonia will battle for a place in the final line-up of a music festival taking place later this summer.



→ The young architects of Tirana, from left to right: Felissia Veliu, Gjergji Dushniku, Lorin Çekrezi, Klaudio Cari, Joana Dhiamandi, Rezart Struga, Edjon Myftaraj, Renis Batalli, Sonila Abdalli

The offices present – Studioarch4, Felissia Veliu, Destil, and STIGMA – will likely show up again tonight. They are all ex-students from POLIS University, and have been friends since being educated in the innovative, internationally oriented climate fostered by this private institute. Experiment and conceptuality are important features, nights out and eternal friendship are the obvious benefits. They represent POLIS University's new generation of architects, able to mix regional traditions and international perspectives into solid solutions for the many challenges Albania faces.

Destil (2014) is an example of how young architects are finding new opportunities to build. According to them, 'Our hostel is a place where (inter)national artists and designers meet, work, eat, and sleep. The place itself is purposely not finished. We want people to be aware that architecture can be different. The restoration of the 1948 building is also a way to honour its history. Our interventions are only complementary. We did all the furniture ourselves. At this moment, we're not working on big projects; this place takes up all our time. It's a way of life.'

This self-commissioned approach is quite clever in a country where good networks and solid information (preferably exclusive) are vital to getting

building commissions in the first place. Studioarch4 (2011) has, after four years of hard work, just reached a new milestone: since a few months ago, they are able to live solely off their office's revenue. 'The construction industry is very non-transparent in Albania. It took us quite some time to find out where we could find clients. One of our contacts gave us a chance to find a destination for an empty building at Kavaja Street. We thought a youth centre would be good.' They finished it recently, but this is hardly public knowledge. 'We have no climate for architectural critique. There are no websites for architecture, no architecture magazines (only one, in fact – *FORUM A+P*), and no national newspaper or magazine that is interested in covering architecture.'

Another way to find projects is to participate in competitions. At the moment, there are quite a few, and all the young offices present are participating. One deals with an extension of the main boulevard in Tirana, another with the entrance to its main park; there is one on student housing in Tirana, and one about the Vlora waterfront. These are transparent competitions issued by trustworthy parties, but that's not always the case. 'Sometimes we only get three days to prepare and make a design. Impossible, of course, but there's always one office that has all the plans in place. They must have been informed

much earlier than we were, which happens quite often. Nevertheless, in competitions we prefer the Albanian ones. Even if we don't win, the prize money is usually okay and it makes our work known to possible clients in the region.'

Felissia has worked as an architect for more than four years on different projects in Albania and Kosovo. 'It's a great way to build up experience, before starting my own office. Starting-up, however, is the easy part. There are many architects here, in all sorts of quality. Some don't have an office, some don't even have a license. The status of an architect is low. We are on the same level as a painter or something. Even the electricity man is valued more highly than we are.'

The others recognize this, and offer their tactics. One is to make sure you get the commission for the full project, including electric wiring, painting, etc., and then find subcontractors to do the finishing stages. 'You'll have to convince the client that you can paint and do the plumbing; the architectural services are just an extra,' the architects from Studioarch4 joke.

STIGMA (2009) takes a more academic approach. 'We've been experimenting with different approaches to architecture. Tirana is an interesting mosaic of oxymoronic things. The context in Tirana



- 1 Experimental housing by Diploma Thesis and Felissia Veliu
- 2 Youth centre by Studioarch4, Tirana
- 3 Destil Hostel Albania by Destil
- 4 Gjakova Central Square by STIGMA (2nd prize competition), Kosovo

is usually ugly, but we can influence how people conceive beauty. Amadeus [an eclectic, newly built hotel with pastel colours and kitsch features, ed.] was voted as one of the most beautiful buildings in Albania by the public! We have such a long way to go.'

After an hour of talking about the pros and cons of being an architect in Albania, we have dealt with all types of difficulties regarding obtaining a commission, the client's lack of education, and poor public awareness. A major problem is that every building project is political. Left-wing politicians are not likely to continue right-wing projects, and vice versa, resulting in a very unproductive construction rhythm of stop-and-go. Earlier this week, I spoke to Zef Çuni, an architect by profession who is now the Vice Minister of Culture. It seems like an ultimate luxury to be able to deal with architecture on that level. What would these architects do if they had carte blanche for two years?

Says Destil, 'We have a lot of problems in infrastructure, which is a technical problem, but architects need to be involved in the improvement of public spaces. How to create them, how to make them used. We have this culture of coffee drinking. People can sit for two hours drinking coffee and then they move on to another bar. Maybe we can change their surroundings by implementing a hybridity of spaces

with bike repair shops and libraries in cafés, or hairdressers and music stores in bookshops. Spaces that transform and have different functions throughout the day.'

Studioarch4 'would start working on the mentality of the regular people. We have to improve the quality of debate and teach people how to express themselves, because if they want better housing, better roads, or better public space, this is the way to get it.' Felissia agrees with this wholeheartedly. Studioarch4 continues, saying 'I would work on educating the clients, too. They all want classic design with modernity, or traditional design with modern touches. We should break clean of mere decoration and ornament. Architects can help with that, too. Most of the architecture is anonymous now, so there is no debate among professionals, either. We need more open and honest ways to discuss the quality of our architecture.'

All of them are looking for international collaborations, but no one is considering leaving the country. Although there are quite a lot of prestigious international competitions in Albania, it is not very clear that Albanian architects can actually win them. There still are many feelings of minority, not only among clients and politicians – who sometimes actively exclude Albanian offices because they lack

international glamour – but also among the architects themselves.

As guest-editor Saimir Kristo explains, 'The big competitions were in most situations part of the political reality, but we should be more aware of the fact that all foreign architects in Albania need a local office to collaborate with. There aren't many building materials here; all supplies and knowledge need to be contracted and collected locally. You need to know your way around to be able to really build. Our generation is the one that can make the bridge between inside and outside Albania. We've been educated within an international curriculum and we know the possibilities of our own country.' Regional competitions, like the one in Vlora, offer interesting opportunities (see p. 46). 'The Vlora Waterfront Competition was won by Metro\_POLIS, an established office, in collaboration with XDGA [Xaveer de Geyter Architects, ed.],' explains Studioarch4. 'In Albania, it's possible to build something that you have designed yourself at a very young age. This is not the case everywhere in Europe, and it's a great way to test our abilities.'

Later that evening, when I visit the music festival, the whole group is there. Not only to listen and to talk, but also to act as hosts and present the bands. Clearly, this generation's idea of architecture is all-inclusive. ◀