



La Biennale di Venezia

19. Mostra
Internazionale
di Architettura
Partecipazioni Nazionali

Pavilion of Albania at the **19th International Architecture Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia**

Building Architecture Culture

Curated by Anneke Abhelakh

Venue: Arsenale
May 10–November 23, 2025

Commissioner: Blendi Gonxhja, Minister of Economy, Culture and Innovation

Press Release May 5, 2025

Albania is a young democracy. Home to three million people, the country sits at the heart of the Mediterranean. Its geography has long shaped cultural exchanges and the built environment.

From Ottoman rule to Italian occupation, from communist isolation to post-socialist transformation, each era has left a visible mark on the built environment. Located between the Adriatic and Ionian seas and bordering Greece, North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Montenegro, Albania has long absorbed a rich mix of religious, cultural, and architectural influences—Islamic, Orthodox, Catholic, and secular.

Following the collapse of the dictatorial regime in 1992, a rupture with the past emerged as people rebelled against public spaces and regime-era buildings. Edi Rama, Tirana's mayor from 2000 to 2011 and now Prime Minister, described this re-appropriation as a reclaiming of individualism: "It was a space to be regained by people deprived of private property and self-expression. The first ten years were about reclaiming private space and abandoning public space. Returning to individualism was very traumatic." Three decades later, Albania remains in transition—culturally, socially, and architecturally. This ongoing renewal has placed architecture at the center of national discourse.

The pavilion shows the past, the present and the future of the architectural landscape in three parts:

The historical backdrop of the relationship between architecture, society and political rulers is shown in a timeline with 100 images through two important sites in Tirana.

1. Skanderbeg Square, the heart of Tirana, has undergone significant political and spatial transformations, reflecting Albania's shifting regimes. During the Austro-Hungarian occupation (1916-1918), it was known as Kaiser Franz Josef Platz, symbolizing imperial influence. Under Italian rule (1939-1943), it became Piazza Vittorio Emanuele III, designed to project fascist control. During dictator Enver Hoxha's communist era (1944-1991), it was renamed Stalin Square, reinforcing Albania's Soviet alignment. The square was expanded to accommodate military parades, with monumental state buildings reinforcing centralized power.

After communism fell in the 1990s, it was renamed Skanderbeg Square, marking a return to national identity. However, its vast, traffic-dominated layout disconnected it from public life. The 2017 redesign by 51N4E pedestrianized the generous public space, using locally sourced stones and adding green zones, symbolizing decentralization and civic participation.

This transformation shifted its role from a site of state power to one of public engagement, aligning with Albania's European aspirations.

2. The Pyramid of Tirana, built in 1988 to honor the dictator Enver Hoxha, was designed by a team led by his daughter, Pranvera Hoxha. Once the most expensive structure in Albania, it symbolized the country's isolationist communist regime. After communism's fall, the Pyramid lost its original purpose and faced decades of uncertainty, serving as a convention center, TV station, NATO base during the Kosovo War, and a nightclub, becoming part of urban youth culture.

In the 2010s, the Democratic Party (PD), led by Prime Minister Sali Berisha, proposed demolishing the Pyramid to make way for a new parliamentary complex, arguing it was a relic of the communist era. The proposal sparked public outrage, leading to a citizen-led petition in 2011 that gathered tens of thousands of signatures in support of preserving the building. Activists, architects, and citizens viewed the Pyramid as an important part of Albania's architectural and historical fabric and memory.

This petition shifted public and political opinion. By the time the Socialist Party, led by Edi Rama, returned to power, the tone had changed towards adaptive reuse. In 2017, the government commissioned Dutch firm MVRDV to transform the Pyramid. They preserved its concrete shell while redesigning the interior into a youth and technology center with colorful staircases, open spaces, and modular classrooms. The building's top became accessible to the public, offering panoramic views of the city.

Today, the Pyramid is a symbol of Albania's transition—moving from authoritarianism to openness, from nostalgia to reinvention—reclaiming a controversial monument as a space for learning, creativity, and the next generation.

These two central public sites' histories capture how Albania's architecture navigates its complex past while embracing future possibilities.

The present is made palpable by a movie called 'The Albanian Calls'. While working on The Albanian Files, an upcoming book on Albanian architecture, interviews were conducted with over 50 international architects currently working in the country. These Conversations recorded via Zoom became the foundation for The Albanian Calls, a feature-length video essay by Anneke Abhelakh & Konstanty Konopinski. The film captures the discourse surrounding what it means to be an international architect in contemporary Albania, exploring both opportunities and challenges.

The film examines the agency of architects, the shifting relationship between public and private space, and the intersection of architecture and politics. The Albanian Calls investigates how architecture shapes Albania's emerging architectural identity. At the same time the country's unique architectural environment prompts a reflection on the state of the practice as a whole, as well as on the role of an individual architect working in a foreign country. In alignment with the pavilion's central theme—Building Architecture Culture—the film is edited as a continuous Zoom conversation, weaving together insights from more than 30 architects.

This dialogue is interspersed with two archival films from the Albanian National Film Archive (AQSHF): Shqipëria Turistike by Mark Topallaj (1974). This movie was made as a propaganda film to purely attract tourists from a similar Marxist-Leninist ideology in a time when the country was completely isolated from the rest of the world. And the second archival footage from Shqipëria 1991 by Xhovlin Hajati and Reiz Çiço (1991), showing the country at the time.

The projective part of the architectural landscape in Albania is shown in the third part of the exhibition, the stereoscopic viewers. In 2004, Edi Rama (PM), then Mayor of Tirana, invited the Berlage Institute to contribute to the city's development, an initiative influenced by Elia Zenghelis (one of four founding members of OMA), who had served on the jury for the 2003 city center master plan competition. Recognizing the institute's potential, this collaboration produced extensive research and proposals for metropolitan growth.

Zenghelis (1937*) played a pivotal role in shaping architectural discourse around Tirana's transformation, reinforcing international engagement with its urban evolution. His connection with the Berlage facilitated research-driven interventions that deepened the city's architectural ambitions. His teaching was marked by rigorous intellectualism, positioning architecture as both a formal and political act. Rooted in historical consciousness and speculative urbanism, his pedagogy challenged students to see architecture as a critical discourse rather than mere problem-solving. Balancing the autonomy of form with ideological and geopolitical awareness, his method was at once precise and profoundly radical. Some of the offices working in Tirana, met at the Berlage. The viewers show 56 offices each with 7 images

of projects in Albania. An amuse-l'oeil for the upcoming book called the Albanian Files, published by Lars Muller in the Autumn of 2025.

The 56 Exhibitors are: 51N4E; Aires Mateus e Associados; Álvaro Siza; Andrea Caputo; Anupama Kundoo Architects; Archea Associati; Archi-Tectonics; arquitectura G; Barozzi Veiga; baukuh; Benedetta Tagliabue - EMBT Architects; BIG; Bofill Taller de Arquitectura; BOLLES+WILSON; Camilo Rebelo; Casanova+Hernandez; CEBRA; Christian Kerez; CHYBIK + KRISTOF; CITYFÖRSTER; Coldefy; Davide Macullo Architects; DILLER SCOFIDIO + RENFRO; EAA Emre Arolat Architecture; Eduardo Souto De Moura; Elemental Architecture; Ensemble Studio; Estudi d'arquitectura Toni Gironès Saderra; GG-loop; Herzog & de Meuron; Kengo Kuma & Associates; KUEHN MALVEZZI; Lina Ghotmeh - Architecture; Luca Dini Design and Architecture; Mario Cucinella Architects; MASS STUDIES; MVRDV; NOA; Nuno Melo Sousa; OFFICE KGDVS ; OMA; OODA; Oppenheim Architecture; RCR Arquitectes; Sam Chermayeff Office; SelgasCano; Shigeru Ban Architects + Jean de Gastines; Stefano Boeri Architetti; Steven Holl Architects; Studio Fuksas; Studio Gang; Studio Precht; Taller Hector Barroso; Toyo Ito & Associates, Architects; XDGA; Yashar Architects.

Another essential part of the pavilion is the Public Program.

This program is coordinated together with Andi Arifaj and Adonel Myzyri and in collaboration with KOOZARCH.

Building Architecture Culture, the Albanian pavilion at the Venice Biennale highlights the reciprocal relationship between architecture and society. The discipline extends beyond practice to academia and the broader public sphere, where spatial ideas are shared, debated, and reflected upon. This third sphere ideally serves as the conscience of the profession. The Albanian pavilion and its public program act as a temporary version of this space, on display and discussing Albania's evolving architectural identity. These conversations will continue beyond the exhibition through a podcast, created in collaboration with KOOZARCH, ensuring that those unable to attend in Venice can also engage with these dialogues.

Anneke Abhelakh on the Content and Curation of the Albanian Pavilion

An interview by Federica Sofia Zambelletti, Founder of KOOZARCH

Public Program One

Release Date: Thursday, 8 May

Available on KOOZARCH's podcast channels

On Agency

Public Program Two

Event Date: Thursday, 3 July at 12:00

Format: Podcast

Guests (tbc): Elidor Mëhilli, Andi Eftimi

Albania's built environment has long been a reflection of its political and economic transformations. From centralized planning under socialism to the unregulated expansion of the post-communist decades, architecture has navigated shifting constraints and newfound freedoms. Prior to the 1970s, there was no dedicated school of architecture. The architect, as an intellectual who could question and think freely, didn't exist as such. First and foremost, he was a worker and then a technician who worked rigorously, following the ideology as the only theoretical framework. After the 1970s, the school of architecture became a space for the children of the

politburo. No longer just technicians, they now aimed to interpret the doctrine of "socialist in content and nationalist in form", reshaping the profession. But can one truly be an architect under an oppressive regime?

Today, architects are involved in almost everything, and recently the term 'local architect' has gained significance. Perhaps it's not that recent, as historically most of the largest public projects have been designed by foreign architects and the locals have always carried out the construction. Unlike many places where architects operate within rigid frameworks, those in Albania must balance their creative freedom with a commitment to the collective good. How will this relationship push the boundaries of the profession in a rapidly changing country? Foreign architects do more than design. They navigate competing interests and introduce long-term thinking into a sector often driven by short-term gains. Why is the foreign architect needed and what balance do they provide?

Elidor Mëhilli - is a historian specializing in modern Europe, authoritarian regimes, and transnational history, with a focus on socialism and the Cold War. His research, particularly in *From Stalin to Mao: Albania and the Socialist World*, explores Albania's architectural and industrial landscapes within broader ideological frameworks. Mëhilli, originally from Albania, is a professor at Hunter College, CUNY, and has been a visiting scholar at institutions such as Columbia University and the Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung.

Andi Eftimi - is an architect and urban planner, serving as a partner at Atelier 4, an Albanian architecture and planning studio. His work spans residential, commercial, and public projects, engaging with Albania's evolving architectural landscape from post-socialist urban transitions to contemporary large-scale developments. Eftimi has collaborated with international firms such as 51N4E, Archea Associati, and MVRDV, contributing to transformative architectural and urban design projects in Albania and beyond.

Freedom

Public Program Three

Event Date: Thursday, 3 July at 16:00

Format: Podcast

Guests (tbc): Lea Ypi, Elisabetta Terragni

Freedom is not widely discussed in today's Albanian society, either as a personal one or of a more complex state. The knowledge of freedom is modest, yet the word itself is widely used. To understand post-dictatorial Albanian society, it's important to first consider the country's unique past. For nearly half a century, Albania was one of the most isolated and tightly controlled communist regimes in the world. The state dictated every aspect of life, cutting off access to outside influences and enforcing a strict ideological framework. During this time, two-thirds of the population lived in rural areas, in small communities shaped by state-imposed repression. Meanwhile, the remaining third of the population lived in cities, where bits and pieces of Western culture managed to filter through, creating a distorted and fragmented view of the outside world.

Then, almost overnight, the country transitioned abruptly from total control to a chaotic sense of freedom—unstructured and without hierarchy. What did freedom mean to a society that had never truly experienced it? Before, Albania had moved from a feudal system to forced collectivization, stripping

people of private ownership and reshaping their sense of individuality. After, in the post-dictatorship era, those who had once been bound by collective ideology suddenly became private landowners, forced to navigate a radically different political and social landscape. Despite sweeping legal changes, traditional moral values remained deeply rooted in pre-dictatorship social structures. While laws quickly adapted to the new political reality, societal norms lagged behind, creating tension. This clash between old values and new freedoms led to unregulated, spontaneous changes to the built environment.

In response, a growing recognition of the need to improve public spaces emerged. Efforts to aesthetically curate the urban landscape as a shared responsibility began to take shape, aiming to bring order and cohesion to a rapidly changing environment. These operations definitely restricted the individual freedom of reshaping the environment while providing a common good.

Lea Ypi - is a political theorist and historian specializing in Marxism, political philosophy, and the intellectual history of socialism. Her memoir *Free: Coming of Age at the End of History* critically examines Albania's transition from dictatorship to democracy, questioning the meaning of freedom in both systems. Ypi, originally from Albania, is a professor at the London School of Economics and a prominent voice in debates on ideology, individual agency, and historical continuity.

Elisabetta Terragni - is an architect and educator specializing in memory, space, and adaptive reuse. She has played a key role in preserving and interpreting Albania's architectural heritage as the curator of The House of Leaves (Albania's Museum of Secret Surveillance) and Kadare House, spaces that reveal layers of the country's past. Terragni is a professor at City College of New York, where she explores the relationship between built environments and collective memory in transitioning societies.

Lucjan Bedeni - is an artist and curator engaged with photography, archives, and visual memory. As director of the Marubi National Photography Museum since 2012, he has redefined Albania's photographic heritage through exhibitions that reflect on identity, ideology, and historical narrative. Bedeni was awarded the Ardhje Prize in 2009 and completed a residency at ISCP in New York. He has taught at the University of Shkodra and holds a doctorate focused on the origins of photography in Albania.

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