



Color concepts by Edi Rama (left) and Liam Gillick (right)
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Six Answers on Albania by Vedran Mimica

Vedran Mimica, currently director of The Berlage Institute in Rotterdam, is an outstanding connoisseur of the Balkans. As he was serving as an advisor to Edi Rama, the charismatic mayor of Tirana, he is the right person to provide glowing reference on Albania, too. Questions by Gudrun Hausegger and Gabriele Kaiser.

Which books would you recommend to read in order to get a deeper understanding of the Balkans?

If it will be only one for the „beginners“, then I’d recommend Robert D. Kaplan’s “Balkan Ghosts. A Journey Through History“. Kaplan is an American journalist who travels through the Balkans during the “pre-large catastrophe” in the late 80s and early 90s. His political travelogue fully deciphers the Balkans’ ancient passions and intractable hatreds for outsiders. The book is the most insightful and timely work on the relation between history and the contemporary madness found in the Balkans. For more advanced readers, I’d suggest the complete œuvre of the Croatian writer Miroslav Krleža. In his novels, dramas, essays, letters, speeches, and poems he covers the entire 19th and 20th century relations of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Balkan states, focusing on the two great wars. Krleža is an erudite author who covers the entire cultural production of the region in the socio-political context of the time.

As a Croatian architecture critic and currently the director of the Dutch Berlage Institute, how would you describe your relationship to Albania and its capital Tirana?

Edi Rama, the mayor of the city, invited me to Tirana in 2004 – an invitation, based on the imagination of Elia Zenghelis, who was a member of the international jury for the city center’s masterplan a year earlier. Zenghelis believed that the Berlage Institute could work with the municipality of Tirana on the ‘vision’ for the new European capital. Tirana is the young capital city of a twentieth-century state whose inhabitants rank amongst the oldest Europeans. Tirana was a small-scale city of serene beauty, grand infrastructure, and early modernism – where, after the Second World War, time stood still for nearly half a century. Since the collapse of the notorious and unique communist regime that had isolated the country from the rest of the world, the city underwent some 13 years of uncontrollable growth and thoughtlessly aggressive development, threatening its survival as both city and sustainable environment; during this short period, its population tripled and so did its size, reflecting the tremendous energy release that had accumulated during half a century of repression. Thanks to the city’s enlightened governance, this energy has turned into a drive that for architects (among others) constitutes the most ideal framework for the construction of a model, modern European state. Indeed, contrary to other Eastern European states that emerged after the collapse of communism, Albania eagerly anticipated its future with optimism and confidence. In this context of suspended animation, we were invited by the city to provide it with a vision that would rise to the level of its expectations.

To what extent do former socialist structures in Albania still continue to have an impact on contemporary processes of architecture and city planning?

I would add the impact on social production and civic life as well. We now know that Enver Hoxha’s regime was perhaps the most severe communist experiment in European history, with devastating consequences for Albanian culture, life, and development. From the late 40s until the mid 80s, Hoxha completely isolated Albania from the world by exercising utopian communist strategies that resulted in the erasure of everything outside his ideology. In the 90s, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Albania underwent a transition – a radical liberation movement expressed in the extreme anarchistic behavior of the majority of population. Let me here bring a quote from my interview with Rama and his answer to the similar question: “After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, two Western concepts were projected onto former socialist and Eastern European countries: parliamentary democracy and the free market. It seems that while parliamentary democracy was embraced, the free market was interpreted differently. Many theoreticians believe that neo-liberal Western Europe did not really

develop in a positive direction and that the delay in the development of cities like Bucharest, Sofia and Tirana could work to their advantage. Do you believe that this delay could help Tirana to develop in a more fertile way?” Rama would answer: “Within this discussion, the continuous radiation effect of communism on the cultural level has to be taken into account for the Albanian case. Our parliamentary democracy is still very young, and as a political system, it is not even part of our history. The current political situation is a direct result of a history in which both the concepts of political opposition and cultural alternatives were inconceivable. In the 70s, Albania was a country that put people in prison for liking the work of Vincent van Gogh, and that abolished the English horn from the orchestra because Albania didn’t have diplomatic relations with Great Britain. Twentieth-century culture was abolished. I couldn’t read Kafka or listen to the Beatles or to Stravinsky.

What would be the result if all of this brainwashing were overlooked by parliamentary democracy? A collection of political parties with different visions and programs, run by the people that served the former regime because there was no other choice. I’m convinced that this has nothing to do with a kind of specific sin in the culture of the Balkan people, but it has to do with the fact that our human resources have been totally contaminated. It will take a long time to create a new political class or a cultural elite. The anarchism that followed the collapse of the regime is linked to the nature of the Balkan people. They can be very individualistic, but are also keen to be absorbed by ideological dictatorship like Russian Matryoshkas: dictator after dictator, from the highest political level down to the family sphere. Regarding the necessity of a vision for the urban development of Tirana, I believe that it’s difficult to act academically in these circumstances; I never have the courage to talk about our work in Tirana as something that can be taken as a model. At the same time, I think that we cannot follow models used elsewhere, because our specific reality puts us in very different circumstances. What is happening in Tirana is the effect of the huge energy on the levels of the individual, the family, and the communities, spreading like a river with no predetermined direction. This energy neither can nor should be stopped by any academic or legal planning process. The planning process therefore has to include the energy of the citizens in the promotion of every idea. We try to work in both directions: planning and developing without really leaning towards one or the other extreme.“

In the current situation of adjusting to the post-socialist system, how would you describe the role of the mayor of Tirana, Edi Rama?

When, in 2000, Edi Rama became the mayor of Tirana, it was probably the worst possible job one could take. One may perhaps theorize, following Boris



Color concepts by Tomma Abts (left) and Helidon Gjergji (right)

Groys' discourse, about the "technical experience of Utopia": if you only know how to get to Utopia, it's un-operational, but if you know how to get in and then out again, it's operational; it's technical. This going in and coming out is a post-communist experience that should be understood as a completion of the communist experience. To forget Utopia means to forget technical knowledge. It is precisely this technical Utopian knowledge – political wisdom and tactical brilliance linking the aesthetic experience to real human conditions – that allowed Edi Rama to construct a miracle in Tirana in only a couple of years. Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek's concept of a "third way" is a projection of a new way of dealing with capitalism after communism in Russia. He argues that late capitalism is equally as devastating to Russian society as was communism. Rama is creating an alternative, third way of development through his urban and social policies as real applications of "technical aspect of utopian knowledge". He put enormous energy behind the process of redirecting and manipulating the strong currents of global and local capital flows into the creation of an authentic and specific architectural and civic culture, which he strongly believed should contribute to European cultural exchange. The invention of new realities was in a basis of the "mission impossible" which Rama practiced the last nine years by governing Tirana. Rama recently faced a strong setback by narrowly failing to win the parliamentary elections as the leader of the opposition. He wanted to enlarge the scale, so to speak, and get rid of the old autocrats from the Democratic Party who ruled Albania in recent years, often complicating implementation of his strategies for the development of Tirana.

How would you judge the potential of "external" city planning projects in the Balkans (such as those by Winy Maas or Dominique Perrault) versus "internal" initiatives (such as those by Co-PLAN or fordewind architecture)?

Here we are talking about two very different approaches, if you would agree. One is perhaps "top down", including big, powerful investments and creating the megacity projects. Another is the work on new forms of architec-



Color concepts by Olafur Eliasson (left) and Dominique Gonzalez Foerster (right)

tural initiatives where the work of NGO-like structures is juxtaposed with professional architectural deliveries. This approach is much more "bottom up" orientated, trying to involve the civic society as a constitutive part of planning and development. The first approach is perhaps risky in terms of public or social benefits, which will be possibly achieved through the large-scale operations in an environment without the "democratic control". The second approach could suffer from a form of populist determinacy, usually not helpful for creation of advanced architecture.

As for architecture and city planning, do you have a personal "vision" for Tirana – do you have one for its political or socio-political future?

I was serving as an adviser to Edi Rama and my views are clearly very congruent with his policies and procedures. More personally or perhaps more theoretically, I would hope that Tirana and Albania would build "third way" policies, following Žižek's term, in order to create a unique culture of "new forms of welfare" for its citizens, after the shocking histories. If and perhaps the question is more when, Rama wins the next general election, there will be a real chance to construct a truly unique socio-political landscape in Albania. Albania should than enter the European Union as an example of what should have been done in the rest of the Eastern European countries during the transition from socialism to capitalism. This sounds mega-Utopian, but I can commit to it fully.