Tirana International Airport

Tirana, Albanien

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Passenger terminal, Rinas

Hin Tan designed Tirana's new Mother Teresa International Airport.

von Werner Bossmann

In Tirana they know all about urban transformations. The Albanian capital has undergone more than one enforced facelift over the past century. The only reminder of Tirana's Ottoman origins is the mosque on Skenderberg Square. In the 1930s, Italian architects filled the city with neo-fascist palaces lining broad boulevards. After the Second World War there were communist mega projects, including a concrete Palace of Culture and a glass pyramid in honour of dictator Enver Hoxha. And while Tirana has acquired a few tower blocks since the advent of capitalism, the glorified provincial town has never been a metropolis.

Mayor Edi Rama is trying, with his „Return to identity" programme, to give the city back to its citizens after a century of megalomaniac projects. His most important decision was to have the grey concrete facades painted in bright colours. Public resources are limited in a bankrupt nation which is also deeply divided politically. In 2006 a flyover literally bit the dust in a political battle between the mayor of Tirana and President Sali Berisha. It appears that for the first time in this country's history it will be the market and not the politicians that will determine how Tirana will look in the coming years.

The new passenger terminal at the Mother Teresa International Airport in Rinas is a portent of things to come – at least, that was the message conveyed by politicians and entrepreneurs in their speeches at the opening last March. If true, we can rest easy. For a change, the building by Malaysian architect Hin Tan does not attempt to impress with dizzying dimensions or Balkan braggadocio.
Nor does the new terminal look like a political prestige object.
All of which does not prevent people from reading more into this design of a central hall dominated by a huge, raked glazed front. While not all that unusual for an airport, in a country that has been hermetically closed off from the outside world for fifty years, it automatically has wider implications. Mother Teresa Airport is the first building of the modern, transparent Albania. As unthreatening and peace-loving as the eponymous Nobel Prize-winning nun.

The terminal can handle one-and-a-half million travellers a year, but the international consortium that has been running the airport since 2005 expects to carry out the first expansion in 2009. Right now it is processing almost one million passengers and Hochtief Airport GmbH thinks passenger numbers will treble in the coming years. The terminal seems to have anticipated this. The visible girders and pipes and the exposed ceiling elements give the new terminal a feeling of temporality, functionality and a work in progress. The café and the souvenir and tax free shops could fairly easily be relocated inside the hall which can be taken in at a glance.

The terminal's appearance is defined by a long narrow awning shaped like an aircraft wing. Pillars as slender as guy ropes seem to hold it in place. The architect makes more such subtle jokes, for example in the passport control area, where a layer of girders above and beside the electronic gates gives passengers the feeling of walking into a cage.

The terminal designed by Tan, who worked for Santiago Calatrava on the design of the new Bilbao airport, could stand in any European city. Nonetheless, Tan sees clear local elements in his arrivals hall. For example, what he calls his „arrivals piazza" features locally quarried stone and is intended to give foreign visitors an immediate sense of „Albanian hospitality". This is easier to achieve in such a small airport, of course, than in the likes of Frankfurt Airport which handles fifty times as many passengers. But Mother Teresa Airport does indeed have something pleasantly well-balanced. Hin Tan hopes that returning Albanians will feel immediately at home. The real question is whether they will recognize their homeland.

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