

The Pyramid of Tirana

A Site of Public Spectacle and Private Power

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Abstract

The Pyramid of Tirana, originally a symbol for Albania's communist dictator Enver Hoxha, has transformed to mirror the country's own ideological shifts. Once a monument to authoritarianism and control, it became a cultural center after the fall of communism in 1991, served as a NATO base during the Kosovo War, and is now a nucleolus for the country's digital education. From reinforcing policies of the past, it now projects the nation toward a new future. But in reframing its identity from its militarization to nonconformity, new questions arise: did a whole country dramatically transform in under three decades? Is this evolution a path to liberation, or is it a more subtle form of control? Is technology an identity and if so, of who or of what? Is the repurposed building a bated hook that is cast to attract fish? Or is it the boat keeping the fishers afloat? MVRDV, known for producing programmatic dualities in their projects wherein spaces attract both intended users and a broader public, adapted the pyramid to reflect its new intended identity. As a result, Albanians recognize it as the TUMO Center for Creative Technologies, due to news outlets; tourists see a climbable landmark and city viewing platform; entrepreneurs find its potential for aesthetically trendy commerce. Yet while its exterior grabs global attention, activities within remain largely opaque. The building's layered history functions like a set of Russian Dolls, each unveiling leads to deeper concealments rather than clarity. This aesthetic is echoed in MVRDV's architectural language: fragmented, overlapping volumes that conceal as much as they reveal. The question remains whether the Pyramid now facilitates transparency or simply repackages opacity in a contemporary guise. It says, in effect, "Here is Pandora's box, pick one," presenting the illusion of access while maintaining layers of curated ambiguity.

Keywords: Albania, Authoritarianism, Pyramid

Introduction: Contexts

The Pyramid of Tirana serves as a site of enduring monumentality, operating less as a physical critique of its own histories and programs, and more as a provocation of the layered social structures that are and were embedded within Albania's political landscape. The analysis of visual layering is made through an oscillation of two distinct contexts: objective and social and eventually positions the Pyramid within the framework of Albania's contemporary rapid development. The emergence of twenty-first century landmarks and resulting media-painted monumentalities have posed national identity alignment against identity manufacturing¹. This leads one to explore how the site's new design and contested

identities invite speculation on the notions of transparency versus concealment, ultimately interrogating the boundaries between reuse and restoration.

Since its construction in 1988, the Pyramid of Tirana has continually mirrored Albania's shifting ideological landscape, embodying multiple lives over time. Its existence begins even prior to its physical inception. Envisioned as both a museum and memorial to the nation's former leader, Enver Hoxha, who rose to power in 1946, the structure was commissioned by his daughter and son-in-law just three years after his death and shortly before the fall of communism (MVRDV, "The Pyramid of Tirana")². In the following years, the Pyramid was repurposed in myriad ways, «used as a radio station, a nightclub, a conference venue, a broadcast centre and, during the 1999 Kosovo War, a base for NATO» and at times, as an urban billboard (MVRDV, "The Pyramid of Tirana"). Each transformation layered new forms of cultural expression upon its original face, acting as a series of masks³. The site evidently descended into informal recreational uses, looting, and neglect. Governmental efforts to demolish it were met with strong community resistance and protest, underscoring its complex place within the public consciousness⁴. The subsequent renovation proposal in 2017 led to its reopening in 2023, marking another phase in its evolving identity⁵. Once a symbol of authoritarianism and control, the Pyramid now functions as a cultural center and a nucleus for digital education, shifting from reinforcing the policies of the past to projecting Albania toward a new, nonconformist future. Centrally located in the heart of Tirana, between two of the city's major landmarks: Skanderbeg Square and the Air Albania Stadium, the Pyramid remains a symbolic and physical anchor⁶.

Landmarks on the Rise

Though renovated and reopened in 2023, the Pyramid of Tirana has retained the essential geometry and temple-like aesthetic since its 1988 origin⁷. Yet the persistence of its form has not stabilized its identity. With each renovation, occupation, and reinterpretation there has been a layering of new ideologies atop old foundations. These oscillations invite a series of critical questions: can an entire nation's ideology truly reinvent itself within three decades, from the Pyramid's inception to its most recent proposal for renewal? Does this architectural metamorphosis signify a movement toward the country's liberation? Or, does it merely reconstitute older hierarchies by concealing a more nuanced form of control under the guise of progress? As Albania situates itself within a globalized network of design innovation and technological ambition, one might ask: is technology itself now part of the nation's identity? If so, whose identity does it serve? The Pyramid's adaptive reuse amplifies these ambiguities, functioning simultaneously as a national mirror and a provocation. Is it a baited hook, cast to attract the global gaze, or the vessel that sustains those navigating its redefined symbolic terrain?

Once a city marked by fortification and ideological rigidity, Tirana was visually and psychologically structured by defense. The countless concrete bunkers scattered across the country remain silent witnesses to that culture of isolation⁸. Within this landscape, the Pyramid stood as a monumental assertion of state power. Over time, however, it shifted from its original purpose and reappropriated by the public. Before its renovation, the building's sloping façade became a playground, literally and symbolically, where citizens reclaimed control through acts of informal resistance: sliding, painting, and climbing upon the decaying monument. This shift from authoritarian object to democratic playground

encapsulates Albania's broader trajectory: a redefinition of collective identity through everyday participation.

By 2023, the Pyramid had re-entered the architectural ecosystem of the capital, now positioned among a series of new or restored landmarks. Illuminated at night, it operates as a lantern within the park and a beacon for the city while its luminous skin both exposes and conceals⁹. The building's surface may signal openness, but it simultaneously stages the question of what remains hidden beneath the spectacle of renewal. At a broader scale, Tirana's urban identity is being re-scripted through a proliferation of new landmarks and cultural projects that signal the city's aspiration toward global modernity (Priest 2023). Its skyline now performs a new aesthetic language: expressive forms and striking silhouettes that announce Albania's entrance onto the global architectural stage. Photographs, illustrations, and media coverage from 2024 onward celebrate this transformation. These frame Tirana as an emergent hub of design and cultural production. International architects, curators, and designers have contributed to this redefinition, positioning Albania not as a periphery but as an active voice in contemporary debates on monumentality and memory. Yet this global visibility also invites skepticism: when monumentality is reframed as progress, does the city risk aestheticizing its own reinvention? Or repeating the rhetoric of liberation while scripting itself once again into spectacle?

This trajectory was particularly evident during the *Bread and Heart Festival* in the summer of 2025, which brought together global and local designers for installations, exhibitions, and symposia that celebrated Tirana as a cultural laboratory (Bread & Heart Festival 2025)¹⁰. Similarly, the Albanian Pavilion at the 2025 Venice Biennale, curated by Anneke Abhelakh,



Fig. 1. Tirana's central district, as seen from Tirana Sky Hotel, with new or renovated landmarks surrounding the Pyramid of Tirana (Emma Sumrow, 2024)

extended this discourse by foregrounding questions of identity, transformation, and urban rebirth¹¹. A composite image, set as the digital centerpiece in the pavilion's media campaign, features the newly renovated Pyramid as its focus (Albanian Pavilion 2025). This suggests that the Pyramid now functions as both anchor and pivot: a hinge between ideological pasts and imagined futures. In this sense, the Pyramid of Tirana resists simple classification. It is neither pure restoration nor complete reinvention. Rather, it stands as a living diagram of Albania's evolving self-image, mediating between the residues of its controlled past and the projections of its digital, global future. Its transformation exemplifies how architecture, particularly within post-authoritarian contexts, can operate as both artifact and agent. It can be a structure that embodies ideology even as it enables its reimagination. Whether read as provocation, performance, or projection, the Pyramid continues to serve as Albania's most dynamic site of negotiation where the very meaning of monumentality remains perpetually in flux.

Monumental Media

MVRDV's intervention at the Pyramid of Tirana repositions the monument not merely through aesthetic shifts but through an intentional recalibration of identity. Known for cultivating programmatic dualities in their projects with spaces that purposely serve both their intended users and a wider public, the studio has transformed the Pyramid into an architectural palimpsest that simultaneously invites and obscures¹². Officially, it is now recognized as the TUMO Center for Creative Technologies, a title reinforced by national media narratives that align Albania's projected future of digital innovation (MVRDV, "The Pyramid of Tirana")¹³. For tourists, however, the Pyramid functions as a climbable landmark and urban viewing platform. For entrepreneurs, it is a stage for aesthetically driven trendy commerce and symbolic capital (MVRDV 2021). The project thus operates on multiple perceptual registers: while its exterior performs openness and accessibility, its interior remains curiously opaque. Its programming remains visible largely through representation rather than experience. To explore this layered identity, collaged images in fig.2 show the new design against that of the old, juxtaposing the Pyramid's previous interior consisting of a single open void, with its current configuration of dispersed boxes, stairs, and walkways¹⁴. This visual comparison is less a commentary on design decisions than a meditation on how shifts in spatial order alter the monument's ideological reading. MVRDV's insertion of stacked volumes and radiating access points has fragmented the formerly unified volume, producing a multiplicity of spatial experiences that reflect the building's new social conditions. What was once a voided, introverted interior has been rearticulated into a networked system of circulation, participation, and display (Priest 2023). This is not merely an aesthetic renovation but a subliminal alteration of scale and sequence. Yet the question persists: what identity does this new monument articulate? Can technology itself be an identity of a building, of a city, or of a nation? The Pyramid's reuse positions it as a spatial metaphor for digital transformation, but its meanings remain contested. For residents, it operates as a community space, a familiar landmark reactivated for public life. For the media, it is a symbol of technological progress, casting Albania as an emergent node in a global network of innovation, as stated by Mayor Veliaj (MVRDV 2018). Tourists, by contrast, instrumentalize it as a climbable scenic surface from which to post panoramic images of Tirana, further feeding its digital afterlife through social media¹⁵. The building

thus oscillates between being experienced physically and being consumed visually, its identity mediated as much by the body as by the algorithm.

Still, beneath each new iteration and program, each mask that has been worn, the Pyramid's original purpose continues to resonate. Despite its evolving programs and colorful additions that puncture the slanted façade, the specter of Hoxha's monumentality lingers in collective memory. The question, then, is whether the renovation itself has transformed public consciousness, or whether it is the building's representation in media that has rewritten its narrative. The Pyramid's new visibility, «now leasing space to dynamic tenants» suggests that identity today is as much constructed through the circulation of images, capital, and ideology as it is through concrete and glass (Piramida 2025). Does the lens of one's social media feed inform the bias of new identity or of political understandings of spatial contexts? To see the Pyramid now is to navigate the intersection of architecture, perception, and power. It

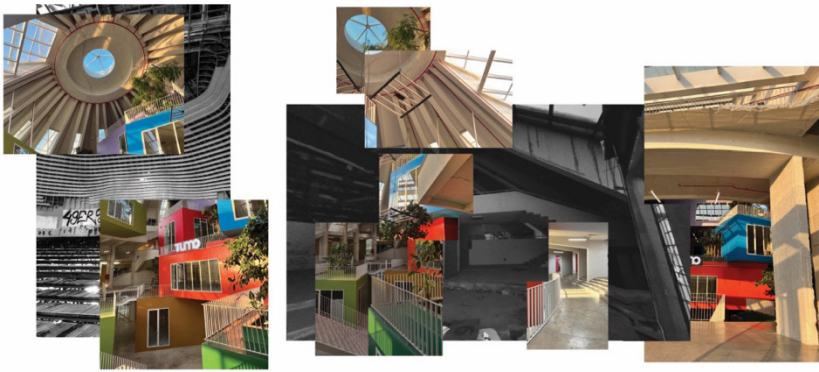


Fig. 2. Collaged studies contrasting the original Pyramid of Tirana with MVRDV's 2023 architectural redesign (Emma Sumrow, 2025)

embodies not a singular history, but the complex choreography of how a nation remembers and rebrands itself. Space is felt, but simultaneously simulated by preconceived notions, cultivated through generations of first-hand experience and media.

Transparency and Concealments

Within a year of its reopening, the Pyramid of Tirana has become a site of layered contradictions. Entrepreneurs have quickly recognized its potential as a new stage for commerce, aesthetics, and entertainment as cafés, galleries, and event spaces now populate the colorful fragments of MVRDV's redesign. Yet many of these functions merely replicate programs that saturate the city, some located only a block away (Piramida 2025)¹⁶. This proliferation raises an unsettling question: has the identity of the Pyramid truly changed, or has it simply mirrored the existing identity of Tirana itself? The site appears simultaneously renewed and repetitive as a monument reborn through the very cultural patterns it seeks to transcend. Despite its striking exterior and enticing colorful vessels, the activities within remain largely opaque. The solid, vibrant volumes that punctuate or sit atop the façade are visually alluring, yet their contents are inaccessible to casual view. The Pyramid's layered

history, much like a set of Russian dolls, which the building now emulates, continues to unfold inwardly, revealing not clarity but further enclosures¹⁷. This paradox resonates with MVRDV's architectural language, where fragmentation and transparency coexist in tension. The design's overlapping boxes and dispersed pathways create the illusion of access while maintaining an intricate choreography of concealment. In this sense, the Pyramid might be understood as a contemporary Pandora's box where it offers the appearance of access while curating ambiguity, performing transparency while reinforcing the conditions of spectacle¹⁸. The additions are like a red herring, distracting from something yet to be seen¹⁹. The broader context of Albania's rapid digital transformation further complicates this reading. Towards the end of 2025, the country announced the appointment of the world's first Artificial Intelligence Minister which may be viewed as a symbolic gesture toward a technologically oriented future. National headlines proclaim that this innovation aims to extinguish corruption as «Albania is seeking accession to the European Union, which requires strong reforms in rule of law, transparency, and corruption control» (Demir 2025). Yet one might ask whether the Pyramid, now branded as the Center for Creative Technologies, serves as a catalyst for this proclaimed transparency or as its architectural simulacrum. Does the structure embody a new civic openness, or does it simply repackage opacity in a more seductive, media-friendly form? When viewed against its own history, the building's new condition seems less like a rupture and more like a return. Its once monumental void has been replaced by programmatic insertions that echo, rather than erase, the site's cyclical transformations (MVRDV 2018). The festive programs that now animate the interior such as parties, pop-ups, and community gatherings, recall earlier periods of informal appropriation, when kids slid down the façade and occupied its abandoned shell. In that sense, the building's latest identity might not mark a departure from its past but rather a continuation of its recurring desire for reinvention.

Ultimately, the Pyramid's transformation provokes a broader question about agency and authorship in the making of identity. Can architecture alone redirect the trajectory of a city, or even that of a nation? The Pyramid stands as both mirror and mask: a monument to transformation that continually asks whether it is architecture shaping the narrative, or the narrative shaping architecture.

Conclusions: Interrogations

The transformation of the Pyramid of Tirana ultimately raises questions that extend beyond architecture into the ethics of adaptation and the politics of identity. Is this a gesture of liberation or the emergence of a subtler, consumerist form of control? Does the project constitute a true reuse, an act of reimagining, or merely a restoration, an aestheticized continuity that reaffirms existing hierarchies under the guise of progress? Albania's rapid shift from isolation to digital ambition mirrors the Pyramid's evolution from monument to platform, from ideological artifact to technological emblem. This text, like the country itself, unfolds as a narrative of transition: from the monumental fixity of the past toward an uncertain but aspirational future of innovation and reinvention. Yet this evolution invites a final provocation: how much responsibility should we assign to a work of adaptive reuse in defining national consciousness? The Pyramid's renovation situates these tensions at the intersection of space, symbolism, and speculation. In this light, its meaning cannot be resolved into a singular reading, neither wholly emancipatory nor entirely complicit. It

remains, instead, a living provocation: an architecture that reflects the ongoing negotiation between memory and modernization, between authenticity and artifice.

Notes

1. As of 2025, Albania is rapidly developing new projects across the entire country. Many sites now viewed as “landmarks” are incredibly new given the context of Albania’s lengthy history.
2. The commission by Enver Hoxha’s daughter and her husband illustrates the regime’s intent to memorialize its own methodologies, even as it was beginning to collapse.
3. The terminology of “masks” is used to emphasize the performative nature of the series of national identities that have been expressed or contained through architecture.
4. Even after the fall of communism, the public’s resistance to the Pyramid’s demolition in 2015 reveals the building’s status of significance to the collective’s urban heritage.
5. The 2017 proposal by the Dutch firm, MVRDV, was a move towards renovation as a form of preservation. The design reinterpreted the space as a public educational hub and technology center.
6. Tirana’s predominant landmarks are centrally located along a single axis. This includes Skanderbeg Square, Tirana Castle, The Cloud Pavilion by Sou Fujimoto, Air Albania Stadium, and Tirana Lake.
7. The Pyramid’s “temple-like” quality derives from its sharply sloped geometry and symmetrical massing, which evoke both ancient typologies and an ideological monumentalism.
8. Hoxha’s regime oversaw the construction of 175,000+ bunkers across Albania between the 1960s and 1980s, embedding the landscape with a defensive architecture that shaped national psychology.
9. The “lantern” metaphor emphasizes the design intent to make the structure more transparent and accessible, visually and socially, through the addition of glass and artificial lighting.
10. The *Bread and Heart Festival* (2024) was among Tirana’s first multi-day events that put design practices across the world at the forefront, framing design as a cultural diplomacy.
11. The Albanian Pavilion at the 2025 Venice Biennale utilized many of Tirana’s recent architectural developments to broadcast the design transitions that spearhead the country’s political initiatives.
12. MVRDV expresses architectural program hybridity in many projects, such as their Depot Boijmans Van Beuningen or the Markthal, both in Rotterdam.
13. The TUMO Center model, originally developed in Armenia in 2011, represents a transnational approach to youth education in digital technologies, positioning Albania within a broader network.
14. The collaged visual study operates as a critical tool rather than a representational one, using juxtaposition to expose ideological discontinuities between the original and renovated states.
15. The Pyramid’s circulated presence through social media reframes it as both architectural site and digital image, extending its physical presence into a parallel, algorithmic public realm.
16. The influx of new commercial programs demonstrates the merging of cultural and economic capital; however, the repeated preexisting typologies reflects homogenization of public spaces.
17. The “Russian doll” metaphor conveys the recursive layering of concealment within the monument’s evolving identity. As each layer is entered or unveiled, there is a new identity.
18. “Pandora’s box” is mentioned to frame the Pyramid as a container of intrigue, curiosity, and uncertainty. A special quality that reveals by concealing. That incites intrigue through embedding.

19. “Red herring” describes the architectural gestures that are meant to divert critical attention toward form rather than ideology.

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