

Contemporary architecture and collective memory: An urban center proposal for Tirana

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World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews, 2026, 30(02), 2084–2091

Publication history: Received on 16 April 2026; revised on 22 May 2026; accepted on 25 May 2026

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30574/wjarr.2026.30.2.1477>

Abstract

In recent years, the center of Tirana has undergone rapid physical transformation driven by private investment, vertical construction, and new commercial developments. Although these interventions have altered the image of the city, they have also weakened the continuity between architecture, public space, and local identity. This paper presents *THE GATE*, a proposal for a civic and cultural urban center positioned near Skanderbeg Square. The project explores how contemporary architecture can engage with the historical and social character of Tirana without relying on nostalgic imitation or image-based iconicity.

The study combines urban analysis, historical investigation, and architectural design research. Morphological studies, historical cartography, spatial analysis, and observation of public behavior were used to understand the evolution of the city center and the relationship between architecture and civic life. Particular attention was given to the coexistence of Ottoman, Italian Rationalist, communist, and contemporary architectural layers surrounding the site.

The resulting proposal introduces a multifunctional urban center dedicated to exhibitions, conferences, workshops, archives, and public activities related to the transformation of Tirana. Architecturally, the building is shaped by the traces, pathways, and visual axes already present on the site. A restrained geometric language, local stone cladding, recessed transparent façades, and reinterpretations of vernacular Albanian spatial elements contribute to a contextual architectural identity.

The paper argues that contemporary civic architecture in rapidly changing cities should strengthen public life and cultural continuity rather than function as isolated visual objects. The project therefore proposes an architectural approach grounded in spatial relationships, collective memory, and the *genius loci* of the city.

Keywords: Tirana; Contemporary Architecture; Urban Identity; Public Space; Albanian Vernacular Architecture

1. Introduction

Architecture in contemporary cities is increasingly influenced by global economic processes, rapid urban growth, and visual branding strategies. In many cases, these dynamics produce urban environments in which buildings prioritize image and commercial visibility over continuity with local culture and public life. This condition is particularly evident in cities that have experienced accelerated transformation after political and economic transition.

The case of Tirana reflects this condition clearly. During the last decades, the Albanian capital has undergone substantial physical and social change. New towers, commercial complexes, and speculative developments have transformed the skyline and altered the relationship between citizens and public space. While these interventions are frequently

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presented as symbols of modernization, they often appear disconnected from the historical and spatial identity of the city.

At the center of Tirana, Skanderbeg Square remains one of the most important collective spaces in Albania. The square contains architectural traces belonging to different historical periods, including Ottoman structures, Italian Rationalist planning from the period of King Zog, communist monumental architecture, and recent contemporary interventions. These layers create a complex urban landscape in which multiple architectural languages coexist.

Within this context, the project *THE GATE* proposes an alternative approach to contemporary architecture. Rather than functioning as a sculptural object designed only for visual impact, the project investigates how civic architecture can respond to context, memory, and collective experience.

The proposed urban center is conceived as a place where the transformation of Tirana can be documented, discussed, and interpreted through exhibitions, public programs, workshops, and cultural activities. Through this research, the paper examines how contemporary architecture may establish meaningful relationships with public space, vernacular traditions, and the historical identity of the city while remaining fully contemporary in form and function.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Contemporary Architecture and Urban Identity

The relationship between architecture and collective identity has long been central to architectural discourse. Cities are not only physical agglomerations of buildings and infrastructures, but also repositories of memory, culture, and social relationships. Architecture contributes to shaping the identity of a place through material continuity, spatial organization, and the symbolic meanings embedded within the built environment.

In the contemporary globalized condition, however, many cities are increasingly shaped by homogeneous architectural models detached from local specificity. International investment, global architectural branding, and image-driven urban development have often generated environments characterized by visual spectacle rather than civic continuity.

In rapidly transforming capitals such as Tirana, this condition becomes particularly visible. The construction of high-rise towers and imported architectural typologies frequently introduces a fragmented urban landscape in which buildings compete for visibility instead of participating in coherent spatial relationships.

Theoretical approaches such as Critical Regionalism, developed by Kenneth Frampton, argue for a contemporary architecture capable of resisting placelessness through attention to topography, climate, materiality, and local cultural conditions. Rather than rejecting modernity, Critical Regionalism proposes a mediation between universal civilization and regional identity.

The project presented in this paper positions itself within this discourse by investigating how contemporary civic architecture can engage with local memory and spatial identity without resorting to literal historicism.

2.2. Public Space and Civic Architecture

Public space plays a fundamental role in the social and cultural life of cities. Historically, civic buildings and squares have functioned as spaces of collective interaction, political participation, and cultural exchange.

Urban theorists such as Jane Jacobs and Jan Gehl emphasized the importance of active public environments capable of supporting everyday social interaction. According to these perspectives, the quality of urban life depends not only on architecture as isolated form but also on the relationships established between buildings, streets, squares, and people.

In Tirana, Skanderbeg Square represents one of the most significant collective spaces within the city. Beyond its physical dimensions, the square functions as a symbolic landscape reflecting different historical and ideological periods. Consequently, any intervention within this area inevitably engages with broader questions concerning memory, representation, and public identity.

The project therefore approaches civic architecture not simply as an institutional object but as an extension of public space itself. The urban center is conceived as an accessible cultural infrastructure designed to encourage participation, dialogue, and collective reflection concerning the transformation of the city.

3. Urban context and transformation of Tirana

3.1. Historical Evolution of the City Center

The urban structure of Tirana is the result of multiple historical layers that have shaped the city throughout different political and cultural periods. During the Ottoman period, the city developed through an organic urban fabric characterized by low-rise architecture, narrow streets, mosques, bazaars, and courtyard houses. Public life emerged through intimate relationships between architecture and collective space.

A significant transformation occurred during the 1920s and 1930s under the reign of King Zog, when Italian architects and urban planners, including Gherardo Bosio, introduced Rationalist planning principles to the city. Bosio's interventions aimed to create a monumental civic center through axial compositions, symmetry, and institutional architecture. The area surrounding Skanderbeg Square became the symbolic heart of the Albanian capital.

During the communist period, the city underwent further transformation characterized by monumental public buildings and ideological representations of collective identity. Architecture functioned as a political instrument, emphasizing public institutions and large civic spaces.

In recent decades, post-socialist economic liberalization has accelerated urban development, particularly through private investments and high-rise construction. These interventions have generated fragmentation within the urban fabric and weakened the continuity between architecture, public space, and collective identity.

3.2. Contemporary Urban Issues

Several critical issues characterize the current urban condition of Tirana. One of the most significant is the progressive loss of architectural identity caused by the adoption of imported architectural languages disconnected from the local urban and cultural context.

The increasing construction of speculative towers has transformed the skyline and often diminished the spatial hierarchy historically defining the city center. Many contemporary buildings prioritize visual impact and iconicity over civic integration and long-term cultural relevance.

Another issue concerns the privatization of public space. New developments frequently privilege commercial and exclusive functions over inclusive civic environments accessible to ordinary citizens. This process risks weakening the social role of architecture and reducing opportunities for collective interaction within the city.

The project presented in this paper responds critically to these conditions by proposing an architecture designed to establish continuity with the historical and spatial identity of Tirana rather than compete visually within the urban landscape.

4. Research methodology

4.1. Urban and Morphological Analysis

The project was developed through a multidisciplinary research methodology combining urban, architectural, and landscape analyses. The first phase of the research focused on understanding the morphological evolution of Tirana through historical cartography and urban documentation.

Maps and archival material from different historical periods were analyzed to identify the transformation of Skanderbeg Square and the surrounding urban fabric. This investigation highlighted how successive political and cultural regimes contributed distinct spatial and architectural characteristics to the city center.

The research also examined the spatial system of the area through analyses of:

- Skyline composition
- Urban scenography
- Perspective axes
- Relationships between concave and convex urban forms

- Symmetry and asymmetry
- The hierarchy between built masses and open spaces

Particular attention was given to the visual corridors created by major urban axes, especially Durrës Street and Kavaja Street, both of which strongly influence the perception and accessibility of the site.

4.2. Relational and Semantic Analysis

A second phase of the research focused on the relational system of the city center, investigating how people experience and interact with public space. This analysis explored the relationship between architecture and collective urban life, emphasizing the importance of accessible civic environments.

The semantic system of the square was also studied. The surrounding buildings were interpreted as architectural layers belonging to different historical periods and cultural narratives. Ottoman structures, Italian Rationalist buildings, communist architecture, and contemporary interventions coexist within the same urban framework.

This coexistence was understood as a semantic pyramid in which the number of surviving buildings decreases moving from older historical periods toward contemporary interventions. Some buildings establish dialogue with one another through proportions, materials, and spatial relationships, while others remain isolated monologues disconnected from the surrounding context.

The results of these analyses informed the conceptual and formal development of the project.

5. Site analysis and urban relationships

5.1. Relationship with Skanderbeg Square

The site selected for the project occupies a strategic position within the civic core of Tirana. Located in a green area overlooking Skanderbeg Square, the intervention stands among some of the most important institutional and cultural buildings of the Albanian capital.

This condition required an architectural response capable of balancing visibility and restraint. Rather than competing formally with the surrounding monumental buildings, the project seeks to establish spatial dialogue through alignment, proportion, and material continuity.

The façade facing the square becomes an instrument of mediation between architecture and public life. Its recessed transparency allows visual permeability between the interior functions of the urban center and the open civic landscape of the square.

At the same time, the monumental portico establishes a direct relationship with the Palace of Culture located opposite the site. This dialogue reinforces the civic character of the intervention while contributing to the spatial continuity of the square.

5.2. Axes, Pathways, and Urban Continuity

One of the principal design strategies involved interpreting the existing movement patterns already present on the site.

Pedestrian pathways crossing the green area became fundamental generators of the architectural geometry. Instead of imposing a rigid autonomous form upon the site, the building adapts itself to these traces, allowing circulation lines to penetrate the volume.

This strategy contributes to maintaining continuity between the urban landscape and the architecture itself. The project therefore avoids functioning as an impermeable object isolated from its surroundings.

The extension of the axes of Durrës Street and Kavaja Street through tall lateral walls reinforces the role of the building as an urban threshold. These walls simultaneously define spatial boundaries and frame visual perspectives toward Skanderbeg Square.

The concept of “*The Gate*” emerges precisely from this condition: the building acts as a mediator between movement and permanence, openness and enclosure, monumentality and accessibility.

5.3. Materiality and Atmosphere

Materiality plays an important role in reinforcing the contextual identity of the project.

The exterior cladding is composed of local stone panels contributing to a perception of permanence and solidity. The restrained material palette avoids excessive visual complexity while emphasizing texture, light, and proportion.

The contrast between the monolithic exterior surfaces and the transparent façade facing the square creates a dynamic relationship between opacity and openness.

Internally, natural light becomes a primary architectural element. The large central skylight illuminates the atrium throughout the day and reinforces the vertical continuity of the interior space.

This use of natural light contributes to creating an atmosphere of civic openness while strengthening the perceptual relationship between voids and built masses.

6. Architectural concept and design strategy

6.1. The Urban Center as Civic Infrastructure

The project proposes the creation of an urban center designed as a civic infrastructure where the transformation and history of Tirana can be narrated, discussed, and collectively experienced.

The building includes:

- Permanent exhibition spaces
- Temporary exhibition spaces
- Screening rooms
- Workshop rooms
- An auditorium
- Archives
- Conference and gathering spaces
- Administrative offices
- A café and public terrace
- Informational and support facilities

The aim of the program is not only to host cultural activities but also to encourage public participation and dialogue concerning the future development of the city.

Rather than functioning exclusively as a museum or institutional building, the urban center is conceived as an accessible and inclusive public environment capable of attracting both specialists and ordinary citizens.

6.2. Geometry and Site Integration

The architectural composition emerges directly from the existing traces and spatial characteristics of the site.

In a context characterized by the coexistence of multiple architectural languages, the project adopts a restrained geometric approach. The building is designed to “whisper rather than scream,” avoiding excessive formal gestures or iconic self-referentiality.

The geometry of the project is influenced by pedestrian pathways already crossing the site. These paths generate longitudinal cuts penetrating the volume and organizing circulation throughout the building. The continuity between exterior and interior space is emphasized through the extension of existing paving materials into the building itself.

The façade facing the street is conceived as a closed monolithic elevation without openings, reinforcing the perception of solidity and urban continuity. In contrast, the façade facing Skanderbeg Square becomes transparent and recessed, opening the building toward public space.

This transparent façade is framed by a trilithic composition of monolithic walls forming a monumental portico establishing dialogue with the Palace of Culture located opposite the site.

Along the sides of the building, tall vertical walls reinterpret the concept of the portico while extending the visual axes of Durrës Street and Kavaja Street. These elements function simultaneously as urban thresholds, visual corridors, and symbolic “gates” leading toward the square.

6.3. Spatial Organization and Interior Composition

The interior of the building follows a nodal composition structured around a large central atrium extending through multiple levels.

This central void is illuminated by a large skylight introducing natural light deep into the building and reinforcing the relationship between built masses and empty spaces.

The transparency of the façade facing the square allows visual continuity between interior and exterior activities, strengthening the relationship between the building and public life.

The project also incorporates principles of universal design through the integration of ramps within the podium system, ensuring accessibility for individuals with reduced mobility.

7. Vernacular references and cultural identity

One of the principal objectives of the project is the reinterpretation of vernacular Albanian architectural principles within a contemporary architectural language.

Rather than reproducing historical forms literally, the project seeks to translate spatial and cultural concepts belonging to Albanian domestic architecture into contemporary civic space.

A key reference is the traditional *hajat*, a semi-open domestic space commonly found in Albanian houses. Historically, the *hajat* functioned as a place of hospitality, transition, and social interaction.

Within the project, this concept is reinterpreted through elevated terraces and semi-open spaces supported by structural pillars. These elements create intermediate zones between interior and exterior environments while reinforcing the civic and welcoming character of the building.

The use of local stone cladding also contributes to the project’s contextual identity by establishing material continuity with regional construction traditions.

The project therefore proposes a contemporary architecture rooted not in stylistic imitation but in the reinterpretation of spatial relationships, hospitality, collective interaction, and environmental integration.

8. Social and cultural impact

Beyond its architectural dimension, the project seeks to contribute to the cultural and civic life of Tirana through the creation of a public institution dedicated to urban consciousness and collective participation.

The proposed urban center functions not only as an exhibition space but also as a platform for dialogue concerning the past, present, and future of the city. Through conferences, workshops, archives, and screening spaces, the building encourages citizens to engage critically with urban transformation.

This aspect becomes particularly relevant within the contemporary condition of Tirana, where urban development is often perceived as disconnected from public participation. By introducing spaces dedicated to collective discussion and cultural production, the project reinforces the role of architecture as civic infrastructure.

The accessibility of the building also reflects broader social objectives. The incorporation of ramps within the podium system and the continuity between exterior and interior public spaces contribute to principles of universal design and spatial inclusivity.

The project therefore proposes a model of civic architecture capable of integrating cultural identity, public accessibility, and contemporary urban needs.

9. Discussion

The contemporary architectural condition of Tirana reflects broader global tensions between globalization and local identity. In many rapidly developing cities, architecture increasingly functions as a visual commodity shaped by market dynamics and international trends.

Within this context, iconicity often becomes detached from collective memory and urban continuity. Buildings are designed primarily to attract attention through image production rather than contribute meaningfully to the civic and cultural life of the city.

The project *THE GATE* proposes an alternative architectural approach emphasizing contextual integration, civic accessibility, and cultural continuity.

Rather than imposing itself visually upon the city, the building establishes relationships with existing urban elements through alignment, materiality, proportions, and spatial dialogue. The project demonstrates how contemporary architecture can remain expressive and contemporary without abandoning local identity.

The reinterpretation of vernacular elements such as the *hajat* illustrates how tradition can function not as nostalgic reproduction but as a conceptual and spatial resource for contemporary design.

Furthermore, the project emphasizes the importance of public and cultural infrastructures within rapidly transforming cities. By creating spaces dedicated to exhibitions, discussions, workshops, and collective interaction, the urban center contributes to strengthening civic participation and public consciousness concerning urban transformation.

The architectural strategy therefore positions the building as a mediator between historical continuity and contemporary urban development.

10. Conclusion

This paper presented *THE GATE*, a proposal for a civic and cultural urban center located near Skanderbeg Square in Tirana.

The project emerged from urban, morphological, relational, and semantic analyses investigating the historical evolution and contemporary transformation of the Albanian capital. The research identified critical issues affecting the city, including fragmentation, speculative development, privatization of public space, and the progressive loss of architectural identity.

In response to these conditions, the project proposes an architecture grounded in contextual relationships, collective memory, and cultural continuity.

The design strategy combines restrained geometric composition, vernacular reinterpretation, and strong integration with the spatial characteristics of the site. The resulting architecture establishes dialogue with the surrounding urban fabric while creating inclusive civic spaces capable of hosting collective cultural activities.

The study demonstrates that contemporary architecture in rapidly transforming cities can remain contextual and socially meaningful without relying on imported formal languages disconnected from local identity.

Ultimately, *THE GATE* argues for an understanding of architecture not as isolated image production but as a cultural and civic act capable of strengthening the relationship between people, memory, and urban space.

Compliance with ethical standards

Acknowledgments

The author wishes to express sincere gratitude to the academic mentors, colleagues, and professionals whose guidance, observations, and critical discussions contributed to the development of this research and architectural project. Appreciation is also extended to the archival and institutional sources that supported the urban, historical, and morphological analysis of Tirana and its civic context. The author further acknowledges the importance of the architectural and urban studies that informed the theoretical framework of this paper. No external funding was received for this research.

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The author declares that there are no financial, professional, institutional, or personal conflicts of interest related to the research, authorship, or publication of this paper. The study was conducted independently for academic and research purposes, without external commercial influence or sponsorship.

Statement of ethical approval

The present research work does not contain any studies performed on animals/human subjects by the author. The research is based on architectural and urban design analysis conducted for academic purposes.

Statement of informed consent

The study does not involve information about any individual.

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