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TIRANA'S CHANGING FACE

by

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Abstract

An atmospheric and illustrated reflection on several decades of visits to Albania's capital city and the transformation it has experienced.

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Over the years (I've visited Albania frequently: just about every year since 1989), I've observed many changes, especially in Skanderbeg Square. On my first visit, the larger than life statue of Enver Hoxha was fairly central to the Square, almost overpowering the earlier statue of Skanderbeg on his horse (1968). In 1989, I saw only one set of traffic lights. Most of the traffic consisted of a few buses and a few trucks and the occasional black car carrying diplomats or government officials. I remember seeing a family of three on a bicycle.

The first major changes came in February 1991 with the toppling of the Hoxha statue. Soon after, the space in front of that statue that had been given for supposedly adoring crowds, was given over to a children's playpark with toy child-sized cars. In the early 1990s, I photographed a shepherd walking his sheep to water at the central fountain. Later, much of the square was grassed over and the, by then, heavy traffic circulated around it. For several of the more recent years, the central area has been inaccessible, closed off in preparation for what has now emerged, apparently at the cost of 15 million Euros—a *vast* area paved with stone slabs. I'm told these are from every part of Albania. Long before completion of this, a high-rise office building was built overshadowing the 18th Century Et'hem Bey Mosque. Now there are several more tall buildings quite close to the Square. The huge, now pedestrian space, is concave, apparently to allow for underground carparking. The roads which used to surround the Square have been diverted on all but one side—forcing much traffic to circulate very widely and a one-way system carrying Tirana's commuters many extra kilometres. A part of the new scheme allows for two sets of fountains, nicely springing out of the stone floor, such that children can run in and out of them during the summer without the hazards that more traditional pools fed by fountains contain (litter, stagnant water, etc.). Around the edges of the new Square, young trees have been planted, interspersed with clumps of greenery (are these wild flowers?) In fact there are hardly any flowers, and the greenery looks bedraggled and weedlike. Amidst

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these are new pale green light metal seats (how long will it be before they disappear?) But maybe they've been created to be uncomfortable, with hard metal trellis to prevent this, or to ensure no-one sits too long, though people have resolved the inconvenience by placing cardboard on the metal trellis seats. Further additions to the Square are several water sources supplied on the ground with water flowing to the edges of the square, forcing pedestrians mostly to walk in avoiding lines, or else to get their shoes wet. The vastly widened area of Skanderbeg Square enables the more significant surrounding buildings to be more fully appreciated, the Mosque, the clock tower and the early 20th century Italian-built Ministry buildings and even the more recent communist buildings, the National Museum whose red star was extracted from the otherwise still intact mosaic above its entrance, of Albanians overcoming their struggles throughout history; the Opera House (now undergoing internal reconstruction) and even the Adrion International bookshop, all gain from the new openness of the Square.

In 2015, I attended a conference in Tirana discussing the possibility of preserving the notorious Spaç prison. Although funding seems to be the main factor inhibiting implementation, the idea alerted me to the general change in attitude to Albania's communist past. Until then, I observed denial, with great efforts made to destroy all markers of that past and to assign it only to oblivion. However, as has been commonly found, a period of over one generation allows for a looking back, and a recognition that in order to prevent any recurrence, it is necessary to study that dark past (it took at least that long for Germany to face its Nazi past). Since 2015 there have been more and more points of such reference in Albania.

Another new building close to the Square is the enormous fenced Orthodox Church with immense golden doors. This is immediately opposite to an old building, in which Dr. Jani Basha created Albania's first maternity hospital in 1931 at the time of Zog's leadership. This building was used as the German Gestapo headquarters in 1944; and under Hoxha the building became the Sigurimi interrogation centre. With the fall of Communism, it was closed for decades until it was recently opened under the name 'House of Leaves', as a museum dedicated to those who suffered there, with much of the original equipment still in place along and with archival material and explanatory notes. There are charts showing exactly who was involved in all the subversive activity, including the hierarchy of informers to the state authorities, and the showing of a popular film made in the 1970s extolling the valour of those who

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fought for Communism. The museum provides a great deal of interest to researchers into this period of Albanian history, including many interviews made with those involved in any way in the interrogation centre, leading to plenty of avenues yet to be unearthed. There has been some controversy over the museum's presentation; some would ensure that the displays received no kind of embellishment; others prefer some creativity as with the non-authentic massive red 'earphones' at the entrance, or a mass of false recording spools to accentuate the scale of the former use of bugging devices.

Also very new in Tirana are two 'Bunk'Art' museums. One, placed just behind the Mosque from Skanderbeg Square, is a large created model of a bunker. This new bunker has photographs of all those known to have been tortured and/or killed under Communism in Albania, and downstairs are further exhibits relating to the tortuous history of that time. The other 'Bunk'Art' museum is on the edge of Tirana, through a tunnel leading right into the Dajtimountain, where a vast warren of passages leads to probably well over a hundred rooms. Massive hefty doors with huge bolts break up the passages. Many, but not all, of these rooms are being prepared as museum spaces, with short histories outside each room, for the period or aspect covered within it. Amongst those rooms on view are the headquarters of Hoxha and of his one-time next in command, Mehmet Shehu. The bedroom for Hoxha and his wife is extremely sparse, but it is not believed that he ever slept there. There are explanations on how they managed to keep the area warm in winter without allowing any visible signs of smoke or vapour to be seen from the outside.

On a cheerier note: the Campanile, beside the Et'hemBey Mosque is now open to visitors who may walk the 90 steps to the top for a magnificent view in all directions all over Tirana. At the foot of the Campanile is a room of ethnographic exhibits of 20th century art, crafts and handwork: traditional home artefacts, cloth and clothing. Walking further away from the Square, the National Gallery of Arts (open 9.00–13.00 and 17.00–20.00—free entrance). When I was there at the beginning of September, it had an exhibition of Albanian art of the 19th (KoleIdromeno, 1860–1939, for one) and 20th centuries. On the first floor are huge and dramatic social-realist paintings depicting fighting in the Second World War and later, the building industry. There are a couple of paintings by the pessimistic painter, Edison Gjergo (1939–89), retrieved from prohibition (he was jailed for his portrayal of communist life). Outside the gallery is a large white installation, a donation from Japan, the 'Cloud Pavilion'. A cloud-like structure, it is designed by the world-renowned

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Japanese architect Sou Fujimoto, and was installed last year. Although normally available to the public to wander through or climb upon, at the time that I visited, it was occupied by a lively band making a sound recording.

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Images

Image 1. Mehmet Shehu's office in the underground shelter at the foot of the Dajti Mountain, Tirana

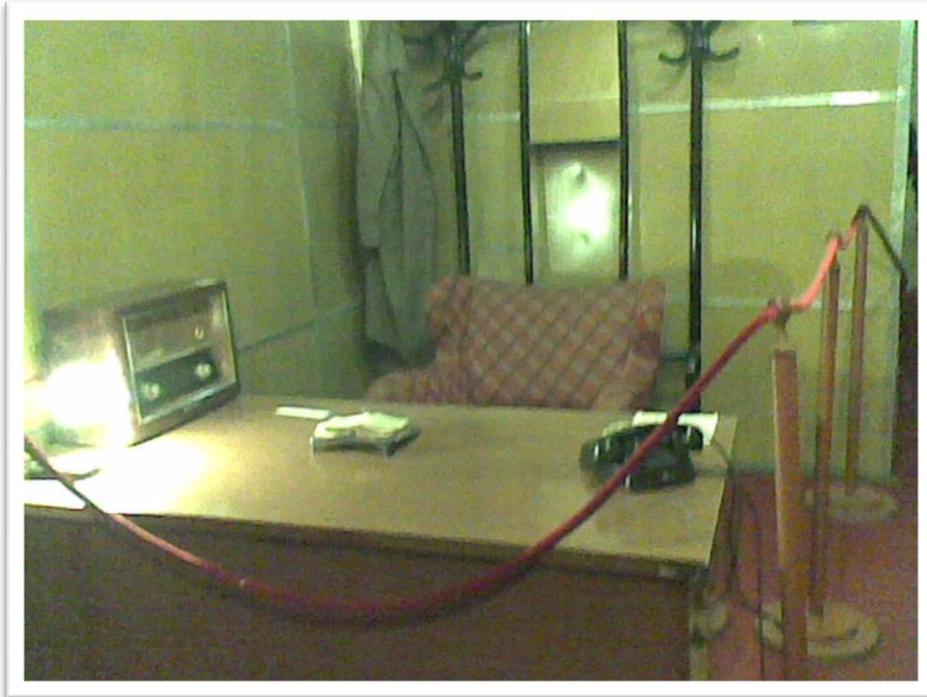


Image 2. Enver Hoxha's office in the same shelter

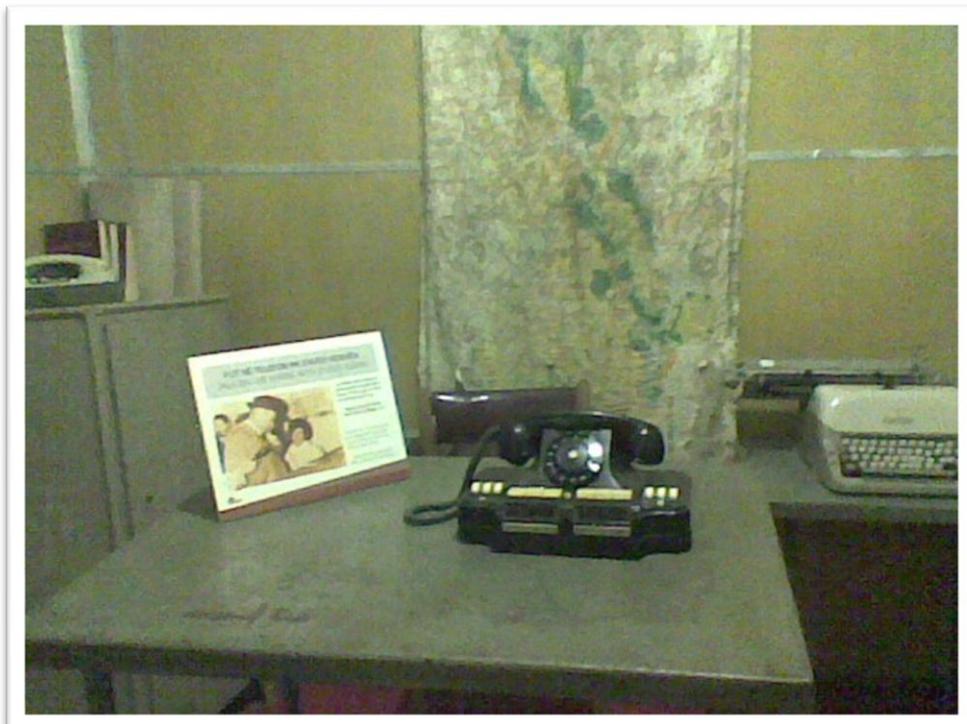


Image 3. Skanderbeg Square, central Tirana

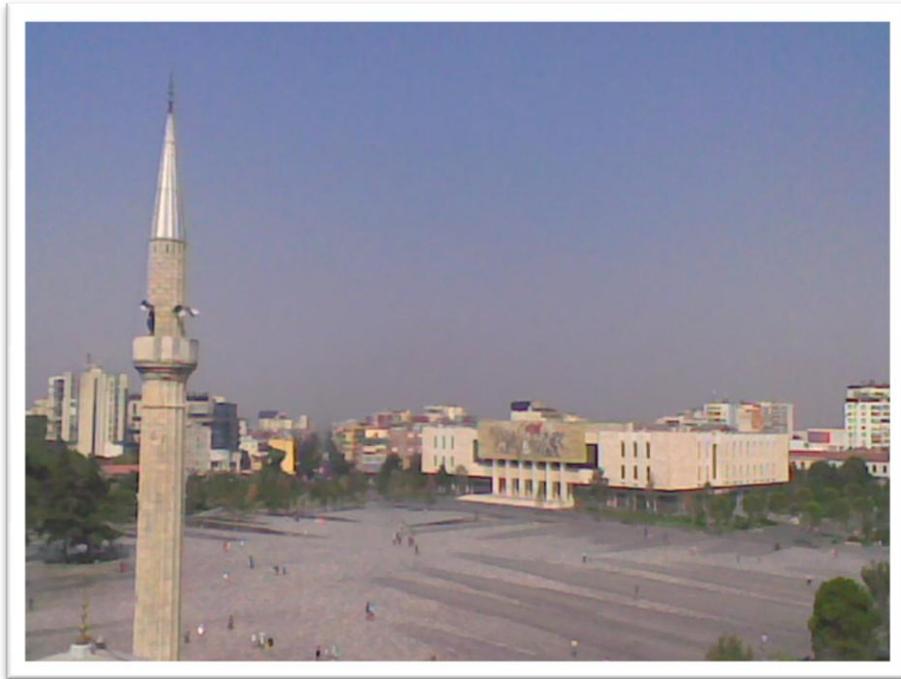


Image 4. Cloud-like structure, designed by the world-renowned Japanese architect Sou Fujimoto Outside Tirana's National Gallery of Art



Image 5. House of Leaves, former interrogation centre, now a museum



Image 6. Front of the House of Leaves



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