Interpretation of architectural identity through landmark architecture: The case of Prishtina, Kosovo from the 1970s to the 1980s

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Abstract
The period in Kosovo from the 1970s to the early 1980s is important yet insufficiently explored. The period is characterized by a liberal approach toward the development of the region. Such development of Kosovo was evident in all spheres of life, including architecture, which functions as an integral part of a society and its progress. This progress was “supported” with an intention to overpower the existing architectural environment and the overall identity of the region in some way. However, when this progress was realized wherein numerous buildings considered important were materialized, an intention to have the earlier and “original” spatial structures to be replaced became evident. In the case of Kosovo, the term “liberal” can be understood negatively and positively. From the architectural viewpoint, designs tend to follow technological advances and “trends” of the time. Consequently, the materialization of such buildings, which are surrounded by symbolisms related to different types of identity and leading toward regional modernism, is an important part to emphasize.

The current study aims to consider important thoughts about architectural identity and its categories in general but specific to the context of Kosovo. The history of the region has a critical story of influences toward its formation. Although several philosophies were accepted by the mass, others produced the antidote of the actual input. This study considers the

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1. Introduction

The issue of identity can be approached in numerous ways. It is an important element to identify in architecture. Architecture serves as a certificate and from the identity perspective, represents the thoughts of its own people, thereby creating distinctive architecture in various periods and locations (Torabi and Brahman, 2013, p. 106). In the current study, the identity issue relates to the region of the former Yugoslavia, which is an example of a country with multiple ethnic or national identities and inhabited by diverse ethnic and religious groups all attempting to find representation in all spheres of life. In several urban areas of Yugoslavia these identities tend to weaken. The relationships between these tendencies and architecture need to be investigated. In this context, the modern industrial economy may be considered a reason to place regions that differ from one another under one patronage; however, this idea cannot be generalized. Most of the recent developments in the former Yugoslavia and the former USSR exhibit explanations for the formation of modern nation states and the control of political power (Colquhoun, 2007, p. 153).

Generally, all of the structures in Prishtina or Kosovo to be discussed in this paper were selected mainly due to the fact that the same structures were built out of a necessity for the society and with the allocation of funds for the development of Kosovo when it was part of the former Yugoslavia. The most important buildings that considered the necessity for the progress of the region were the National and University Library, the Rilindja Printing House, and the Youth and Sports Center. These structures were selected as the main case studies for this particular analysis.

2. Analysis

The sense of belonging in a community and the relationship with architecture should always be considered, especially when architects are the ones who change certain areas depending on the location of their design (Adam, 2012). The fact that architecture represents the identity of a community is well supported by the idea that architecture depends on the geography, traditions, behaviors, visions, and history of a community and region (Torabi and Brahman, 2013, p. 107).

The first experience people have with a building, even before entering it, is its architectural identity. This identity, if interpreted correctly, can inspire confidence or even comfort. The characteristic of a façade—when separated from the function or constructive side of the building—is a major element that emphasizes the idea of symbolism in architecture. A building can symbolize a region (in the general sense), cultural identity, an ethnic group or identity, and even the identity of the architect. The most important message the architecture should convey is to make human beings experience their existence with profound meaning and purpose, thereby helping them strongly remember who they are (Pallasma, 2007, p. 130).

Regardless of the identity a building is meant to represent, the architecture should be subject to a set of rules. These rules should guide the work of an architect regardless of the identity intended. This condition applies even in the case of national identity, where the implications are broad. Rules, and perhaps the architect’s personal rules, must be set. As any other form of art, architecture can also be autonomous in the sense of personal artistic expression and culture bound in the sense that tradition and the cultural context serve as the basis for individual creativity. However, it should not remodel the reality of everyday specifics but orient views toward another dimension, such as memories and the reality of images or even dreams (Pallasma, 2007, p. 139).

A building’s identity needs to be determined in the development phase and after its completion. This idea leads to a discussion on the various possibilities of interpreting identity. Regardless of the type of building and its architectural intention, it must adapt to changing conditions if it is to have a lasting effect in space and time. Numerous buildings are forced to undergo reshaping, reconfiguration, or renovation. Such processes will particularly change their original identity, as was the case with one of the structures in Prishtina, that is, Rilindja Publishing Office Tower (Fig. 1 and 2). In modern society, having buildings with steady and committed public meaning, as in the case in earlier stages, seems no longer
possible. However, after a renovation, a new identity will emerge with which the building will be identified for a certain time until an interest in re-interpretation emerges.

Other changes may have an impact on the characteristic of a building and on its original meaning. In the case of buildings in a region with strong identity problems, this condition can be understood as system’s implications, especially when a perceived need to defend a region’s national and cultural identity persists. When a building is reconstructed after destruction, the building could possibly be restored to its original shape (i.e., to restore its original identity, whereas in post-war reconstruction phase, the reconstruction of the landmarks of the city can recreate the perception of familiarity and ordinariness; Jakupi, 2013, p. 65). Another possible decision is to reshape the building to meet current requirements; however, such decision should only be made with great care. Certain elements and components can be considered honest and logical; these elements and components belong to the tradition or the original design of the building that can also be used to enhance the values of the most needed contemporary architectural intervention (Meem, 2007, p. 190).

Another issue to be considered is that of a building that is still standing and has not outlived its structural soundness but has lost its usefulness. This issue was well illustrated by Winston Churchill who said immediately after World War II, when the Commons Chamber in London had to be reconstructed after suffering severe damage: “We shape our buildings, and afterwards our buildings shape us.” Churchill justified his opinion by arguing that the building should be kept in the shape in which it had served for 40 years, although several members pointed out that it was overcrowded (Truby, 2008, pp. 13-14). This case is a good example of a decision to retain a building’s identity; however, it may not always be possible with other types of building.

2.1. National identity and modern regionalism

National identity is sometimes expressed considerably more emphatically abroad and beyond the region itself, such as by building housing diplomatic missions. In such cases, the architecture of the diplomatic building might express a country’s politics or other forms of regional and national identity (Jashari-Kajtazi, 2014).

The national identity and its representation in the form of buildings seem to have reached its peak during the nation-building phase that might be characterized by tributes to the “heroes” of the time. Conversely, the supposed post-national or identity phase not only provides room for the expression of national identity but also combines this identity with other forms of identity (e.g., cultural, ecological, and gender issues) and with the presence of the multinational component. Generally, such combination can be described as a form of European identity. In the context of the relationship between Kosovo and Western Europe, identities are built through memories in some way, while the presence of the past cannot be denied. These statements raise the question of what is worth preserving. What can still be used to identify the originality of a region or nation when boundaries between countries are becoming increasingly porous and, in many cases, have ceased to exist? National identity can be replaced by a mere sense of place and a collective memory. Thus, architecture should be considered responsible for modeling collective memories and the use of cultural potential as a means to express new identities, suggesting that a landmark architecture has become a metaphor for the place where it exists (Delanty et al., 2001, p. 464).

Modern regionalism is an approach to architecture that strives to counter “homelessness,” utilizing traditional elements in a building's structure or meaning in a site where the building stands. Modern regionalism generally refers to two issues, that is, the building’s material substance and its abstract concept. The concrete concept of regionalism focuses on expressions that replicate various features, portions, or entire buildings, while the abstract part or concept expresses proportions, the use of light, the sense of space, structural principles, and other abstract qualities (Ozkan, 1985, pp.13-14).

This condition leads to the conclusion that many regionalist architects were against the idea of internationalism and preferred modernism. This condition was specifically due to the fact that internationalism has a diminishing effect on the reflection about local conditions, which by contrast, constitutes the most important element of regionalism.

Fig. 2  Rilindja Printing House Tower Design after the refurbishment (Photo: Eris Kajtazi).
The main reason for discussing modern regionalism in architecture in this context is that in modern regionalism, architects are strongly believed to have a chance to respect local culture and traditions by using modern ideas. This condition was not the case in the 1970s and 1980s when historical and traditional contexts were either completely disrespected or at most considered in an abstract form. Only few cultural aspects were considered and implemented. As stated, modern regionalism can be expressed by referring to its concrete or abstract sides. In concrete regionalism, elements, components, or even the entire structure are produced from regional sources. It simply uses new materials and technology while retaining the form and space of architectural structures of the past. Conversely, abstract regionalism attempts to express a region’s cultural elements by applying them to new structures (Powell, 1985).

This condition clearly expresses what architects should understand and observe. However, in Kosovo for example, a dispute often exists between groups who desire to retain the region’s originality and those who attempt to impose their own priorities even though they would lead to a complete loss of the region’s identity. In Kosovo, the former Yugoslavia’s multi-nationality concept showed disregard for 90% of the region’s population. The regime evidently attempted to subordinate this distinct majority by preventing it to keep its originality and identity (A Future for Kosovo’s Past, 2006) and by enforcing the “Brotherhood and Unity” concept.

In Kosovo, modern regionalism offered an opportunity for a different interpretation. This process can be conducted by attempting to find elements that identify the region and the majority of the population. Therefore, these elements should be emphasized when analyzing every building and the possibilities it offers.

When looking at modern regionalism in Kosovo, several indicators are considered valid. Two of the buildings, the National and University Library (Fig. 3) and the Youth and Sports Center (Fig. 4), can be interpreted in several ways under the following considerations: What was the original symbolism of the design, and what interpretation was placed upon them once the buildings became part of the regional landscape? The National and University Library’s white domes are one example. They were interpreted as Islamic components and as traditional white wool hats. The Youth and Sports Center has been interpreted as symbolizing the eight Yugoslav federal regions but also as an eagle. In contrast to other manifestations of our society, architecture shows modernity in a recognizable manner. It is used to demonstrate the ideas of being “contemporary” or even “fashionable.” Every region has its own specific views of what is modern and contemporary and what sets it apart from other regions. This condition was exactly the case in

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Kosovo when the landscape was attempted to be transformed into a modern and “fashionable” environment. Contemporary architectural designs wavered between the symbolic elements “imposed” and the clear intention to create buildings in harmony with what the most recent technology had to offer at the time. With this statement, we provide a metaphorical interpretation of these buildings, which represented an intentional break with traditional architecture, striving toward a contemporary cultural identity.

2.2. Critical regionalism and architectural expression

Critical regionalism can be described neither as internationalism nor as an architectural expression of a region’s history. It considers specific elements of certain buildings and interprets them from a reflective rather than an obvious point of view (Frampton, 2004). It pays more attention to a building’s meaning than to its atmosphere, and the atmosphere would be appropriate if the architect’s design had been traditional. The essential approach of critical regionalism is to mediate the influence between worldwide civilization and the individualities of a place (Canizaro, 2007, p. 395). The culture of a region and its elements, as well as its sustainability (especially in terms of architectural form), depends on the skills or capabilities needed to create forms on the basis of regional culture. A readiness to accept international influences and the ability to implement cultural elements while being in touch with progress in the rest of the world need to exist. Particularly, several contemporary buildings in Kosovo were designed in their external form and impression to contain components of regional culture (Fig. 3), such as domes and the symbolic representation of the eight constitutional parts (Fig. 4) of the former Yugoslavia (Brotherhood and Unity), using either a concrete or an abstract interpretation and expression.

Within few categories, critical regionalism is expressed using certain features, such as marginal practice, consciously bounded architecture, architecture as tectonic fact, regional climate conditions, and reinterpretated vernacular elements (Frampton, 2004, p. 327). Among all the summarized features of critical regionalism, this analysis is concerned with the feature that can be used to explain how contemporary buildings, such as our subjects, were designed. Examples are the white domes of the National and University Library and their interpretation as either traditional white hats or traditional oriental structural elements. In addition, this building’s design belongs to a supposed “imported” style, that is, brutalism, if the netting over the facade is disregarded. However, in view of the aforementioned “regional” elements while demonstrating the building’s contemporary architecture, this idea is consistent with four approaches to regionalism in architecture, namely, folkloric, ideological, experiential, and anthropological regionalism, which summarizes that architecture responds to distant and nearby influences simultaneously (Pavilides, 2007, p. 166).

All these parameters do not directly and strictly correlate with the subject itself. However, given that they are important separately and regardless of the architectural style and identity, every architect should pay attention to regional climate conditions and to aspects of the human environment (Turner, 2003). These parameters or summarized groups of features or attitudes of critical regionalism are not necessarily specific, especially if we consider Frampton’s opinion that the term “critical regionalism” is not intended to denote the vernacular because this concept was once spontaneously produced by the combined interaction of climate, myth, and craft, but rather to identify those recent regional “schools” whose primary aim has been to reflect and serve the limited constituencies in which they are grounded (Frampton, 2004).

3. Results shown through connections: regional architecture and regionalism

Harwell Hamilton Harris’s “Regionalism and Nationalism in Architecture” addresses both these issues in architecture and creates connections and correlations between them. The book begins with a general description of regional architecture, and continues to explain regionalism as “fundamentally, the state of mind” (Harwell, 2007, p. 57). He based his opinion on isolated localities where the choice of building materials is limited and native to the region itself. This condition used to be the case with traditional buildings and construction in Kosovo but was disrupted once the “modernization” period began. Many of these buildings could not be saved or preserved. This type of regionalism can be described as against cosmopolitan and progression. In any case, if this perspective is to be applied in the situation in Kosovo, then one could find that no negative reaction on the region’s modernization existed but on the destruction of traditional (historical) structures that had to yield to modernization. The use of traditional construction methods and designs had vanished long before modernization began; however, a desire to maintain and preserve existing structures remained. No indications that anyone in Kosovo intended to interfere with and interrupt the process of modernization and catching up with the rest of Europe existed. During the 1970s and the early 1980s in Kosovo, specifically in Pristina, several buildings were constructed because of planned investments for the progress and modernization of the area. All the contemporary buildings mentioned in this study were designed and built during that period with the same general intention, that is, modernization. Although their appearance in the existing environment was influenced by the strategy to make traditional influences “invisible,” indicators reveal that liberal regionalism in architecture existed as defined by Harris, who also mentioned that “to express this regionalism architecturally, it is necessary that there be a building-preferably a lot of buildings-at one time” (Harwell, 2007, p. 58). This case happened in Kosovo, particularly in Pristina, at the time when the idea of modernization was accepted. Such condition explains how buildings, including the National and University Library (Fig. 3), the Youth and Sports Center (Fig. 4), and the Rilindja Publishing and Office Tower (Fig. 1), emerged as a representation of progress in the region and its capital city. These buildings certainly play a crucial role in the region. A genuine need to have them built existed, and their creation met the need. A limiting factor
for the design of these buildings was definitely the require-
ment that they had to express the symbolism of Brother-
hood and Unity, which was extremely important to the
former Yugoslavia. This period occurred when the region’s
national commitment, the requirement by Yugoslavia as an
entity, surfaced to coincide with Harris’ idea about the
national versus the regional expression of architecture,
stating, “A national expression, on the other hand, is, at
its highest, the expression of consolidation. This is because
a nation is a people consolidated. The purpose of a national
architecture is to further unite people as citizens. Since the
nation is essentially a symbol, a national architecture must
provide an image of the qualities the nation it symbolizes”
(Harwell, 2007, p. 61). In the case of this analysis and
location/region of interest, a good example for “expression
of consolidation” and a matter of “uniting people as
citizens” is the Youth and Sports Center in Prishtina.
However, the expression of the identity of architects or
their qualities should not be disregarded. This idea empha-
sizes the importance of the relationship of a region’s people
with a building’s design and its interpretation.
In view of the aforementioned considerations and the
architect’s expression through their design, two issues must
also be distinguished, that is, the interpretation of the
designers or architects about their actual work and the
influence on the public resulting in their interpretation of
the design (Bonta, 1979, p. 153). The architects/creators of
a building and the region’s people must be credited with
free minds and imagination. Their interpretation allows the
architectural creation to last and assume a life of its own.

4. Conclusion

1. The expression of more than one type of identity in a
single architectural structure is possible. The intention
can be revealed through the use national symbols to
express national identity or to show that the country is in
line with modern architectural developments in other
parts of Europe and the world.

2. A building can simultaneously “communicate” the
region’s own identity and its European identity. This idea
is consistent with the interpretation that the identity of a
building surpasses the borders of its region, in this case,
of Kosovo. Such identity may not have been what the
architects had in mind when they designed and con-
structed these buildings in the 1970s and 1980s; however,
their attempt to assume a European identity could not
have been avoided.

3. The aforementioned efforts are evident today; however,
a strong evidence exists in which these efforts had
already started during the 1970s and 1980s. Since then,
the region has suffered several hindrances in all spheres
of progress, including architecture. Even now, uncertain-
ties concerning the path to be considered toward achiev-
ing the latest European standards, in the context of
architecture and spatial planning, still exist.

4. Complexity of the region, Kosovo in particular, even
nowadays continues to express the difficulty to
distinguish its architectural identity clearly and the use
of traditional components. However, the aforementioned
thoughts and notions imply that several other studies on
Kosovo’s architectural identity could emerge to be spe-
cifically elaborating on other landmarks or buildings and
distinguishing them individually out of the entire con-
glomerate of identities disguised under the concept of
regionalism.

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