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PROCEEDINGS

UNDOING CONFLICT IN MUSEUMS Materiality and meaning of museum architecture and exhibition design

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Undoing conflict in museums: materiality and meaning of museum architecture and exhibition design. Proceedings

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PRESENTATIONS

EXHIBITING THE OCCUPATION: HOW THE ITALIAN PRESENCE IN ALBANIA HAS BEEN REPRESENTED THROUGH EXHIBITIONS OVER THE LAST CENTURY Giuseppe Resta, Faculdade de Arquitectura da Universidade do Porto, Portugal

ABSTRACT

On the 17th of May 2020, the Albanian National Theatre in Tirana was demolished overnight, in the days of the first major lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The theatre was built in 1939, when the Italian military occupation of the Albanian territory was officially established, after decades of increasing influence on the local economy by the fascist regime. That day was the climax of a two-year-long protest against its demolition by local associations and international organisations. This event demonstrates the importance of debating on the contested material and immaterial traces that the Italian presence in Albania left behind, culminating with a military occupation during WWII.

This text surveys the exhibitions curated or organised by Italian institutions, with the aim of tracing the evolution of the colonial narrative from fascist propaganda to contemporary initiatives. Starting in the 1920s, the Italian *Ministero delle Colonie* opened trade exhibitions, ethnographic displays, and political and recreational events. During the occupation, Albania was featured in the *Mostra Triennale delle Terre Italiane d'Oltremare* (1940) and many other venues up to recent shows in Tirana.

The first exhibitions were essential devices to support Italian territorial claims, built on the argument of an alleged Mediterranean tradition of the area, reunited once again under the "Roman" identity flag. The political-ideological nature of the artistic productions, the biased historical discourses around the myth of Roman origins, and the aesthetics employed in such events formed a strong narration that lasted much longer than the military presence on the territory. Taking this case as an example, we will see how exhibitions were instrumental to the authoritarian regime in the identity-building process; how contested narratives can be twisted in the contemporary political debate; and to what degree this heritage can be considered a shared legacy by both parties, the coloniser and the colonised.

BIO

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INTRODUCTION

Exhibitions were one of the pillars of Mussolini's propaganda strategy, aimed at supporting the ongoing colonial narrative in association with the interests of the national building industry (Cianfarani, 2020). What is Albania's role in all this? How was architecture communicated during the occupation, and how has the narration evolved until today?

In the twentieth century, Italy held a strong influence on the country, spanning from a full-fledged military occupation to scientific collaborations. Officially, the Italian occupation lasted only five years (1939-43), but the factual interest in Albanian affairs precedes the turn of the century and continues to these days. As a matter of fact, the problem of accompanying the military action with a new narrative became central to the propaganda. This produced a wide range of cultural initiatives involving publications of all kinds, movies, scientific explorations, and exhibitions.

After Albania declared its independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1912, a new phase of westernisation took place. During the First World War, the country was transformed on the battlefield. A group of patriots led by Ahmed Zogu, future president of the First Republic and later king of the Albanian kingdom (1928-1939), re-established order in 1920 to create a central government based in Tirana (Porfido & Resta, 2022). However, this instability attracted the attention of Austria, France, and Italy. The economic and political interests were manifold (Ministero della Guerra, 1915). The Italian government first created the conditions to steer domestic politics by leveraging on infrastructural works through loans from state-owned agencies (Iaselli, 2004, 2013); later, the Mussolini administration seized power and treated Albania as one of the regions of the kingdom.¹

The fascist propaganda portrayed the country as a land of opportunities. Similar to what happened in the Agro Pontino, agricultural centres and reclamation works followed 1927

Mussolini's announcement that "Italy must be ruralised", determining renewed attention to the rural areas and population growth policies (Parlato, 2002). Those Italians who started to migrate to Albania following State guidelines, hence legally, were considered proper colonists; others entered the country illegally (Vietti, 2012). All contributed to a climate of foundational civilisation.

THE INVENTION OF A SHARED MEDITERRANEAN TRADITION

In several European countries, as a response to the formation of nation-states, the end of the nineteenth century is permeated with debates on what is to be included or excluded from the supposed identity of a population. This is done by defining a common historical memory based on flexible interpretations of heritage (Biddiss, 1994). Hence, the roots of national culture had to be grounded on invented traditions (Hobsbawm, 1992).

Italian fascism developed a colonial narrative based on the Mediterranean at the time of the Roman Empire, the so-called *romanità*.² This was the invented tradition to be publicised domestically. Archaeological bulletins, the commemorative stamp of Aeneas in Butrint, "Virgil's cruise" dedicated to the places explored by the Trojan hero, and several other initiatives aimed to relocate the differences between the two countries as a historical accident to be compensated.

The *romanità* debate also involved architectural elements, especially at the beginning of the 1930s when the regime favoured austere forms over eclecticism. One example is the argument between Marcello Piacentini and Ugo Ojetti on the use of pilasters and architrave system instead of columns and arches, in which the former prevailed because of the simplified aesthetics (Piacentini, 1933).

The consensus-building program passed through infrastructural works and new towns. The popularisation of the operations in Albania was first disseminated in Italy through the press. In the mid-1920s, the news covered mainly Italian archaeological missions in Albania (Gilkes, 2003), also documented by scientific publications, conferences, and *Istituto LUCE* newsreels. In Albania, *Gazeta Shqipëtare*, the local branch of the Italian newspaper *Gazzetta* del Mezzogiorno, was founded in 1927. In August 1933, news in Albanian started to be broadcast from across the Adriatic Sea, from Bari's EIAR station. Later, the first LUCE short films and *cinegiornali* were screened in Italy, primarily aimed at publicising the infrastructural works carried out by the Italian-funded agency SVEA (Godoli, 2012).

Because the *romanità* was a staged tradition, exhibitions were crucial venues where new stories could be told. As we will see, the approach was that of a total work of art, an integration of architecture, visual arts, and graphic design.

ITALIAN EXHIBITIONS DURING THE OCCUPATION

The regime designed fairs and exhibitions as places where the Italian population would have tangible contact with distant territories. Their placement, the architectural features, and the exhibition design metaphorically represented their political posture towards different territories. Indeed, exhibitions reflected a much broader discourse on communicating colonial claims. In an all-encompassing regime like the Duce's, any minor decision had to follow precise aesthetic guidelines (Avcı Hosanlı & Resta, 2022; Besana, Carli, Devoti, & Prisco, 2002).

The first logical venue was Bari's Fiera del Levante, as it was the closest to Tirana. Starting from its opening in 1930, Albania participated on a yearly basis until 1939. Two dedicated pavilions were designed within a general layout drafted by Arch. Augusto Corradini (La Sorsa, 1931). The Fiera accommodated an "oriental village" in which various nations to the East of Italy were represented with stereotypical characters. This process of visual appropriation employed the architectural lexicon of an idealised distant land, with an Islamic milieu, to be normalised. The first Albanian pavilion showed more eclectic decorations: pilasters at the corner intersections, recessed panes on the façade, and two large trifore shaded with latticework elements similar to a mashrabiya. It was later renovated to accentuate the eclectic decorations. The first exhibition, in 1930, aimed at presenting photos of scented landscapes and beautiful panoramas (La Sorsa, 1931). In the 1932 edition, there was also a painting of King Zog, local products on show, and visuals portraying the infrastructural works in which "bridges, buildings, and streets give an idea of the great development that is

progressing in the allied kingdom"³ (Bollettino Quotidiano, 1932).

The second pavilion reflected the changed relationships with the country in 1939. It was designed by Gerardo Bosio, the leading architect of the Tirana office in which regulatory plans for Albanian cities were drafted (Resta, 2019). The building adopted a dominating position in visual and physical terms,⁴ in line with the changed sensibility of the fascist regime towards architecture in the late 30s (Fig. 1, a). It was a pure rectangular parallelepiped, alluding to a military defensive tower. Bosio drew a structure made of sandstone, with a *bugnato* cladding, sat on a stepped podium, and next to a Skanderbeg⁵ statue. The only architectural elements were a large monumental entrance, a series of small openings around the volume, and a crenelation-like top. Interestingly, this was seen as a morphological synthesis between the Venetian control towers installed on the Balkan coast under La Serenissima rule (1392-1797) and the local tower house typology kulla (Castiglioni, 1945). The interiors and the content of the exhibition were personally curated by the Undersecretary for Albanian Affairs Zenone Benini, hence as a close emanation of political messages. On the walls was a photomontage of military scenes and working people.

The main room hosted a large model of Tirana according to the new fascist plan, and archaeological material extracted from the ongoing campaigns. It was an ideal connection between the Roman past and the fascist future. The rest of the exhibition presented the richness in raw material in the Albanian Alps (Pollastri, 1939) and ethnographic information on the local customs.

Building on the same rhetoric of the *Fiera*, Albania was presented in May 1940 at Napoli's *Mostra Triennale delle Terre Italiane d'Oltremare*. Tellingly, the poster shows the feet of a person wearing caligae⁶ and stepping on a stonepaved road. The pavilion confirmed the same organisational structure (coordination by Benini and design by Bosio, in collaboration with Arch. Pier Nicolò Berardi) and precisely the same architectural features mentioned above. However, the Napoli pavilion was much bigger and equipped with custom artworks produced by relevant artists (Fig. 1, b). The uniform structural pace of the framework was integrated with displays and representations, exhibited in a linear fashion as a series of episodes composing the overall narration of the fascist initiatives in Albania. Again, predominantly military involvement, raw material extraction, infrastructural works, and urbanisation. At the centre was another large model of Tirana. The Triennale pavilion achieved the optimal integration between built and narrative space, presenting itself as the quintessential display of romanità. Goods and objects were framed in monumental scenes, capable of communicating a sense of power and wellbeing. The architectural composition of the two pavilions was not only an isolated exhibition project, but a small-scale experimentation of what Bosio would later build in full scale in the capital. The Casa del Fascio, today's Polytechnic School of Tirana, shows symmetry, proportions, bugnato cladding, and many additional details that the Florentine architect tested in Bari and Naples.

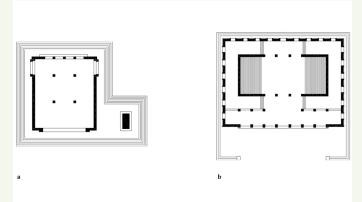


Fig. 1. Plan of the Albanian pavilions at the Fiera del Levante (a) and Mostra Triennale delle Terre Italiane d'Oltremare (b), drawings by the author on the base of archival material

The Second World War interrupted most of the international exhibitions, including Roma's Expo of 1942. Minor exhibitions were organized in Tirana in 1942 (the *Mostra del Libro e della Cultura italiana dell'epoca fascista* and the travelling exhibition *Mostra Mobile del Fascismo*) and in 1943 (the *Mostra dell'Artigianato albanese*).

ITALIAN EXHIBITIONS AFTER THE OCCUPATION

On the 17th of May 2020, the Albanian National Theatre in Tirana was demolished overnight, in the days of the first major lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The theatre was built in 1939 by Arch. Giulio Bertè and represented the climax of a two-yearlong protest against its demolition by local associations, and international organisations. This episode demonstrates the importance of debating the contested material and immaterial traces that the Italian presence in Albania left behind. Although the theatre embodied the Italian occupation, the fact that it was being repurposed by the artists' community *Art House* flipped its meaning for the city as a centre for experimentation (Lunghi & Scardi, 2020). The contested heritage of colonial past is then rarely a binary decision of keeping or destroying, but it should be analysed in its individual stories.

Colonial exhibitions are part of the immaterial traces left behind. The Albanian case is quite unique because the postwar period relegated the country to an extremely isolated status, under Stalinist dictator Enver Hoxha (Fischer, 1999). Foreign visitors were generally not allowed, or "tested by the daily requirement to undertake up to six hours work on a collective farm in return for the privilege of staying in the country" (Hall, 1984, p. 547).

His decision to limit cultural influences from foreign countries was lifted only towards the end of the regime⁷(Bishku, 2013). Italy was one of the first nations to restore cultural ties, though the issue of studying the early twentiethcentury architectural heritage was a slippery one.

The main governmental body for the organisation of exhibitions, among other cultural activities of promotion of Italian culture abroad, is the *Istituto Italiano di Cultura* (ICC). It was founded in 1926, as an outpost of the regime propaganda abroad, and reformed several times, until today's operational autonomy under the umbrella of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Mancini Palamoni, 2020). In Albania, the ICC functioned as one of the offices of the Italian Embassy, with a limited degree of action, until it moved to a dedicated location in 1999.

In the same years, architectural historians inaugurated studies on Italian colonial architecture in Albania. First, Gresleri, Massaretti, and Zagnoni (1993) published a volume on *terre d'oltremare* (overseas territories), recently expanded and revised. The design activity of Italian architects in Albania was exhibited, in collaboration with the Albanian ICC, in *La presenza italiana in Albania nella prima metà del XX secolo* (Tirana 2004), Architettura moderna italiana per le città d'Albania. Modelli e interpretazioni (Tirana 2012), and Sulle tracce dell'Italia in Albania (Tirana 2014). But more exhibitions opened in Roma, Firenze and Bari (i.e., L'amicizia tra Italia e Albania: passato, presente, futuro in Roma in 2006, La presenza italiana in Albania. La ricerca archeologica, la conservazione, le scelte progettuali in Bari and Roma in 2016).

Indeed, the first relevant monographic volume was the catalogue of the 2004 exhibition, curated by Giusti (2004), followed by the catalogue of the 2006 exhibition (Giusti, 2006). Articles and chapters mainly covered the case of Tirana, until 2012, when publications included minor cities and towns as well as co-authorships of Italian and Albanian researchers (Giacomelli & Vokshi, 2012; Menghini, Pashako, & Stigliano, 2012). An essential work on thematic archival indexing was conducted by Silvia Trani in 2007.

The 2014 exhibition is probably the most relevant until today, with broad institutional support. Five Italian universities and the Polytechnic School of Tirana collaborated in the curatorship of the contents, spread across the same Italian buildings that were the object of the studies. On the same days, the restoration of the National Bank of Albania, designed in 1938 by Arch. Vittorio Ballio Morpurgo, opened to the public and the event was accompanied with a scientific conference (Ambasciata d'Italia a Tirana, 2014).

Overall, the three exhibitions mainly presented original archival material, surveys, 3D reconstructions, and typological analyses of the projects. Less evident was the effort in critically addressing the Italian influence today, and attempt maybe a revision of the sources. As we have seen with the demolition of the National Theatre, this uncertainty on the contested heritage leaves gaps that could be exploited in many ways. As an example, the theatre will be replaced with one designed by the Danish office BIG, plus buildings to be developed in the same area.

The Italian exhibitions retained a rather conservative position and rarely addressed the wider public. Also, the composition of contributors showed a large majority of Italian scholars. The design was flat, made of panels loaded with information and technical drawings. Sometimes directly sourced from Master's or doctoral theses. The many details presented in the texts made intellectual positions hard to understand, somehow at the other extreme from the assertive magniloquent vocabulary adopted in the original fascist pavilions. The words "traces" and "presence" are the most recurrent in the briefs and the titles. The former explains the act of discovery of something that was interrupted; the latter rewords "occupation" with a more diplomatic term.

The body of archival research on Italian Architecture in Albania is today mature, and the archival material has been examined consistently in publications and theses, especially affiliated with universities in Firenze, Roma, and Bari. However, the unfoldings of the Italian contested heritage are in that phase of much-needed dissemination, in order to open public debates on mainstream media but also chats among acquaintances. This phase needs bold curatorial approaches and a not-so-academic approach to exhibition design in an attempt to re-elaborate the documentary and iconographic material accumulated over the years.

NOTES

1. It should be noted that Albania did not retain the status of a colony, but that of an Italian region. Indeed, it was officially part of the "kingdom" and not of the "empire", to which other colonies were subjected (Ciano, 1996).

2. There is a frequent reference to the Roman Empire as an ideal destination for a renewed centrality of Italy in the Mediterranean. The prime minister Merlika Kruja, in the speech dated April 12th 1939, with which the Parliament offered the Albanian crown to the Italian king Vittorio Emanuele III, stated that "the union of the kingdom of Albania with fascist Italy in the framework of the Empire of Rome is an event of historical importance" (Kruja, 1943, p. 36).

3. The text has been loosely translated as "allied kingdom". However, in the original version, the Albanian Kingdom is addressed as *amico* ("friend"), highlighting the privileged status of Albania.

4. In contrast with the location of the previous pavilion, it was not placed together with other foreign countries because Albania was in the process of becoming part of the Italian territory.

5. Skanderbeg is the Albanian national hero who fought the Ottoman Empire in the fifteenth century.

6. Military sandals worn by Roman foot soldiers.

7. The communist rule of Enver Hoxha spanned between 1944 and 1985, with his death. Until 1992, Ramiz Alia guided a transition phase that led Albania to reconnect with Europe, the USA, and the Middle East right after the end of the Cold War.

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