

The Pyramid of Tirana

From the “Mausoleum” of the Albanian Communist Dictator to a Cultural Hub

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Abstract

This research aims to highlight the transformation of one of Albania’s most iconic buildings: the Pyramid of Tirana. Its name, form, and symbolism take us back to 1988, the year of its construction. Although the main purpose is to study architecture independently of its political history, the latter is essential to understanding the building’s evolution. From 1945 to 1990, Albania was under a dictatorial regime that significantly shaped its history and architecture. After the dictator’s death in 1985, four architects were commissioned to design a monumental structure symbolizing his eternity. The resulting “mausoleum” was intended to make a strong statement both visually and within the city’s urban fabric. The concept incorporated symbolic elements: the pyramid shape referencing resurrection in Ancient Egypt, converging lines evoking sun rays through clouds, and an eagle-shaped plan representing Albania’s national emblem. Following the regime’s fall in 1991, the building lost its original function and underwent several uses before falling into decay. In the early 2000s discussions about its future emerged, dividing public opinion between those favouring demolition, seeing it solely as a symbol of dictatorship, and those advocating for its preservation and adaptive reuse. Ultimately preserved, the Pyramid’s redevelopment was led by Dutch firm MVRDV, transforming the former mausoleum into an inclusive cultural centre. The original concrete structure, echoing its communist past, was retained and complemented by new coloured volumes hosting educational spaces, cafés, and exhibition areas. Accessible ramps were added, allowing people to walk on the roof and experience the building as an urban meeting point. Opened in 2023, the project successfully converted a controversial monument into a dynamic place for youth and the wider community. This paper analyses the design strategies for adaptive reuse, the social impact of the transformation, its contribution to sustainable urban development, and integration within Tirana’s contemporary context.

Keywords: Mausoleum, Symbolism, Transformation

Introduction

When an existing building, whether historical or of more recent origin, becomes the subject of research, it emerges as an object of analysis across multiple dimensions. First, architecture presents itself as an integrated part of the city, actively contributing to the transformation of urban fabrics and engaging in dialogue with public space. At the same time, it manifests itself within the sphere of individual and collective experience, where the building serves as a sedimentation of memory. From these tangible interactions arises a

deeper, ideological dimension, in which architecture becomes charged with symbolic values and assumes the role of interpreter of political, cultural, and identity-based visions.

At the centre of this study lies the Pyramid of Tirana, a late-1980s architectural work that stands as an emblematic case for the complexity of the dimensions it embodies. This complexity often shapes the perception of architecture more broadly, particularly when it is closely tied to a significant chapter in a nation's history. In Albania, that chapter corresponds to the communist regime of Enver Hoxha, who, from 1945 to 1990, imposed a totalitarian political system marked by international isolation, strict social control, and the instrumentalization of art and architecture as a means of propaganda. The Pyramid, built in 1988 as a 'mausoleum' in honour of the dictator, inserts itself fully into this context, standing as a powerful testimony to the regime's will to impose its image by leaving a lasting mark on public space.

Since its inauguration, the Pyramid has generated contrasting public attitudes, sparking ongoing debates between those who view it solely as a symbol of dictatorship to be erased, and those who argue for its preservation and adaptive reuse. After decades of controversy, the government ultimately opted to preserve the building and transform it into a space designed to foster social interaction.

The recent redevelopment project by the Dutch architectural studio MVRDV offers a significant example of adaptive reuse, in which the conservation of the existing concrete structure was combined with new architectural additions to generate open and inclusive spaces. The redevelopment intervention enabled the transformation of a highly controversial building into an accessible and inclusive space, capable of impacting the social life of the community through educational and creative activities. The main purpose of this research is to examine the social impact of this transformation and the new urban and collective relationships it has produced, with particular attention to the design strategies adopted for the conservation and enhancement of original structural elements, as well as to the architectural additions that have redefined the Pyramid's function and contemporary identity.

Historical Background

In 1945, following the end of the Second World War, Albania, like many other Eastern European countries, came under a communist dictatorial regime. Enver Hoxha, who would govern for forty years, established a highly centralized state where political opposition, religion, and independent media were all tightly controlled. Albania became one of the most isolated nations in the world, cut off from both Eastern and Western influences. The regime pushed for rapid industrialization, collectivized agriculture, and the elimination of private property, while promoting atheism and dismantling religious institutions, including churches and mosques. Education and literacy campaigns were intensified, and women were encouraged to enter the workforce. Over the decades, Albania shifted its alliances, from the Soviet Union to China, before adopting a deeply isolationist policy by the late 1970s.

Beyond politics and economics, Hoxha's regime left a profound mark on culture, art, and architecture. Every artistic or architectural project was expected to communicate nationalist ideals and demonstrate the power of the state. Monumental architecture became a tool for shaping public perception, embedding ideological messages into the cityscape, and

asserting the regime's authority in a tangible, physical form.

Hoxha's death in 1985 signalled the beginning of slow political changes, yet the regime's structures and influence remained until 1990, when mass protests ultimately led to the fall of the communist government. Decades of repression left Albania politically constrained, economically stagnant, and socially isolated, with architecture and public space bearing the marks of a tightly controlled and ideologically charged environment.

Monumentality and Symbolism

The historical centre of Tirana is characterized by a strong sense of monumentality, shaped by the axial alignment of major administrative and cultural buildings along the city's principal boulevard. This urban composition, originally established in the plan of Gherardo Bosio during the late 1930s, provided a stage for architectural representations of state power and civic identity. Within this context, the construction of the Pyramid in 1988 marked a significant addition to the city's monumental landscape. Erected on the site of a former public park, the building was conceived as the Enver Hoxha Museum, a structure dedicated to celebrating the legacy of Albania's communist leader shortly after his death. Designed by a team of four young Albanian architects, Klement Kolaneci, Pranvera Hoxha, Pirro Vaso, and Vlora Hoxha, the project was developed under pressing political and temporal constraints, aiming to embody the grandeur and ideological resonance demanded by the regime within a remarkably short timeframe.

Architecturally, the design synthesizes elements of socialist realism with a language of modern experimentation. The composition is grounded in principles of symmetry, axial order, and monumental scale, yet departs from the rigid formalism typical of socialist architecture through its dynamic geometries and expressive use of light. The inclined concrete façades, intersecting radial glass strips, and the interplay of perspective and reflection generate a powerful visual tension between solidity and transparency. In its formal restraint, the Pyramid conveys an almost metaphysical atmosphere, a sense of void and illumination, as if its concrete shell were fractured by rays of light breaking through clouds. Rising 21 meters at its highest point, the structure appears lower when perceived from the surrounding ground level, an effect achieved through the progressive descent of its sloping planes, terraces, and stairways. This design strategy establishes a dialogue between monumentality and human scale, allowing the visitor to experience the building both as an imposing landmark and as an inhabitable surface. When viewed from above, the star-like plan reveals a dynamic, wing-like form reminiscent of an eagle in flight, an emblem deeply rooted in Albanian national symbolism. Through this synthesis of ideological, formal, and symbolic dimensions, the Pyramid emerges as one of the most distinctive architectural expressions of late socialist Albania, embodying both the aspirations and contradictions of its time.

The Interaction with Urban Fabric

The Pyramid of Tirana establishes a distinctive and complex interaction with the city through both its spatial configuration and its symbolic presence within the urban landscape. Positioned along the city's main boulevard, an axis of important historical and political significance that structures the capital's urban hierarchy, the building asserts itself as a monumental focal point within the civic core. Its strategic placement was not accidental:

the alignment with the boulevard situated the Pyramid within the continuum of state power and collective representation that characterizes Tirana's central spine.

However, unlike the surrounding governmental and cultural institutions that maintain a direct relationship with the street, the Pyramid differentiates itself through a deliberate spatial detachment. The building is withdrawn from the urban front on all sides, surrounded by open paved surfaces and green areas that create a buffer zone between its massive form and the pedestrian flows of the boulevard. This separation produces a dual reading: while it isolates the structure physically, it simultaneously enhances its perceptual prominence, reinforcing its status as a symbolic object rather than a functional civic building.

The architectural composition further amplifies this condition. Resting on a series of terraced



Fig. 1. Aerial Image 1976-1986 (left), 1994 (right) (source: Asig Geoportal)

platforms and slopes, the Pyramid rises above the natural ground level, transforming the act of approach into a processional ascent that evokes the rhetoric of monumentality. This elevation underscores the building's intended role as a commemorative landmark, initially dedicated to the memory of Enver Hoxha, while limiting its accessibility and integration into everyday urban life. In this sense, the Pyramid negotiates a tension between monument and public space: it is both central and detached, open and inaccessible, monumental yet ambiguous in function. At the same time, its materiality and geometric composition introduce a stark contrast with the surrounding urban fabric. The sloping concrete surfaces, axial symmetry, and massive scale stand in opposition to the more traditional architectural vocabulary of nearby structures. This visual and spatial dissonance accentuates the Pyramid's singularity within Tirana's urban panorama, turning it into an unmistakable landmark whose identity continues to oscillate between the legacy of its political origins and its evolving role in the city's contemporary cultural landscape.

From a “Mausoleum” to a Cultural Hub

Since the political transition of the early 1990s, the Pyramid of Tirana has undergone a complex sequence of transformations that mirror the broader social and ideological shifts within Albanian society. Following the collapse of the communist regime, the building's function, originally conceived as a memorial to Enver Hoxha, was progressively redefined through a series of provisional and often improvised reuses. Over the years, it has served as a radio and television broadcasting centre, a conference venue, a cultural and exhibition hall, a nightclub, and even as a temporary NATO base during the Kosovo conflict in 1999. These adaptive yet discontinuous uses, combined with unsuccessful renovation attempts and long periods of neglect, contributed to the gradual deterioration of the structure. Inside, the building's once well-organized spaces became fragmented and poorly lit, reflecting its uncertain role and changing identity within the city.

Throughout the subsequent decades, the Pyramid became the subject of continuous public and professional debate, oscillating between proposals for demolition and visions of preservation. Its ambivalent status, as both a remnant of a totalitarian past and a potential site of collective memory, made it one of the most contested architectural artifacts in post-socialist Tirana. This debate culminated in 2017, when the Albanian government endorsed a new adaptive reuse strategy, marking a decisive shift in the building's trajectory. The Dutch architectural studio MVRDV was commissioned to redesign the Pyramid, transforming it into an open and accessible structure. Their project reimagines the former monument as a space for culture, education, and community engagement.

Conceptual Approach

The adaptive reuse of the Pyramid of Tirana is grounded in the redefinition of circulation, accessibility, and spatial perception, transforming a once introverted monument into an open and participatory urban structure. The project reinterprets the building's original geometry, previously characterized by a rigid central void and a protective concrete shell, by introducing new layers of horizontal and vertical connections. These pathways not only renew the internal circulation but also create multiple viewpoints that frame both the city and the surrounding landscape, establishing a continuous dialogue between interior and exterior. A key aspect of the intervention lies in the permeability of the structure. What was once a closed and symbolically inaccessible monument is now conceived as an open framework that can be crossed, climbed, and experienced from different perspectives. The addition of stairways, ramps, and terraces transforms the sloping façades into habitable surfaces, inviting movement and interaction. This shift converts the building from an object of observation into an active, lived space that encourages public engagement. Through this conceptual transformation, the Pyramid evolves from a static, commemorative monument into a dynamic civic platform. Its previously empty core becomes a place of activity and encounter, hosting educational, cultural, and creative programs that extend into the newly landscaped park. The surrounding open areas, once mere transitional areas, are reimagined as vibrant public spaces, integrating the building into the life of the city and redefining its role as a contemporary landmark of openness and renewal.

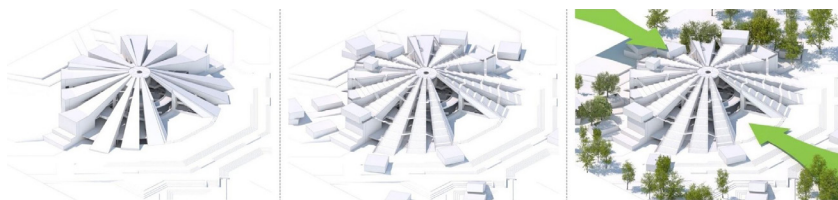


Fig. 2. MVRDV. Concept, Pyramid of Tirana, 2018 (source: MVRDV Official Website)

Reuse Project

The reuse project of the Pyramid of Tirana is structured around a series of conceptual and spatial themes that guide its transformation from a closed, monumental artifact into an open and inclusive civic space. The first key theme concerns accessibility and movement: the intervention replaces decades of unsafe, improvised use with a coherent system of circulation that connects interior and exterior spaces. New ramps, stairways, and platforms create a structured network of horizontal and vertical pathways, transforming what were once unsafe slopes, improvisedly used for climbing, into proper staircases that now allow people to move safely, turning movement itself into an essential architectural experience rather than a mere functional necessity.

The second theme relates to verticality as experience. The reuse project now invites people to ascend and explore the building's sloping surfaces. The introduction of new staircases facilitates this movement, guiding visitors safely to the top of the Pyramid to enjoy panoramic views of the city. In this way, the elevated terraces and viewpoints redefine the structure as a civic belvedere transforming monumentality into a shared experience of participation and urban openness.

A third theme is the activation of a static concrete shell through additive and reversible architecture. Lightweight insertions, transparent enclosures, and modular interior volumes inject life into the previously empty structure without erasing its material and historical identity. The former void has been inhabited by a series of stacked cubic volumes, creating lived-in spaces within the Pyramid and transforming the once vacant interior into a vibrant framework for activity and creativity.

The following theme, from passageway to place of permanence and social transformation, highlights the reactivation of the area surrounding the Pyramid. The open space that once separated the building from the street front is now inhabited by a series of cubic volumes that bring the structure closer to the pulse of urban and public life. These new insertions create a gradual and natural transition from the city to the Pyramid.

Conclusions

The reuse of the Pyramid of Tirana demonstrates how an abandoned and contested monument can be successfully reactivated through adaptive strategies. By choreographing circulation with new stairways and terraces, the project transforms unsafe and improvised movement into a safe and accessible experience. The verticality of the pyramid, once intimidating and symbolic, is now reframed as a collective journey culminating in panoramic views of the city. At the same time, the horizontality of the surrounding park reconnects the structure with the urban fabric, ensuring that the pyramid is no longer isolated but fully



Fig. 3. Interior, Ossip van Duivenbode. Pyramid of Tirana/MVRDV, 2023 (source: ArchDaily)



Fig. 4. Ossip van Duivenbode. Pyramid of Tirana/MVRDV, 2023 (source: ArchDaily)

integrated into public life.

Equally important is the insertion of colourful boxes inside and around the pyramid. These volumes house creative, educational, and leisure activities that encourage permanence rather than transit. By layering new functions onto the existing shell, the pyramid is redefined as a civic landmark of the present, where citizens can learn, work, and socialize. In this way, the building shifts from being a symbol of the past to a vibrant hub for the future, exemplifying the potential of adaptive reuse as a tool for social activation.

Potential Risks

Despite its successful reopening in 2023, the Pyramid of Tirana is not without possible challenges. One critical risk concerns the management and accessibility of the new facilities. While the colourful boxes host creative, cultural, and educational programs, there remains the danger that these activities could become too exclusive or commercially oriented. If this happens, the pyramid may lose its intended democratic character, turning into an attractive destination for tourists or specific institutions rather than an open civic platform accessible to all citizens.

Another challenge relates to the long-term sustainability and maintenance of the structure and its surrounding public spaces. The terraces, stairways, and inserted volumes require constant care to ensure safety and usability. Without consistent investment the pyramid could gradually slip back into neglect, echoing the cycle of abandonment that marked its past. For the reuse project to achieve its full potential, the architectural transformation must be matched by durable social, economic, and political commitment.

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