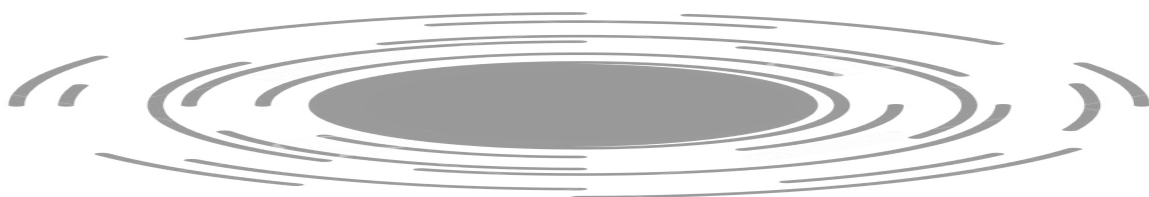


I PAPËRFUNDUAR



The whole situation
or should one say:
THE HOLE SITUATION



will unfold on and around Sheshi Skënderbej, the central square and artificial heart of Tirana. Since it was implanted by Austro-Hungarian occupiers in 1917 and refined by Italian fascist architects in the 1920s to instill a sense of grandezza, the space has undergone several large-scale remodellings and modernisation efforts. Since its inception, Sheshi Skënderbej has been somewhat of an open-air laboratory, in which desires, hopes and governance found their physical manifestation. However, the square remains estranged from the surrounding city until this day. It is a location detached from organic growth; the past, the present and the future are layered here in awkwardly circular sediments. Maybe that's why the notion of 'becoming' can be examined in some detail here, emphasised by the insularity of a profound time-space disconnect.





THE WEST IS ROLLING THROUGH TOWN.
SEJDIA'S CAR IN TIRANA, 1991

1991

Hajdin Sejdia had promised the city officials to build the largest, highest and most modern hotel across the whole Balkans. The 52-storey tower was to be the newest addition to the expanding Sheraton luxury hotel chain, overlooking Sheshi Skënderbej.¹ As the chairman of Iliria Holding — a company which may or may not exist — he had obtained all the necessary building permits with ease, grounded in the assertion to revitalise the heart of the city which would inevitably catapult Albania into capitalist bliss. The money to commence construction was raised mostly from ordinary citizens whom Sejdia had promised enormous returns and vouchers once the hotel would be in operation². Hajdin Sejdia had promised a lot — and the people had listened. After all, he was the only one in town riding around in a silver-grey Rolls Royce in these days of painful transit — evidently, he was a man who knew how to succeed in the new system, the only expert at hand for the time being. The Sheraton luxury hotel chain seemed to be the only party that Sejdia hadn't made any promises to. In fact, he had never even spoken to any of the chain's representatives, so Sheraton's CEOs were oblivious to the fact that a hotel tower was to be built in Tirana that sported their brand — but if they didn't know, they couldn't raise measures against it. Thus, Sejdia began excavating a large hole on the north-eastern corner of Sheshi Skënderbej, just behind the Palace of Culture. As the people saw him dig up the square, they invested even more money with him. Obviously, this man was for real.

¹ "Hajdin Sejdia is arrested, wanted for fraud," shekulli.com.al, April 2013.

² This form of scrap-financing was not an uncommon way of realizing large-scale real-estate developments in the early post-socialist period. Apart from collecting investments from individuals for promises of returns, a strategy of paying contractors supplying raw construction materials was to give them apartments in the very buildings that were to be built with their goods.

2019

If one squints really hard and then looks at the billboards dotting Sheshi Skënderbej and its immediate surroundings with renderings of spectacular soon-to-be real estate developments, one can almost see the buildings depicted on them already being manifested in space, piercing the actual skies with their actual bodies of steel and glass. And indeed, a handful of these structures of a promised better future have already made the transition from billboard into real space. Letting the gaze wander over Sheshi Skënderbej, they appear strangely displaced and out of context, but surely, this sensation will vanish once additional projects have been realised around the square.³ For now, though, the disconnect lingers.

³ Spoiler alert: The sensation will not vanish; quite to the contrary, actually.

Keeping up the squint just a little bit longer, one might be able to spot yet something else: a complex space of potential that hovers above, next to and in between the steel-and-glass facades and CGI-rendered promises on plywood billboards. This space of potential feels much older than the glitzy new buildings. Quite possibly, it was implanted here with the square itself. In order to sense this particular space, one has to revert more to fantasy than to sight, really. Wandering about on Sheshi Skënderbej, one can vaguely estimate this second layer of an invisible space — it seems that next to every image hovers the imaginary.

Perhaps it helps to get a better hold of this fleeting space of potential when looking at (or rather above) many of the smaller residential buildings throughout Tirana, which often times seem to be left unfinished. However, these buildings are not exactly shells or ruins, as their lower levels are fully furnished and inhabited — only their top floor is left bare. Where one would expect a roof, bare support columns of cast concrete are pointing skyward without actually supporting anything, it seems. People are living underneath skeletal



CAN YOU SEE THE SPACE OF POTENTIAL HOVERING ABOVE THE LIVING QUARTERS OF THIS SEEMINGLY HALF-FINISHED HOUSE?

structures while rods of reinforcement steel are protruding upwards through the ceilings as if the buildings were modular and one could add new storeys on top at any given point in time. Leaving buildings seemingly unfinished but still inhabiting them is a popular tax evasion scheme, as there are no fiscal duties to be paid on buildings that

⁴ This legal loophole, by the way, is by no means exclusive to Albania.

are still in a state of construction.⁴ But there is yet another, more elusive reason why **I PAPERFUNDAR**—‘the unfinished’—has been a popular building style since the early-90s, after Albania’s communist dictatorship had broken apart. If one looks past the bare brickwork and steel rods poking through ceilings, here, too, one can recognise the phenomenon of a second spatial layer. Sheshi Skënderbej may seem far, but the very same space of potential can be found hovering above these much more humble dwellings as well. In this type of building, the future and its promises becomes a vital element, an immaterial construction material, so to speak. Built into every finished house is the yet unfinished one, the one finding itself in a perpetual state of becoming. Astonishingly, the void above each of the residencies reveals its yet-to-be-realised expansion, it implies imminent prosperity and wealth. However, without the material support structure underneath, the immaterial and pending future could not be ‘seen’. At this point, it becomes apparent that the exposed steel rods and merlonesque columns piercing the sky are by no means signifiers of aborted construction. Quite to the contrary: they assume a crucial function for the buildings they protrude from — a narrative one, that is. They indeed are material cues pointing towards a speculative future. At work here is a cultural practice of employing material pointers in order to see that which is not there (yet), a process of visualising in the mind’s eye a state that has just-not-yet physically manifested, but its announcers have.

1997

A crowd is gathering around a building-sized square hole on the north-eastern corner of Sheshi Skënderbej, just behind the Palace of Culture — men, women, children. They brandish guns of various sizes,



IN THE FOREGROUND: THE SHERATON HOTEL TIRANA

looted from one of the country’s two enormous main armories in which the paranoid former dictator Enver Hoxha had hoarded all types of weapons during his 41-year reign.⁵ A man aims his handgun and starts firing into the hole. The others follow suit and the space erupts with

the crackle of countless live rounds shot into the pit, amplified to become a thundering noise echoed by the bleak walls of the surrounding blocks of flats from bygone socialist times.

⁵ It is estimated that in 1997, after the armories had been looted, every male above the age of ten owned at least one gun, bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p04ms060, 12/10/2018.

The people are shooting at all the promises that were made to them but never delivered, they are shooting at a building that is there but not there, they are shooting at the past, the present and the future.⁶

After all the magazines have been emptied, an eerie silence remains, trapped in between the same bleak walls of the surrounding blocks. The people are staring down into the hole from which a white mist is slowly rising and then settling as dust back on heads, leather jackets and firearms. The dust smells of gunpowder. In the background, which no one is paying attention to, a silver-grey Rolls Royce quietly glides past the crowd and disappears into the materialised communist past.

2021

The Bjarke Ingels Group had finished constructing their new cultural centre on the north-eastern corner of Sheshi Skënderbej — its communal area moulded from the negative space of a traditionally-shaped mosque turned inside out — adding yet another landmark site to the square.⁷ By now, the once-hesitant trickle of new investors in Tirana's promising market of real-estate development had swollen into a steady stream. The Western architects allegedly remained dumbfounded at the practice of commissioning enormous projects without having a clear purpose in mind for them.⁸ Of course, the architects in question were hardly ignorant regarding the actual use their buildings were put towards: intended to serve less as edifices satisfying an ordinary and practical need for real estate to accommodate housing or commercial space, they were rather dealing in the speculative field of enhancing a location's value. Adding 'starchitects' landmark buildings (or perhaps already their sheer announcement on plywood billboards) to a cityscape broadened this place's portfolio, raised trust and attracted future investment. The architects and their buildings were used as tokens, as bait, and they gladly played the part.

The latest addition of vertical voids (at this point only the foundations had been excavated) came from the *Al Habtoor Investment Group*, a developer based in the United Arab Emirates, who had promised the city officials to build the largest, highest and most modern tower across the whole Balkans, a building of spectacular 106 storeys in height.⁹

After investors' interest in Tirana had picked up, a new branch of business emerged that was centred around offering tours to show investors' representatives attractive locations for future real-estate development alongside famous sights around town. Most of these tours start and end on Sheshi Skënderbej, usually concluding underneath the spectacular mosaic dominating the south-facing facade of the National History Museum. 'The Albanians' is a socialist realist-style depiction of Albania's struggle for independence throughout history and its path ahead in communism, narrated through a series of 13 individuals, each one the

⁶ In the end, that is after the Albanian civil unrest of 1997 has been stifled by UN troops, shooting at nothing and no one in particular will have killed more than 2,000 people. More information: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albanian_Civil_War, 12/10/2018.

⁷ In recent years, other global players, amongst them the Dutch architecture giant MVRDV, had put buildings on and around Sheshi Skënderbej, or had remodelled it altogether — such as the Belgian architects of 51N4E, who a few years earlier had also contributed the first landmark tower to the square, the square-on-the-top, circle-on-the-bottom *TID Tower*. Daniel Libeskind (*Magnet*) and Stefano Boeri (*Biloku Cube*) had also built nearby. Many others had turned in proposals that work had already begun on or that were about to be realised, such as Coop Himmelb(l)au's new parliament building or BIG's bow tie-shaped National Theatre.

⁸ Freek Persyn, senior partner of 51N4E, stated in an interview about the development of *TID Tower*: "(...) the competition brief should have rather been to design a tower, regardless of its content. We gradually found out that this was the question. We discovered it because a lot of buildings in Tirana are left empty." *Accatone Magazine*, Issue 4, August 2016, p. 59.

⁹ "Dubai-based company plans to build \$250 mln high-rise in Tirana," *tiranatimes.com*. April 2017.

archaic and idealised embodiment of a moment in the country's history. The three central figures, foregrounded and slightly larger than the others — a worker with a leather apron, a militia man and a woman in a traditional dress — directly face the spectators standing on Sheshi Skënderbej. They are depicted marching towards the spectators, towards a future that lies beyond what can be seen in the mosaic.

Assuming the marching triumvirate's perspective, the visitors can only imagine what these larger-than-life figures have their eyes locked on. Communist fulfilment, as much as its counterpoint of capitalist bliss, must eternally remain in the realm of the imaginary. Projection, or rather: the unredeemed, is ideology's motor — no one knows this better than investors and their representatives, the field staff of the promise-crafting industry.



However, examining the imposing depiction from their own time-shifted vantage point, the spectators are looking into the past and see the display of a present that never was. They stare at the rendering of a socialist present, with autonomous and politicised subjects who by virtue of their own will and determination have obtained equal rights as well as equally distributed wealth, subjects who are blessed with literacy, a working health care system and solidarity.

Typically, at this point in every tour, the investors' representatives look at each other with a shudder and feel reassured that they are finding themselves on the right side of history. Now at ease that they have done everything correctly, they realise that this mosaic is essentially yet another advertisement billboard, a projection screen showcasing the rendering of a utopian condition. A few of the representatives might giggle at the audacity of the motif, and the inevitable irony, as they are reminded of their own billboards for new real estate developments gradually replacing the old promises by rendering their very own

utopian condition on plywood projection screens. If they were still in doubt up to this point, after looking at 'The Albanians' in the same way as looking at their own billboards, the investors' representatives are usually convinced that this is the right place and the right time to lay some money on the table. Squinting really hard, they can already map the renderings depicted on the billboards onto Sheshi Skënderbej,



TWO BILLBOARDS - ONE IN THE FRONT, THE OTHER IN THE BACK

and the revenue flows their masters' real-estate developments will produce make them salivate and gradually wet the stone tiles the square is paved with since its latest remodelling in 2017.



PUDDLES OF INVESTORS' SALIVA WETTING SHESHİ SKËNDERBEJ

FROM 1991 TO 2021

Between 1991 and some time around the year 2000, when it was levelled again over night, the void on the north-eastern corner of Sheshi Skënderbej, once the foundation of all good things to come, a just-not-yet graspable luxury hotel tower, had remained arrested in its state of becoming. It had lost its once luring draw, its power of summoning the imaginary as an almost corporeal entity had imploded and during these years it appeared as nothing more than a barren hole, a spottily overgrown wound, gradually filling up with trash and reminding every passerby of the aspirations as much as the treasures that were lost in its depth forever.

Shortly after digging the hole that was supposed to be the foundation of the grand Sheraton Hotel Tirana, Hajdin Sejdia had run off with all the money, along with the machinery and all his promises. For quite a while before the incident, there had been an arrest warrant against him

¹⁰ Vickers, Miranda; Pettifer, James: *Albania: From Anarchy to a Balkan Identity*. London, 1999. p. 131.

¹¹ "Sejdia's Hole" painfully reminded the people that the times they were a-changing. They briefly forgot that again in 1996 and 1997, when a series of large-scale pyramid scheme investment frauds rattled the country, pushing it to the brink of civil war by scamming the last steadfast practitioners of **PAPËRFUNDUAR**-magic out of their life savings (at least two-thirds of the population, mind you). A contemporary told the BBC: "People thought that this is what democracy looked like, this is what they had been hoping for – it was the smell and the wind of freedom making impossible things possible (...) this just seemed like a way to make it real, to touch it in a very rapid way, so it really led to a lot of happiness for a while, until things ended." www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p04ms060, December 2018.

circulating in Great Britain. He was wanted for fraud involving drilling equipment for the North Sea oil industry, but the Albanian authorities hadn't checked credentials.¹⁰ The projection of success hovering above the excavation site — known today only as 'Sejdia's Hole' — had simply been too compelling to avoid, and it had played masterfully on the cultural imaginary of the **i papërfunduar**, the unfinished, hardwired into the people's gaze to generate a mirage, 52 storeys in height.¹¹

However, even after these traumatic experiences of the 90s, the practice of rendering the future through **PAPËRFUNDUAR** wouldn't go away around Sheshi Skënderbej. Quite to the contrary, it rather set out to expand and tap into an entirely new demographic group of practitioners. An indicator for this might be the numerous billboards that have been erected around the square, announcing future real-estate projects via a display of elaborate CGI renderings. It doesn't quite seem that these over-pronounced advertisements have been placed there for the locals.

As we have seen, in a culture that is casually accustomed to **PAPËRFUNDUAR**, all that is needed for its imaginations to unfold is the hovering void — be it above a seemingly half-finished house or above a hole in the ground. So, who then is the target audience intended to examine the billboards, squint really hard in order to imagine the buildings depicted on them as being already manifested in space? Well, you already guessed it, it seems that instead of addressing local citizens, the billboards are imagination aids put up for foreign investors who aren't quite familiar with the cultural practice of seeing what's not there (yet) by means of nothing but negative space. Their imagination needs to be stimulated by more explicit visual cues — that is artificially manufactured images — which in spite of seeming substantial are just as ethereal as the imagined palaces above simple dwellings or hotel tower chimeras above excavation sites, of course. Just like bare concrete ceilings or holes in the ground (or socialist realist mosaics, for that matter), the billboards become screens for a projection of desire. The speculative computer graphics that are printed on plywood sheets and placed next to empty lots have the power to summon an iteration of magical thinking and are at once promise and its embodiment. What is more: the buildings that are conjured up by the prime agents in the business of value-enhancing (does one even want to call them 'starchitects' at this point?) and whose digital representations are printed onto those billboards might first and foremost be designed to convince as 2D-renderings, and not as built structures. If they look good on paper, it does not matter so much how they look in space, how they interact with their environment and whether they actually serve a practical need, as the built structures are themselves repeating,

prolonging and amplifying an eternal promise. Even when built and thus having replaced plywood with steel and glass, these units remain projection screens. They are nothing but the materialised renderings of a promised future and a speculative currency of growth fiction¹², as they become the very void upon which more desires can be projected, and their hollow units serve as the ground floors to the imaginary palace. At play here is a pathological situation of imaginary world-building with actual consequences. Palaces and luxury hotels — if ever erected — are spatial manifestations of the virtual pulsing beneath their brittle outer shells. They remain mere containers of capital, vaults as much as voids that generate the fever curve of eternal growth. As long as new incarnate mirages are perpetually announced and occasionally spat out to translate promises into space, the investors' saliva will remain flowing until the next inevitable financial crisis (the global equivalent of a shady businessman running off with suitcases full of life savings) dries out their mouths and liquidity gives way to that rancid taste of the day after the bubble burst. As one laconic Goldman Sachs-employee once pinpointed this frightening detachment from all that is solid: "Liquidity is there until it isn't."

¹² "Buildings became such an important currency because they were not just a place to save your money but a place to make even more money. This means much of Tirana was not built to satisfy a need for housing per se, but as an investment by individuals to retain his or her own wealth. Much of the city is quite densely built, but occupation can be very low. There are no exact numbers on this, but many buildings and apartments in the city are unoccupied and empty." Battisti, Simon: "Marrhëdenie: Negotiate is to have a Relationship," von Lenthe, Jonas. *Responding to Particular Needs at a Precise Moment*, Leipzig, 2018, p. 10.

2021

On a hot August day, a stately silver-grey Rolls Royce limousine enters Sheshi Skënderbej from the far side and slowly glides towards yet another group of investors being shown the impressive mosaic on the National History Museum's facade. Hasn't all traffic been banned here since the 2017 remodelling?! Small groups of locals who are scattered around the square in loose patterns seem to magically have formed some sort of cordon to let the car roll through — as if they already knew where it was heading. No one shows a reaction to this unusual sight and certainly no one seems to take offense to the vehicle drifting through an all-pedestrian zone. Looking at the tire tracks left after the limousine crosses a series of watery puddles, one could almost get the impression that it is being pulled across the square by an invisible magnet. The vehicle has reached the group of investors. It seems to float. The car's tinted windows reflect the towering mosaic and next to it one can make out BIG's massive new cultural centre on the north-eastern corner of Sheshi Skënderbej, lying there like a stranded quartered whale, bare and unused. Strangely, the window's reflection shows yet another new building rising majestically into the skies just behind the cultural centre. Albeit being higher than all other buildings — it must be a good 350 meters — none of the investors had noticed it before.

Its vertically spiring shape is drawn into the sky in slightly blurry squiggles. Too grandiose to be an optical illusion, one can be almost certain that there really is a marvellously gleaming tower of unusual organic shape dwarfing all the other buildings around. Turning their heads in the direction of this impressive building to verify their observation the investors can't see a thing, but as they rub their baffled eyes and once more stare at the reflection in the car's windows, the miraculous tower reappears. Casually, the glass barrier rolls down and the reflection gives way to a stout gentleman in a cream-coloured three-piece suit gently stroking his moustache. The hint of a smile is playing around the corners of his mouth as he opens it to speak.

A brief closing remark: The notion of reading 'the unfinished' as a projection screen was chiefly informed by my own shortcomings as I am not personally familiar with either the city of Tirana or Albanian culture, a condition prompting me to project my own fair share of speculations into the obvious void at this commission. Hence, remotely exploring the local situation through various media made looking for patterns a positivist endeavor of sorts.

I do owe many cues to Jonas von Lenthe' extraordinarily well-informed book *Responding to Particular Needs at a Precise Moment* (Spector Books, 2018).