
Perspectives on Modern Movement's Architectural Heritage of the early XX Century in Western Balkans

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ABSTRACT

The main architectural histories of the XX Century trust little or no space to modernist architects, critics and theorists in Balkans, while they have played an important role in the cultural life that nourished the background in which Modern Movement born and developed.

In the cultural turmoil which characterized European cities in the early XX Century Balkans architects were in contact in Paris with the circle of artists and architects that gravitate around personalities like Le Corbusier, Peter Behrens, and many others. Theorists like Emil Szytka, Karel Teigé, or Miloutine Borissavliévitch played at that time a crucial role in cultural interpretation and diffusion of modern movement in other European countries, and particularly in the Balkan area. Also, the constitution of many “associations” that worked on the application of Modernist ideas in other European countries, like the Group of Architects of Modern Expressions (Grupa Arhitekata Modernog Pravca, GAMP) in Serbia, foster the introduction of a new “practice” in the architectural panorama of the early XX Century.

THE MODERN MOVEMENT AND THE BALKANS AREA

1.1 The early period

The Balkan area enters late the renovation of the architectural language which the European area knows during the first decades of the XX century. In part due to the difficult and controversial politics which the involved areas lived from Turkish domination to the Balkan Wars, and still traversed during the first part of the Twentieth Century. While Le Corbusier was working on the definition of the new architecture, made of pure and white volumes and based on his five points, architecture in the Balkan area was mainly hesitating on eclectic, where non neoclassic and neo-baroque, styles.

Furthermore, the Adriatic side of the Balkans were under the stagnating influence of the “dark-side” of the Italian architectural culture. In Italy «the Great War marked the end of Futurism's age of influence. In its wake came a return to classicism, in the form of the *Novecento Italiano*. The *novecentisti* remained prisoners of the old dilemma – past or future – and could suggest only a return to certain models of the past»¹. And that was the main characteristics of the architecture that Italy exported in its areas of influence.

Those features – return to models of the past, neo-classicism, ecc. – are mainly visible in town planning renovation in the last decades of the Nineteenth century. The planning of towns like Plovdiv, Stara Zagora, Varna or Silistra, are geometrical, with a orthogonal grids of streets, showing a good knowledge of the contemporary town planning models in use in the European and American cities.

Indeed when traveling in the early Twentieth century in the Balkan area, a territory of “small warring states”, where «diversity and conflict, fractionalization and opposition represent both how the peoples of the peninsula have come to be perceived, and indeed how many perceive themselves»², one could be «disappointed to find that Balkan peoples were not upholding the “classical” cultural traits»³ which one had hoped to encounter. The presence of multiples identities, ethnic groups and religions foster a warped and manipulated perception of the Balkan area. Le Corbusier himself, during his “Voyage to the East” saw the

¹ M. Fuller, *Building Power: Italy's Colonial Architecture and Urbanism, 1923-1940*, «Cultural Anthropology», III, November 1988, 4, pp. 455-487, p. 458.

² D.R. Hall, *Representations of Place: Albania*, «The Geographical Journal» CLXVI, July 1999, 2, pp. 161-172, p. 164.

³ *Ibidem*.

places he encounters with the eye of the antiquarian, looking more for the ancient and archaeological side of what he encounters, instead of perceiving the modernity which were growing all around.

1.2 Between the two world wars

The new division of the territory in the Balkans forms different areas of influence, some states come under the inspiration of the European models, while others try building their own schemes, or choose – mainly on the Adriatic area – to filter modernity through the experience of the Italian Rationalism. A new demand for housing and the increasing density of towns, parallelly to the necessity of building for institutions and cultural venues, pushed architects to develop new architectural models.

While cities were adopting the international zoning criterion, concrete frames structures made their entrance in the architectural panorama. However, in the Twenties those structures were masked behind an eclectic approach to styles, like in the works of Jordanoff, Ovciarov, Slatof, Koef and Kantardjef in Bulgaria, the academic architecture of Jovan Ilkic in Belgrade, or Duiliu Marcu in Romania.

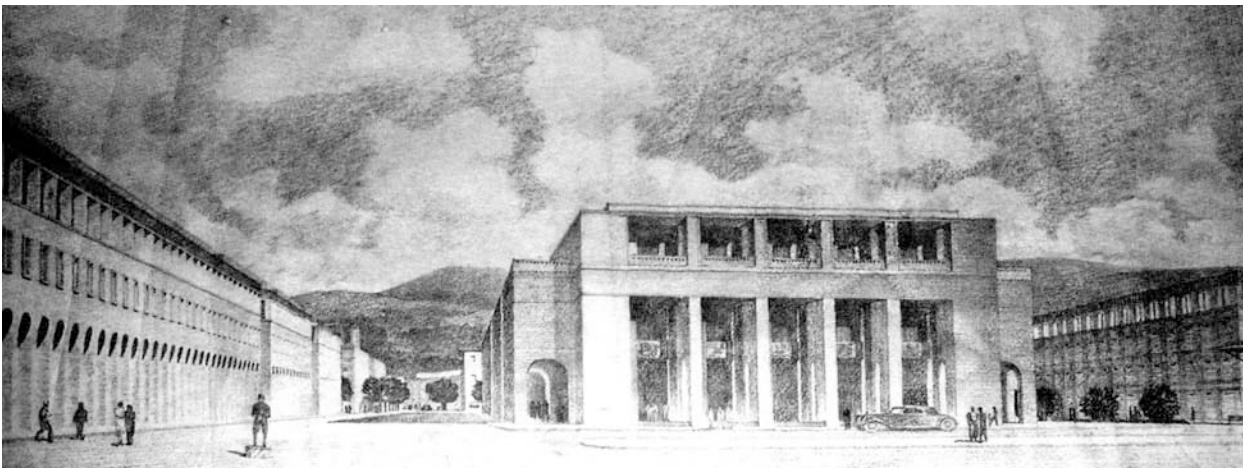


Fig. 1: Tirana's urban plan, view of Scanderbeg square, by I. Lambertini and F. Poggi, 1942 (AQTN).

The modern architecture enters the Balkan area in multiples ways: from the Jugendstil experience, with the works of disciples and collaborators of Otto Wagner, or through Balkan architects studying in the northern countries, with Behrens, or in Paris, in Berlin, ecc., and also through the relevant cultural role of architectural reviews and critics. An important role was played by the Group of Architects of Modern Expressions (Grupa Arhitekata Modernog Pravca, GAMP), founded in 1928 – parallelly to CIAM – which tried to play the role of local interpreter of the international architectural debate, and in which Milan Zloković, author of the National Bank in Sarajevo, had a leading role. Also important, in this panorama, was the Italian influence on the western area of Balkans – partially evident also in the work of Zloković –, in which was filtered the experience of the Modern Movement, not mainly through Rationalist work but with academic one.

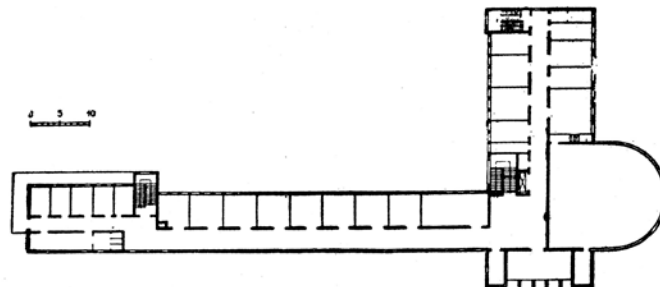


Fig. 2: Plan of the Faculty of Medicine and Surgery by architects Arboff, Anghelova and Capitanof.

The firsts examples of this turning point may be found in some isolate architectural works, mostly houses, like the Ruscev home (Bulgaria, 1936) of the architect Damianov, or the Faculty of Agricultural Sciences (Bulgaria, 1928) of the architect Ovciarov, with a full brick covering that which seems to be inspired by the German rationalist experience, and the Faculty of Medicine and Surgery of Arboff, Anghelova and Capitanof (Fig. 2).

In the collective housing an experience that appears to be more linked to the Modern Movement is the apartment building of the architect Creanga in Boulevard Balcescu (Romania, 1934), less known – and maybe of uncertain attribution – is the club-house Mamaia, of the architect Stefanescu, in Bucarest (1932), which shows a particular attention to the “occidental” sensibility to an austere and linear aesthetic. The former Yugoslavia, from an architectural point of view, in the Thirties was mainly under the influence of Austria and Jugendstil, but there were also architects more interested in the new modern materials, like concrete, and their aesthetics. The new paediatric clinic of Belgrade, of Zlokovic, or the apartment buildings by Manojlovic, Marinkovic, Kojik and Belobrk. Representative of this period is the new bank of Agriculture of Belgrade by brothers Krstic.

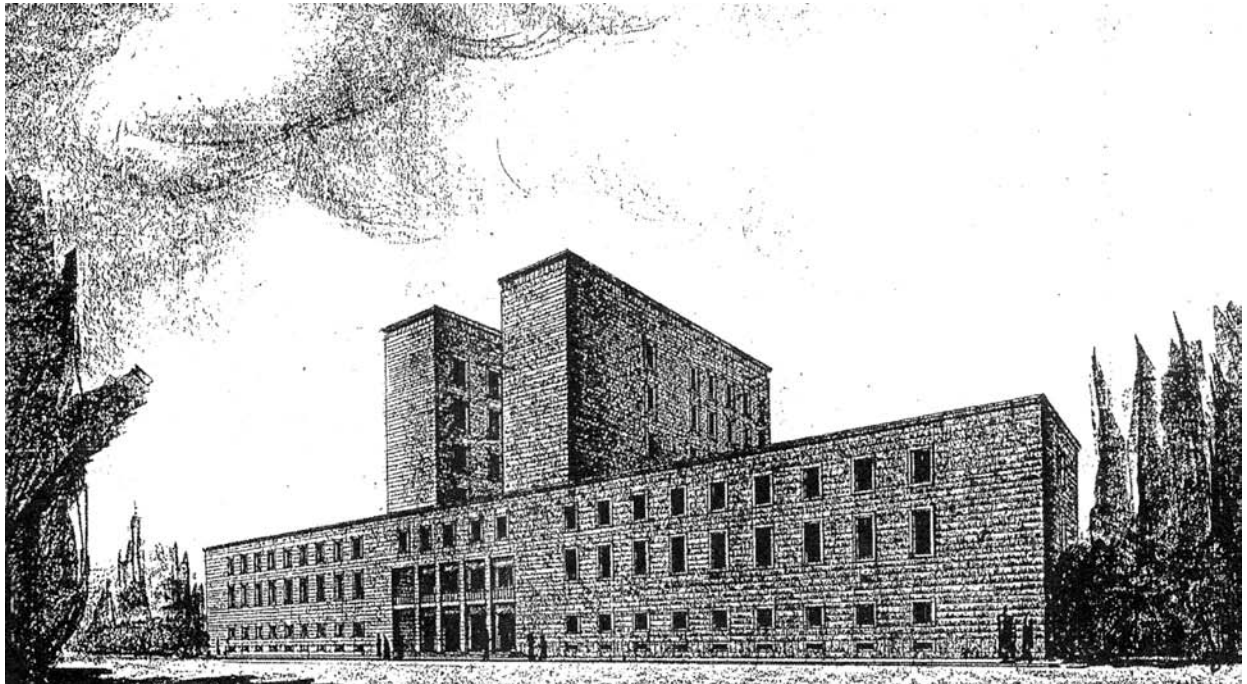


Fig. 3: Perspective drawing of *Piazza Littoria* showing the preliminary version of *Casa del Fascio*, by G. Bosio, 1940.

In Albania, during the Thirties, and the early Forties, the Italian architects involved in the restructuration and the planning of the new and old towns were principally coming from the academic area. The work of Ballio Morpurgo, Gherardo Bosio, Giuseppe Paladini, Leone Carmigiani, Ferdinando Poggi and Ivo Lambertini in Tirana is strictly related to the fascist architectural expression, and is particularly evident in the new urban plan for Tirana, or in those for Koritza, Durazzo.

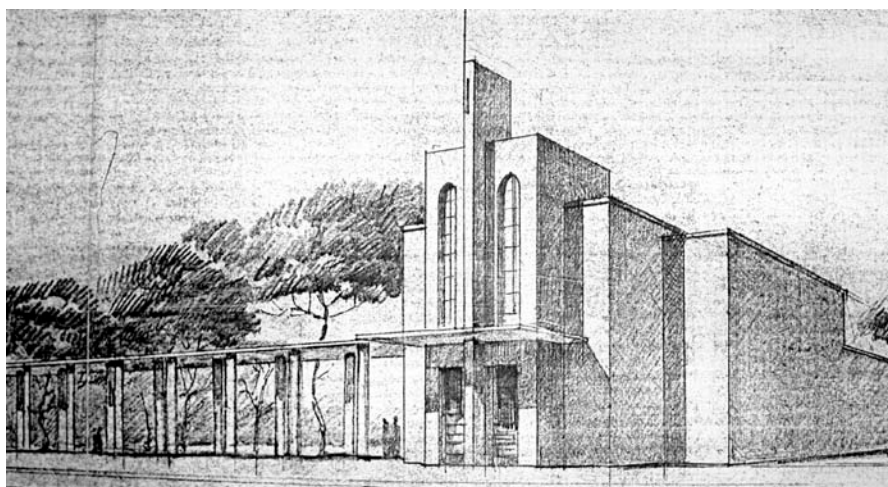


Fig. 4: Perspective drawing of the cinema Kossova, Tirana 1945.



Fig. 5: The *Casa del Fascio* in construction, by Gherardo Bosio. Tirana 1940.

Particularly reminiscent of the Italian coeval architectural language are the “Casa del Fascio” (Fig. 3, 5), the *Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro Albanese* and the Dajti Hotel by Bosio, as well as the new arrangement of Skënderbej Square, the Olympic stadium or the *Viale dell’Impero*.

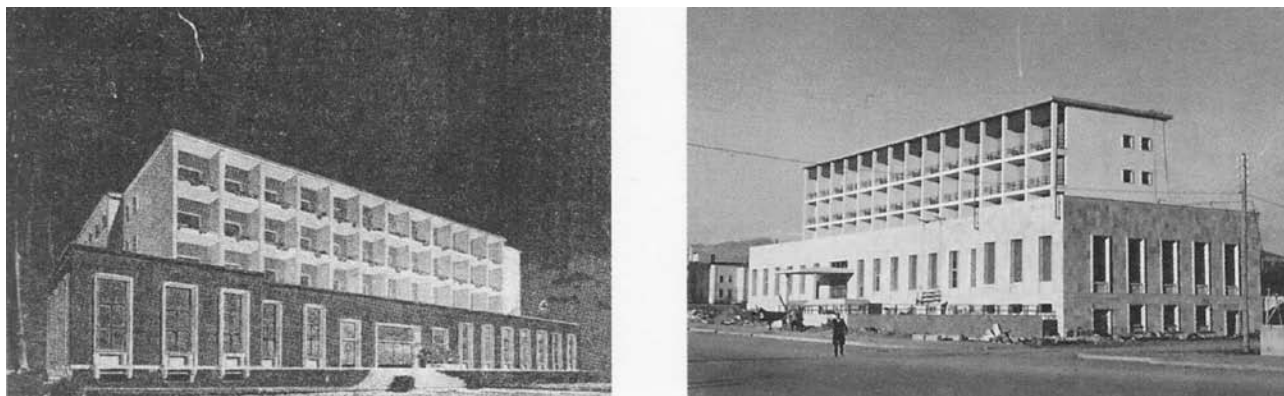


Fig. 6: Perspective of the Dajti hotel and the hotel in construction, by G. Bosio, Tirana 1937-1940.

While “modernist” meant «the clear expression of structure, strip and corner windows, continuous horizontal balconies or protruding slabs, the use of exposed concrete and extensive glazing», and «a crucial standard was functionality, in other words, a building’s appropriateness for its purpose and its setting»⁴, the new architecture was mainly the result of a re-interpretation thought the lens of the classical history. «One problem raised by these architectural criteria is that while the Rationalists were eager to design Fascist buildings, their vision was not well suited to creating monuments for the representation of Fascist power. Fascism rejected Rationalism in the long run, but it is important to note essentially two strains in competition, the historicist and the radical, and eventually the former more or less won, in that it survived Rationalism»⁵.

FROM THE END OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR TO THE END OF THE COLD WAR

New national identities rises in the Fifties and Sixties, and with them the need for a new architecture, able to mark a clear separation from the languages of the past. In those years, especially in Romania and Bulgaria, the influence of sovietic architecture, partially reminiscent of the constructivist experience, was particularly evident. As, for example, in the Ministry of Railways’ building (Bucarest, 1954), or the television tower in Sofia designed in 1960 by the architect Donev (Fig. 7).

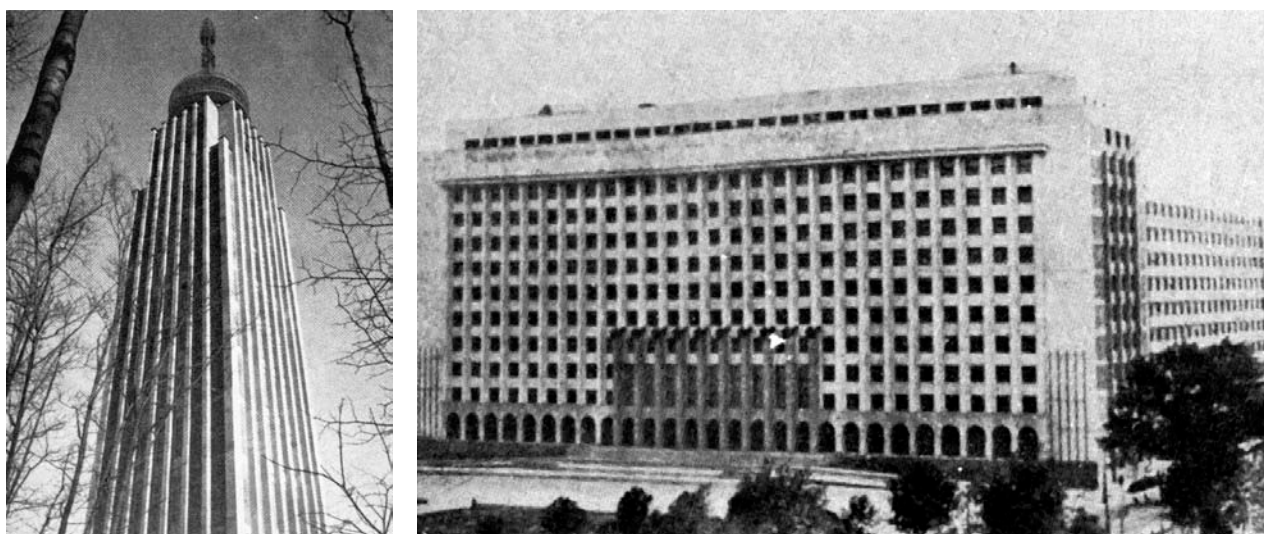


Fig. 7. The Television Tower (left) and the Ministry of Railways’ building (right).

⁴ M. Fuller, *Building Power...*, op. cit., p. 458.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

Directly related to the modernist language seems to be the School “Rakovski”, of Elka Nenova (Fig. 8), which shows a plan that appears to be more inspired by the functionalism of Walter Gropius or Jacobus J.P. Oud, rather than by the re-interpretation of the Modern Movement by the architects of the new, post-war, generations. The organicist approach to architecture, especially that of Hans Scharoun of the after war period, is the link between the re-interpretation of the Modern and the search for a new language, as in the Universiadi '61, a multifunctional building that can accommodate different sports and cultural venues, with a theatre, an auditorium and a congress hall, designed by the architects: Basov, Vladichki, Tatarov, Ivantchev, Nissimov and Lubenov (Fig. 9).

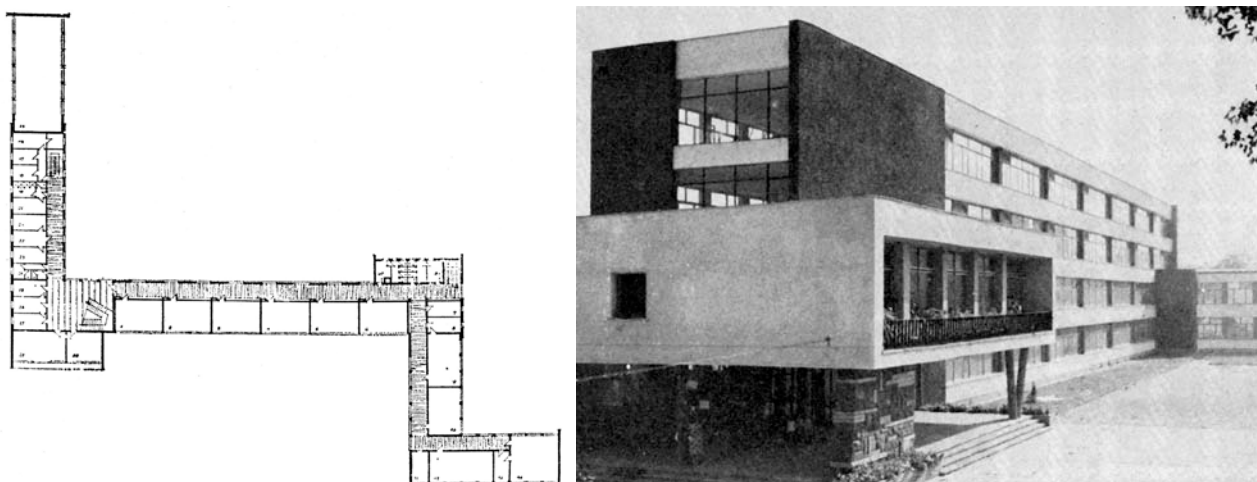


Fig. 8. School “Rakovski”, Elka Nenova, 1961.

The Sixties are the most interesting and creative years in the search for a new and specific architectural approach in the Balkans. Many architects, as Nicola Nicolov and Stoinova, create new forms, new languages, that are original evolutions, with specific innovative characteristics, instead of re-interpretations on the international diffusion of the post-modernist era. As the Hotel Sozopol Necebar, of Nicolov and Stoinova, for example (Fig. 9), or others hotels like those in Tirnovo, the Europa, Maritza and Pliska.

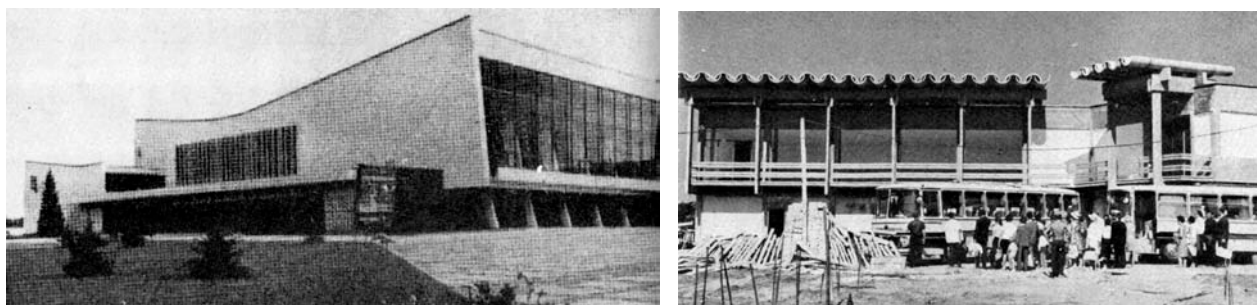


Fig. 9. The Universiadi '61 (left) and the Hotel Sozopol Necebar

The housing problem became particularly relevant with the start of strong urbanization in the late Fifties. That was the occasion for architects and planners to look at the post-war experiences lead in other European countries, like the “new towns” in England, or the “*grands ensembles*” in France. The results are a great number of peripheral neighbourhoods like the *Lenin*, the *Zapaden Park*, *Iskar*, or *Ivan Vazov* and *Ippodrome* which seem perfectly integrated in the post-war re-interpretation of the Modern Movement language, as in other European experiences like those related to the CIAM, or TEAM X, as, for example, those of Giancarlo De Carlo. In particular, the *Ippodrome*, designed by Z. Kolev, M. Mateev, I. Tatarov, P. Tachev and T. Danov, is one of the most important buildings complex «in the search for a free plan, with many open spaces, and a contraposition of buildings with different volumes and directly inserted in a green park»⁶ (Fig. 10).

⁶ A. Mambriani, *L'architettura moderna nei paesi balcanici*, Cappelli, Bologna 1970, p. 107-108

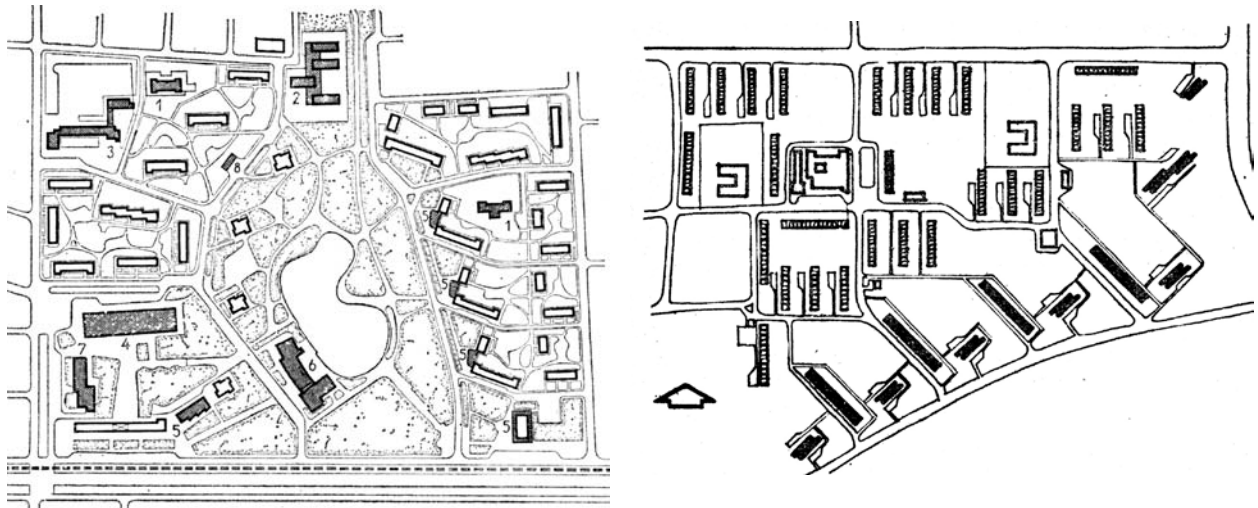


Fig. 10. The *Ippodrome*, 1957, (left) and the *Jul Scinteia*, 1962, (right) master plans.

On the other hand, a large part of the architectural panorama remains related to the European context, with some exceptional works like the new circus of Bucarest, 1969, of the architect Porumbescu – which seems connected to the researches on concrete structures lead by the Nervi and Morandi –, the industrial buildings in the area “Militari”, and the Hospital “La Caciulata”, 1969, designed by Horia Hudita and Ilcana Daia. Other remarkable works, more connected with an international evolution of the modernist language are the Airport Otopeni and the National Theatre in Bucharest.

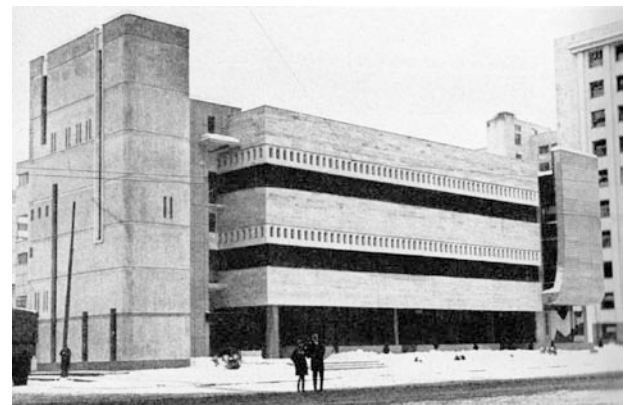


Fig. 11. Predeal's Station (left) and Bucarest Railways' Computer Centre (right).

AN HERITAGE AND ITS PERSPECTIVES

The Balkanian architecture from the late Sixties to the early Eighties has a specific characterization which comes from invention and research. Form, constructive definition of the building, aesthetic and innovation in technologies and materials, made the Balkanian architecture more innovative and culturally related than many other contemporary works.

The station of Predeal, with its hyperbolic roof and glass walls, connects multiples experiences of the modern – from the lecorbusierian Philips Pavilion to the architectures of Kenzo Tange and Oscar Niemeyer – in a totally new vision. The Railways Computer Centre of Bucharest realize a building that re-interpret the modern language with a strong urban vision, and create a form really suited to urban dimension, original in its invention and design (Fig. 11). The Enver Hoxha Museum, completed in Tirana in 1999, with its pyramidal shape, was also an example of how architects and planners in the Balkanian area were active in the search of an autonomous language, and an architecturally defined identity, not dependant from the European experiences.

Interesting for the evolution, and the contradictions between architectural ideas and researches, is the design competition for the National Historical Museum in Tirana, in which the proposals from Enver Faja, Petraq

Kolevica and Maks Velo appears to be more original and architecturally interesting than the final, realized, version of Faja, with its absolute urban form (Fig. 12).

The increasing industrialization of the Balkanian countries lead to a change in the architectural language, that was progressively adapted to the new constraints and possibilities offered by the use of standardized components in the building industry, as may be found in the open-air cinema in Bucarest, in 1968, in the Zagabria University buildings, in the Yugoslavia's pavilion at the Triennial in 1964, in the tower building in Lubiana on Revolution square, in the building complex "Savsko Naselje", in Kiosk '67 and in the Lubiana pavilion. Representative of this kind of "industrial" experimental architecture are the proposals for the local assembly in Skopje, 1967, and the project of the Nuclear Institute in Ljubljana, 1965, of the architect Oton Jugovec.

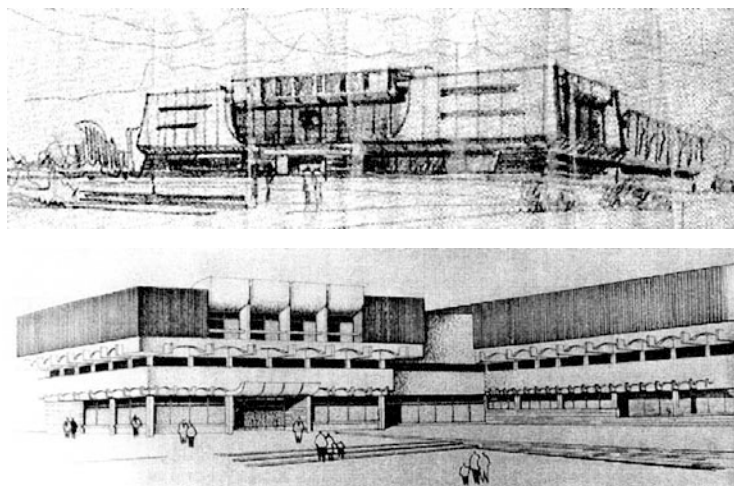


Fig. 12. From top to bottom: Enver Faja and Petraq Kolevica proposals for the National Historical Museum in Tirana.

Symbolically, the end of this fascinating adventure of search, experimentation and discovering, closes with the urban plan of Vjenceslav Richter, called *Sinturbanizam*, 1964. This urban proposal is vaguely reminiscent of the garden cities of the early Twentieth century, of the Wright's Broadacre city and of the lecorbusierian *Unités d'Habitation* superblocks, but takes a step back to an architecture – reactionary, in the sense referred to by Stanislaus von Moos – strongly anchored to the past: a self-sufficient "Ziggurat" which is resolved in itself and self-referential (Fig. 13).

This culturally rich and relevant experiences have been partially erased from wars, regimes and, more recently, from the urban global transformation. But there is still an heritage that is waiting for being re-discovered, and that could constitute a new important chapter of the history, and of the living heritage, of the Twentieth century.

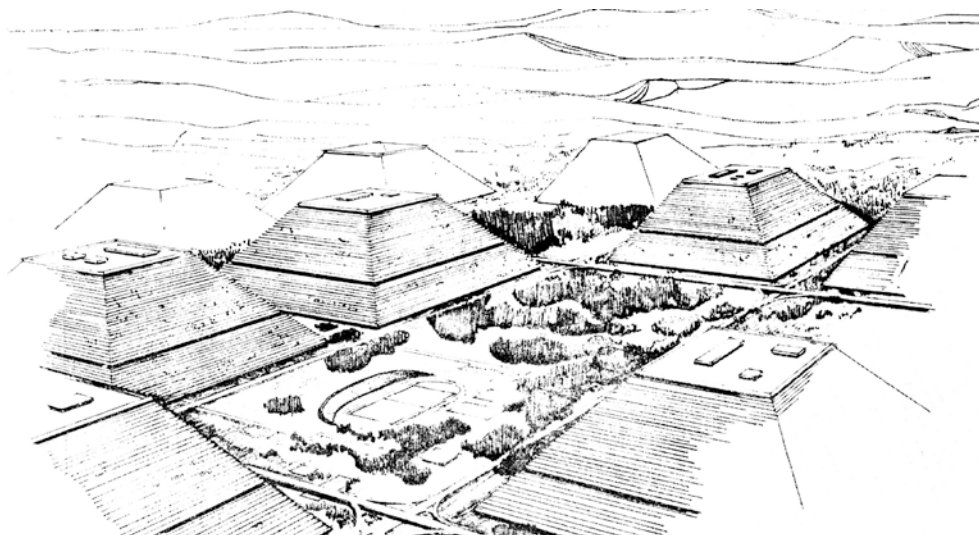


Fig. 13. Vjenceslav Richter, *Sinturbanizam*, 1964.

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