

The Ruth & Ted Braun Awards for Writing Excellence at Saginaw Valley State University

From Dictatorship to Democracy: The Transformation of the Albanian Capital **Elvin Gjevori**

COLLEGE OF ARTS & BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES – SOCIAL SCIENCES

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Elvin Gjevori is majoring in Political Science with a minor in Philosophy. He is interested in the ways in which a government and a political system, especially the built environment, influence the mindset of citizens making the transition to a liberal democracy after the fall of Communism. He has studied the subtle ways in which politics and the political process influence the day-to-day life of the citizens of a particular country, especially his home country, Albania. He plans to expand his research as a basis for graduate school in the future.

When I returned home in 2002 for the first time after two and a half years of absence, I saw a different Albania. Sure, our old cynicisms, distrust, anger at the government, and desire to become richer than Americans in only twelve years of democracy had not changed. The government seemed to be a little bit more efficient but not much more. The main change was that people were returning from their long emigrations in Greece and Italy. The first groups of undergraduates from the West were returning to work at home. For the first time in our long and seemingly never-ending transition to democracy, Albania was seeing its sons and daughters return and not leave home. Truthfully, I felt a little guilty, since I have not yet decided whether I am going back home once I finish my studies.

The youth had started to come back and take on important positions in the state administration. A country that elected a Prime Minister age 35 and a foreign minister of 32 shows that it has rested its hopes on a new generation. We like to call it the generation that has not been tainted by Communism. That is wishful thinking; we have all been tainted by Communism. A person cannot escape the invisible grasp of Communism in Albania even twelve years after its demise. As a country needs decontamination after being hit by a nuclear bomb, so do Albanians need a lot of

time to get “healthy” again, after living for 45 years under a North Korean-like Communist system.

Since 1991, the country has gone through many fundamental changes. One of the many things that is changing is the architecture and the look of the capital city, Tirana. The aim of this paper is to analyze the new architectural direction that the country has taken, represented best by Tirana. The architectural changes of the city show the political messages that the political leaders are sending. The paper explains the importance of architecture in political revolutions and then shows the practical uses of these theories in Tirana.

Fall of Communism and Transition to Democracy

To understand the transformation of Albania, it is necessary to begin with a brief overview of the democratic revolution and the stages of change that the built environment has gone through in the past twelve years. In early February 1991, the Albanian capital, Tirana, was living under the tight grip of the Sigurimi (Communist Secret Police) and the Special Intervention Units. The reason for such tight security was that the protests that had engulfed

the country were about to reach Tirana. Thousands of people from every city were demanding the fall of Communism and the installment of democracy. The government seemed ready to take on the challenge, since it had called to the city almost half of the entire security apparatus of the nation. When the protest started, there were violent confrontations with the police force, but the overwhelming numbers of the crowd made the security troops powerless. The last stage of the protest moved to the downtown area of the capital, right at the place where Enver Hoxha's (Communist leader from 1944-85) huge statue was. The confrontation with the police was even more violent than earlier stages. The security forces were shooting rubber bullets, and fire engines were covering the crowd with frigid colored water. After hours of urban rioting, and once the party leadership denied the police the right to open fire, the protestors owned the square. Human bodies covered the huge statue and soon it looked like a moving mountain of people.

Every Albanian not at the protest was watching the situation unfold from his or her television set at home. They had been used to expecting anything, but when the bronze statue that shadowed the entire central square of the nation fell, it felt like 50 years of history had fallen. Soon after, every statue of Hoxha was removed in all other major cities. Every home had had a small statue of Lenin, Stalin, and Hoxha. It became a daily event for people to get together in the central square of their cities, bash these statues and chant, "freedom and democracy," "long live America," and "we want Albania like the rest of Europe." One year after these events, the Communists were out of power for the first time since 1944, and the progressive forces had taken charge of the nation. Some of their decisions were to remove the red star from the nation's flag, change all the names of factories and universities that were called Enver Hoxha after the Communist leader, and remove Hoxha's body from the National Cemetery of the Nation's Heroes.

Although people knew that the reforms were going to be very hard, that jobs were going to be cut and individuals were going to suffer, everyone had an unexplainable happiness and hope for a better future. The popular belief was that no matter how hard the reforms were, they would not be as hard as removing or living under the Communist regime. What people did not understand was that the real reforms were the removal of the regime. The statues that had been overthrown were just the image; the hard part was changing attitudes, ways of life and of thinking. Albania, as it has always done, entered a new stage of its history having no idea what to expect. Soon reality hit home and people understood that the pain of reforming the country would be felt by everyone for quite some time to come. Poor to the point of despair, fueled by a strong hate for Communism and its strict rules and a limited understanding of capitalism, Albanians found themselves free but with

few ideas of what to do with that freedom. Although people were free, they were waiting for their government to tell them what to do with their newfound freedom.

Wanting to make up for the lost time and become as rich as we could as quickly as we could, the first years of capitalism were a modern Wild West. Within a short period of time the country went from one extreme to another—from total control to uncontrolled freedom, from total collectivization to unparalleled individualism, from humanity to a new kind of person who cared about nothing and nobody but him- or herself. The transition period seemed to be working, however, since the European allies called the country "the tiger of the Balkans." In Albania, there is a saying that the wolf might change clothing but not his soul. The country looked democratic and a success story, but the invisible far-reaching mental grip of Communism had not let go. The Mayor of Tirana often says that "there is a little Enver in the minds of every Albanian." It was true that the government was not Communist anymore, but 45 years of strict Communist doctrine had shaped people and their views. The Communists had prided themselves on building "a new kind of man," and they had done so.

It was hard for people to democratize their thinking because Communism had pervaded everything. It was at school, at work, in the house and on the highways. Everywhere there were anti-capitalist and anti-western posters. (See Appendix, Fig. 1.) At school, the photograph of the leader watching everyone from above was present at every class. Citations from Hoxha were written with big letters at the entrance of every building and his picture was almost everywhere. (See Appendix, Fig. 2, 3.) Students were taught that they were not going to school to better just themselves: they were going to school to be the new party officials. At home, people were required to have little statues of either Enver or one of the great Communist ideologues. On every major highway, there were billboards claiming how strong and happy Albania was under the Communist rule. (See Appendix, Fig. 4.) In every job, apart from the manager, a party secretary oversaw the ideological behavior of the workers and reported everything to the regional headquarters of the Communist party. There was no escape; "privacy as 'personal space,' as the right to be alone, as a dimension of freedom, has not existed in our culture, which was deeply marked by totalitarianism" (Lubonja). For a long time, the Albanian citizen had two personalities: the one he or she had to show constantly in public and the one he or she could show at home. The more the control of the regime on its people tightened, the more the public persona started replacing the private one. Soon Albanians had no privacy; their souls had been emptied and filled with Communist propaganda.

In Albania, there was officially no religion. The Communist doctrine and the Communist leader were transformed into the "Holy Book" and the "Son of God."

Everything had to agree with the party doctrine. There were no inconsistencies; there was nothing a person could look at to see that what was happening was pure folly. “Ideology was surmised to encompass the whole of philosophy, history and economics, along with literature and the arts. It had the right to determine the other social or natural sciences, whose results never ran counter to its conclusions” (Lubonja). The Albanian people were deprived of any institution that would ask them to divert some of their party loyalty. Even the family was to be a front line of the class warfare. Parents were afraid to talk against the party in the presence of their children because they feared that their children would spy on them. Spouses did not talk about these things with each other because the fear was overwhelming. If it happened that somebody was caught committing “agitation and propaganda,” the wife had to divorce her husband, the children had to cut off any relationships with the parents, and the parents had to disown the child. It is very clear that the life of the average Albanian under Communism was living hell. People were constantly looking over their shoulders and lived a kind of life that gave no satisfaction.

This overview of Albanian Communism shows the kind of abyss into which the soul of the individual and society had fallen. Now the country chose to move on immediately, to forget; we thought we could make it. Using the same infrastructure that was in place for Communism, the country thought that it would be able to transform it into capitalism. For the most part, we failed.

Once people were free to own private property, they turned their backs on the communal life. Thinking about the well-being of others was “stupid;” thinking just for oneself and family was the capitalist way. This had immediate consequences. All the traditions of making sure that the public spaces were maintained and cleaned by volunteers on Sunday were regarded as Communist and therefore wrong. The strict urban rules of construction were called a Communist inhibition on the freedom of the individual. Paying taxes was Communist because the state should not have that kind of power over people. People believed that the government should not regulate what people build, where they build, or how they build. The Communists had told everybody what to do for 50 years and people were not in the mood to listen to any government official anymore.

These beliefs, coupled with extreme poverty, government inefficacy, and rotting corruption, made Albania the paradise of the people who wanted to do whatever. The government was not an institution that we feared; it became an institution that we could cheat, steal from, and use to our own advantage at the expense of society in general. Not only did we do so for the better part of the ‘90s, but we also said to the whole wide world that we were the “land of opportunity.” Not only did we proclaim it to the world, but

the international community kept saying that sick Albania had found its doctor in the policies of our President, who was a cardiologist by profession. Maybe the medicines were giving the country some much-needed cash from the development of small enterprises, but soon we were to discover that we had taken an overdose.

One of the side effects of this unprecedented and uncontrolled freedom was urban destruction. In a very short period, Albania lost its parks, its green areas, and its public spaces. Small constructions mushroomed all around the nation and especially in the capital. In 1995, citizens could not find the Parliament building because of the many coffee shops around it. Many parks that had statues of fallen heroes disappeared, the statues buried in the middle of the constructions. The Central Park of Tirana was butchered, with most of its trees cut and most of the green areas occupied with shops and bars. The color green was replaced with that of concrete and the air became unbreathable, since the number of cars in circulation increased while the number of trees significantly decreased. Tirana had become a jungle of constructions that had sprawled everywhere and engulfed every space. With every new building that was put up, people became angrier and started demanding solutions. Finally, the intense public pressure awakened the incredibly inefficient Albanian administration from its winter sleep.

In 1998, when unexpectedly the Prime Minister of the time decided to remove the illegal construction in the center of the downtown area, people were shocked. They were shocked that the government had finally decided to become active in executing its own laws. The second shock was the discovery of the “dictatorship” that we had lived under for about eight years. The downtown now looked like it had been rediscovered and had so much more light. The government was surprised by the popularity of such a policy, and it promised to continue the policy until the total restoration of public spaces was achieved. It was going to be very difficult, however. After a transition period in which, if one had the right amount of money and good connections, one had the ability to build anywhere, restoring the power of law would be difficult. The capital had lost its parks and did not have any more public spaces. There were illegal constructions even in the park in front of the Parliament, and the MPs owned most of them. The project was going ahead but very slowly.

The Built Environment and Politics

This transformation of Albania, Tirana in particular, can be seen at a deeper level by analyzing its architecture and public spaces. Since the built environment is a product of the society that builds it, it is logical to expect changes to buildings when a new political order takes power. “The expansion of a new regime, or of a new system of authority and control, usually results in alteration of the physical

environment” (Lasswell 13). The elite of the new regime want to distinguish themselves from the previous rulers and also wanted to put into practice their vision of nation building and system of government. The best way to distance the new regime from the old was to demolish landmarks connected to the old ruling class, or to transform the purpose of these buildings.

Architecture is the most public of all arts. People do not have to go to museums to look at architecture; in fact, people most of the time are not aware of the built environment that surrounds them. However, almost since the creation of the state, leaders have recognized the power of architecture to maintain and/or reshape the prevailing political and social views of the time. In his article “Architecture or Revolution,” the author, Neil Leach, quotes George Bataille’s definition of architecture as “the expression of the true nature of society, as physiognomy is the expression of the nature of the individuals” (38). When new regimes come to power, one of the things that they change is the look of the buildings and especially of the capital. History presents many examples. When Pope Julius II was elected to the papacy in 1503, for instance, the prestige and the power of the Papal State was crumbling. In order to centralize power and to visualize the Pope’s plan for the future, he planned a regrandification of the papal residence and an urban renewal of Rome (Moss 47).

Although buildings do not have any political meaning on their own, it is the way people read them and the stratification of meaning people put on them that makes them symbols that represent political messages and ideologies. Mussolini, The Duce, for example, wanted Italians in the 1930’s to think that he was rebuilding the lost Roman Empire. In order to realize his dream, he ordered the construction of the Piazzale Augusto Imperatore. This square incorporated the Mausoleum of Augustus, one of the best known Roman Emperors, who centralized power into his own hands and who enlarged the borders of the Empire. Through this project, the Duce sent a clear message that he thought of himself as the new Augustus. He was saying to the Italian people that he was ready to reform the lost empire and become the new Emperor (Kostof 275 – 280). Duce’s ideological brother in arms presents another example of the connection of architecture to the political system that builds it. Until Hitler started building in a neoclassic style, people did not see that style of building as totalitarian. Nowhere was that more true than in America, where national government buildings have a distinct neoclassic style. However, once this style was connected to Hitler and his regime, it started to stand for ideas of totalitarianism. It is very clear then that buildings stand to represent the ideas of the regimes that build them.

Buildings represent not only the values of the regimes that build them, but also the values of the societies that house them. The idea is that the whole built environment is

a product of the society—its cultural, social and political beliefs, and its economic needs (Forty). It is clear that the development of building styles goes hand in hand with the prevailing social, moral, economic, and political values of the time. A good example that illustrates this point is the development of the modern hospitals in France and England. The hospitals started as “acts of mercy” performed by believing Christians and Catholic nuns. The buildings were open and had a chapel inside so that the sick people could hear the ceremony. In these kinds of hospitals, spiritual healing had as much importance as physical healing. However, once the Reformation swept across Europe, the hospitals started to be managed by civil authorities whose main aim was to save money on the treatment of the poor and disabled. It was thought that the way the nuns were running the hospitals encouraged dependency pauperism. Consequently, the new buildings were built on farms, isolated from the cities. The architecture had to serve a double meaning. The hospital had to beautify the town and make the private donor look good, and at the same time discourage pauperism.

By the early 1800s, the new style of the pavilion plan emerged. The sisters favored it particularly because it gave them strict control over the patients and the visitors. It was thought that these pavilions provided better hygiene and helped the sisters perform their duties more efficiently. The doctors thought that these pavilions would help their profession too, since hygiene was essential for an operation to be successful.

In the twentieth century, however, the patients’ ideas started playing a more significant role in the design of hospitals. Furthermore, the doctors started to notice that the pavilions were not providing the hygiene that their proponents said they would. It is at this time that the hospital as we know it today started to take its shape (Forty). The steps that the hospital buildings have gone through over the years are a very clear indication that the values of the society influence the buildings it produces.

This change in social values is especially evident in the former Communist countries of Eastern Europe. In her essay, “The State as a Work of Art,” Romanian writer Renata Salecl, for example, explains how Ceausescu, the Communist leader of Romania, destroyed the old part of Bucharest in order to build his huge Palace of the People. His plan did not just entail the construction of a new majestic building that would be a legacy of his new regime; an important part of his architectural plan was the destruction of the old. The existence of the old Bucharest was a reminder of how things had been before he took power and transformed the nation. “By razing the historical monuments, Ceausescu aimed to wipe out Romanian national identity, the fantasy structure of the nation that is forged around the historical old buildings and churches, and then to establish his own version of this identity” (Salecl 102).

The new systems, especially if they are totalitarian, do not want to have the symbols of the old rule around them. The removal of the old symbols helps the people understand that a new page in the history of the nation is being turned. Descartes made the same point when he said that to have a real departure from an old form of architecture, destruction and construction are interconnected. In order for the new to come to the forefront, the old has to be destroyed somehow (Benjamin).

For Eastern Europeans, it was just as hard living without Communism as living under it. When a totalitarian system of government is removed from power, people find themselves with an amount of freedom that they do not know how to use. A people that have been under the tight grip of a totalitarian regime do not have the capacity to function in a completely free world without some kind of structure and control. Living without Communism becomes as hard as living with it. Salecl's example is the prisoner and his or her institutionalization in jail. Prisoners always want to get out of jail, but when they do so, they have a very hard time integrating into society, because when they think of freedom, they think of it with no institutions and no order. "When this 'freedom' is attained, for many prisoners this causes total collapse, the loss of all they had: their identity breaks down when they come out of prison" (Salecl 95).

In Salecl's example of the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*, the prisoners in the story all dream about getting out of the jail, but once they do, they fail to reintegrate. Only one prisoner, Andy, makes it on the outside. The reason is that all the other prisoners thought of freedom as a place with no institution to control them. Andy, however, thought of freedom as a place where there was a more democratic control. Salecl talks about two groups of people under Communism that are similar to the prisoners and Andy. The first group is made up of the eternal complainers who try not to accept the regime. What they want is for the regime to fall; they do not have any idea how it is going to be once the regime has fallen. The other group is made up of people who appear to submit to the rituals, but start to undermine them from the inside. These people did want the regime to fall, but at the same time they had a dream and an objective for what to do with their freedom.

Living without the umbrella of Communism was also hard because Eastern Europeans are persecuted by a sense of guilt. The guilt was that most of them spied on their friends to save their lives and remained quiet when all the injustices were happening around them. This sense of guilt made many people identify with the regime and its institutions. When the regimes fell, people went in search of some "symbolic order" which would provide them with social order and structure. Once they failed to find such a structure, because the early post-Communist regimes were in disarray, they formed the memory of the "happy before." To avoid the trauma of having no order, people form a dis-

torted memory of the past in which all the pain is removed and the old order is hailed. This phenomenon explains the return to power of many reformed former Communist leaders in Eastern Europe. The people form a memory that gives them certainty and a place in the social structure. The process of remembering becomes a process that gives certainty and provides institutions that secure social order (Salecl). Since in the chaotic transition period there is no rigid social structure, they turn to the memory of the "good times" in which Communism provided order and stability.

This distorted memory is a powerful force in the post-Communist countries, because the progressive forces have to fight against an invisible enemy that is everywhere. This explains the immediate removal of most of the Communist symbols from the public realm as new governments tried to erase the memory that was one of the major obstacles to reform. Many countries have also tried to redirect that nostalgia to a certain period in the history of the nation, which provides the new regime with the political cover of striving to bring back the good old times, not of Communism but of a more distant past which can be interpreted more elastically.

Another theory of man/environment relationships was also relevant here. When Communism fell, many public squares and buildings lost their main objective, but were not readily replaced with a new objective. Therefore, this new environment no longer functioned to bring forward the Communist point of view, but it did not function to send messages about democracy either. Mayer Spivack of the Harvard Medical School stated that "When the environment does not provide all settings necessary for the total human behavior spectrum, individual functioning and the quality of society may be impaired" (33). Just by looking at the difference between East and West Berlin in 1990, a person could see the different worlds that the German people had been living in for decades. The Communist cities were bland, gray, and conformist. They did not allow an environment that supported human behavior patterns. The Communists built cities in such a way that people felt they were being watched at all times. If a person were to study housing in Albania, he or she cannot help but notice that the bedroom windows of neighbors were in front of each other and a person could always see what was happening in the other neighbor's house. When Communism fell, the absence of capitalist experience allowed the new constructions to look Western but still feel Eastern. There were no playgrounds for children and no green areas around the buildings. All the huge spaces that were built under Communism to have a communal life disappeared, as new buildings started to be constructed.

In the very beginning of the transition to democracy, the Albanian cities were a strange mix of Communism and wild capitalism. Going from one block to the other was like going from West to East all the time. In one part there

was too much individualism and in the other part a person felt like he or she was being watched all the time. Many researchers state that such a combination is very harmful for the citizenry. “The new environment must be able to sustain the load of the old ways and the new ways together. It must be as adaptable as man himself, and capable of rapid, sensitive adjustment” (Spivack 34). The environment can modify the behavior of the people who live in it. It can reduce the expectations and the experiences of the people who live in it. If the environment is dark, it does not allow people to dream of a bright future. If people live in a place that does not allow them to express their whole potential, their lives are confined within a certain border and are never fulfilling. “Another social function of building . . . is its role in predisposing individuals and groups to act in a particular way through its capacity to create a mood in those who inhabit or observe it” (Gutman 44). The infrastructure of the cities is a problem that many Eastern European countries have had to confront. People feel no connection to the places they live in, as these cities do not provide them with the necessary settings to express their complete human potential. If the buildings are gray, ugly, and depressing, they influence negatively the mood of the people who live in or see them.

The examples and theories mentioned above very clearly demonstrate the connection between the built environment and politics. Political leaders modify the built environment each time they want to push the country into a new direction or leave a political legacy. The people, according to their sense of history, interpret buildings and at the same time, buildings help people decode the place they are in. The built environment is paramount in allowing the citizens to express their full potential of life, and its development is closely connected to the society’s development of political, moral, social, and economic beliefs. These theories of relationships between men and environment, especially in Eastern Europe, help to explain the way Tirana has dealt with this problem.

The Difference That One Man Makes

When Edi Rama, a former basketball player and a painter, became Minister of Culture, Youth and Sports in 1989, many people were surprised. He became the only shining light in a socialist government perceived by the Albanian people as being composed mainly of short, fat, and boring ministers. He became known for going to government meetings with very colorful suits and saying what he thought. He was a breath of fresh air and a man who showed that he could get things done. His first project attracted a lot of media attention. He wanted to remodel all the Communist-style movie theaters, most of which had been privatized and transformed for other purposes or showed only porn movies. He got the funds and he did it, first in the capital and later in the other big cities. He

seemed to be the only Minister who knew what his job was, knew how to do it, and did it.

When the year 2000 approached, the capital was still under the heavy burden of the constructions that had sprawled everywhere. Building facades were in disarray, their dark Communist colors were depressing, the infrastructure was in total chaos, and the streets built by the Communist regime could not handle the new heavy traffic. A lot had to be done. A city that had been built to house a quarter million people was housing around 600,000; everything seemed in total chaos. In October of that year, the socialists were expected to win the office of Mayor of Tirana; the socialists and Edi Rama found each other. The party wanted a candidate that would give them a fair chance to win that office for the first time since democracy, and Rama needed a powerful political party to support him in his bid. Before starting his campaign, from his ministerial office, Rama came up with “Return to Identity.” The idea was to repaint all the major ministerial buildings in the downtown area that had been left in disarray for decades. When I left Albania to start my studies in America, I remember that all the buildings were covered up and everybody was anxious to see how the project would go. We did not know it at the time, but the Rama era had just begun. In October of that year he won the elections in the first round and went on to become the third mayor of the Albanian metropolis since democracy.

After the Mayor restructured the whole municipality and fired all of the fictive staff (the administration would hire people who did not work and share the salary with them for personal profits), he started the work to change the image of the Albanian capital. The project “Return to Identity” had been an overwhelming success. The big fascist style ministries associated with Communist memories now looked different. The Defense Ministry looked like a colorful happy place to be; people forgot that it had been the place of one of the bloodiest purges of the regime on the military in the 1970s. (See Appendix, Fig. 5.) The Interior Ministry, which had terrorized Albanians for decades, looked like a Disneyland building that made people feel good. (See Appendix, Fig. 6.) The Mayor knew, however, that repainting just the ministries would not be enough to convince people that better times were ahead and that democracy might be messy, but still far better than dictatorship.

It is normal for Communist countries to feel nostalgic about their past, but the Mayor redirected this nostalgia. By repainting the buildings and beautifying the city, he brought back some of the perceived order and cleanliness that we had during Communism. To that, he added beautiful and bright colors, reds, pinks, oranges, that gave to the order that we had under a totalitarian regime the added beauty and liveliness of a democratic regime. The apartment buildings now looked lively and filled the citizens of

the capital with positive feelings about their city and their future (see Figure 1, p. 35). He made Albanians understand that we should not strive to bring back a form of regime that had failed miserably. Albanians should identify things that they liked from the old regime, such as order and cleanliness, and make them fit the ideology of a democratic government. Not only was it important that he chose to repaint the buildings, but the colors he chose were very significant. He made an immediate break and departure from the bland Communist style. He chose bright new colors for a bright new future, and transformed the suffocating atmosphere of the Communist architecture into bright colors that made people feel good about themselves and their city. (See Figure 2, p. 35.) (See also Appendix, Figures 7, 8, 9.)

The fact that Rama started to repaint not only government buildings, but also apartment buildings, sent a message that the government, together with its people, will change and reform the country: "What I'm trying to do is to bring people together through colors, through green space, through better infrastructure, and lighting because people have to gain their dignity back" (as qtd. in Williams). All the Soviet and Communist style buildings that were renovated told people that Communism was now gone. It was gone not only from the government, but also from its day-to-day contact with people through architecture. The repainting and repairing of facades helped to shape the new national identity that is created around a nation's buildings. When people saw their neighborhoods clean and radiant with color, they could not help but be proud of their country and hopeful of its future.

The Mayor's second project, "Clean and Green," was a larger scale and more difficult one to administer. During the regime transition, corruption and money laundering through construction had been widespread. Consequently, many high-rise hotels and restaurants had been built on green areas that were government property. Thus, in a very short period, the nation had lost its green spaces, its parks, and its public squares; concrete buildings (see Figure 3, p. 35) had invaded Tirana. Trying to remove these constructions would be very difficult because of lack of resources, the enormity of the task, and the power of the adversaries. Like Saddam's regime, however, even the regime of the illegally built buildings was much easier to destroy than previously thought. As soon as the first buildings started to come down, the public response was so overwhelmingly positive that the project went much farther than even the Mayor had planned. People wanted to liberate their city and reclaim their spaces and public areas. It might seem strange, but young children were seeing for the first time many statues of national figures that had been hidden by the construction.

The city that had been defaced for so long was reclaiming its face. The parks started to be rehabilitated and the Lana River emerged again as if by magic once the con-

struction was gone (see Figure 4, p. 35). (See also Appendix, Fig. 10, 11.) People started to feel like their city was fulfilling all the duties that a European city is supposed to. This project was so successful that most of the demolition and the clean-up was done by private companies for free. The Mayor cleaned up the city, enlarged the streets to adapt them to capitalist needs, and gave Tirana a colorful image. One of his more subtle objectives was to reshape the psyche of the citizens and their relationship with the surrounding environment. The old regime, the Mayor claimed, "destroyed the meaning of the relation between humans and nature, between the individual and community" (as qtd. in Williams). One of the messages of his projects was that the built environment is important to fulfilling a person's life, and thus his real battle was not with the illegal constructions per se, but rather with the mentality that built them. The most important message of this project was that the government was back in charge and that the era of unrestricted capitalism was over. There would be no more Wild West in the former most Communist country in the East. His fame soon passed the borders of this small country and he started to appear in many major European newspapers as the man who was changing Albania's image. His work was recognized by the UN in 2002 with an award for doing grassroots work for the removal of poverty and the strengthening of democracy.

The other major rehabilitation work was done at the Mayor's office itself. He relocated the offices to a new building until the municipality building would fit his idea of a democratic building. In this case too, he had to spend nothing from his budget; private companies volunteered almost everything. The major addition to the municipality was the new chamber that would house the City Council meetings. (See Appendix, Fig. 12, 13). Democratic at its core, the seats in the chamber were in a semi-circle that descended from the top. It broke with the Albanian tradition in which the Speaker always stood higher than anyone else; the new warm formal chamber incites debate and for the first time, has room for the citizens to sit and participate in the Council meetings. Another important component of the rehabilitated building is the information section. (See Appendix, Fig. 14, 15.) It is a tradition of the Albanian bureaucracy to send people from one office to the other without ever solving the people's issues. The Mayor formed this new office with legal advisers who would talk to people who would walk in, listen to their problems, and direct them to the appropriate department. Furthermore, everyone could get a code number and could complain if the office he or she was directed to did not want to address the issue. Thus, Rama made the municipality user-friendly. All the achievements described in this paper have been completed in two and a half years.

There is one thing, however, that we Albanians tend to overlook as a major accomplishment of the Mayor. With all

his imperfections, he returned some of the people's faith in government. With his commitment, he showed the people that there are good politicians who are willing to work hard to reform the country and prepare it to integrate into Europe. More an activist than a politician, he raised the bar that we hold politicians accountable to. The Mayor is the ultimate successful activist artist. Still not a member of any political party, he joined politics as a force of reformation and used art and architecture to achieve his political goals. The choice of the colors he repainted the city with and the design of the new public parks show the invisible hand of a visionary artist behind a dull and many times inefficient bureaucracy. The Mayor is the painter and Tirana is his work of art.

He brought another fresh component to the extremely complicated equation that is Albanian politics: humor, a sense of irony, and style. His dressing style, ever-changing beautiful girlfriends, and Rumsfeld-like (U.S. Defense Secretary) sound bites made people love him to death or hate him deeply. He knows Albanian folk so well that he is able to come up almost instinctively with names for his political adversaries. The one politician that he created an array of names for is the opposition leader. The latest in his media activities happened on April 1, 2003. On April's Fools Day, he put a huge white banner on the municipality building with all the accusations that the opposition leader had said about him. They ranged from "Edi is a thief" to "Edi is more dangerous than Saddam." That is the ultimate example of an activist art and an activist politician. He took what he was accused of and turned it against his opponents.

In one of his many interviews, the Mayor said, "The day I was elected, I had to fix my priorities, and one of them was to stay sane, not to become a post-modern Kafka character as the Mayor of Tirana" (as qtd. in Williams). He knew that the leadership that he provided would encourage people to either keep doing nothing or try to do something to change the city for the better. The way he himself behaved politically would affect his entire administration. He chose to be an unusual politician. He is young, energetic, and passionate about his job. He decided to do something for the city and to take it one step at a time. "The important thing is to do something every day, something small and visible. Before I go to sleep each day, I have to ask myself what have I done. What has the municipality done, from fixing a road to planting a flower" (as qtd. in Williams). The Mayor knows that the job of a municipality is multifaceted. It has to provide the basic daily services and make people like the city they live in. By rehabilitating the public areas and by repainting buildings, he provided the necessary setting for people to live happily in their city. He could have started by completing many other long-term projects, but he decided to start resolving the short-term problems first to give a shot of adrenaline and confidence to the city and the nation in general.

The Mayor understood that the citizens of Albania had gone from the dictatorship of the gun (Communism) to the dictatorship of concrete buildings. "Thousands of tons of concrete had buried the hopes of the people to live in a city where they could have something more than a cage to sleep, a cage to work and a jungle to pass through" (Rama, as qtd. in Williams). The Mayor had the ability to grasp the importance of architecture in sending political messages. Rama understood that people need to have a built environment in which they feel comfortable to live full productive lives. He also understood that he had to change the mindset of the Albanian citizen. By repainting the buildings and providing the citizens with spaces in which to live full social lives, he helped to remove some of the Communism in every citizen and help them move forward.

What one learns from the transformation of Tirana is very clear. All major political changes are accompanied by architectural changes. Not every mayor in the world is going to paint his buildings red and pink, but most mayors will need to find a new medium to sustain the new activities and to make people feel comfortable. The lesson from Tirana tells everyone that some imagination, a little money, and a lot of leadership can make a great difference. The city that I left in mid 2000 was bleeding from the urban massacre that was going on. The city that I found in December 2002 had just left the hospital and was in fast recovery.

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Fig. 6 The Ministry of Public Order after it was repainted. <www.pjberkel.com/photos/tirana2/9.php>.

Fig. 7 Apartment complex after it was repainted by the municipality. <www.pjberkel.com/photos/tirana2/2.php>.

Fig. 8 Apartment complexes after they were repainted by the municipality. <<http://www.pjberkel.com/photos/tirana2/21.php>>.

Fig. 9 Apartment complexes and government buildings after they were repainted. <www.donaldstark.co.uk/photos/tirana/>.

Fig. 10 The Lana River before the reconstruction was covered by buildings on both sides. <www.shqiperia.com/foto/galeria/bashkiatirane/19_6>.

Fig. 11 View of the rehabilitated Central Park once all the buildings were removed. <www.shqiperia.com/foto/galeria/bashkiatirane/20_2>.

Fig. 12 View of the new City Council meeting room. <www.shqiperia.com/foto/galeria/bashkiatirane/25_3>.

Fig. 13 View of the interior of the municipality after the reconstruction. <www.shqiperia.com/foto/galeria/bashkiatirane/25_5>.

Fig. 14 View of the new information section of the municipality after reconstruction. <www.shqiperia.com/foto/galeria/album01/24_1>.

Fig. 15 Another view of the new information section of the municipality after reconstruction. <www.shqiperia.com/foto/galeria/album01/BASHKIA_005>.

Appendix

Fig. 1 View of one of the many capitalist posters in Communist Albania. Translation: "There is no blockade strong enough to defeat the Labor Party and the Albanian people." <<http://www.thejohnfleming.com/PhotosAlbania/pictures/anticapitalistposter.html>>.

Fig. 2 View of the picture of the Communist leader of Albania, which was everywhere. <<http://www.thejohnfleming.com/PhotosAlbania/pictures/enverhoxhposter.html>>.

Fig. 3 View of the many local party buildings where party functionaries were prepared to maintain the party control. Translation of the poster: "Lead us, party, into new battles." <<http://www.thejohnfleming.com/PhotosAlbania/pictures/localpartybuilding.html>>.

Fig. 4 View of one of the many road-side posters that were supposed to scare people. Translation: "The power of the people comes from the barrel of the gun." <<http://www.thejohnfleming.com/PhotosAlbania/pictures/roadsideposter.html>>.

Fig. 5 Government ministries after they were repainted. <<http://www.pjberkel.com/photos/tirana/10.php>>.

Figure 1: Communist-style Apartment Complex Repainted by Municipality



Source: Municipality of Tirana

Figure 2: Older Apartment Complexes Repainted by Municipality



Source: Berkel

Figure 3: Demolition of Buildings to Restore Riverfront



Source: Shqiperia.com

Figure 4: Restored Riverfront with Apartment Complexes in Background



Source: Shqiperia.com