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Why are so many unusual skyscrapers being built in Tirana?



Starr Charles | 13 February 2025 | 24 comments

Tirana is becoming an unlikely hotspot for offbeat architecture as politicians court high-profile foreign architects to transform the Albanian capital into a “world city”. Starr Charles reports.

“Tirana is changing so fast, so very, very fast, and in an explosive way,” Italian architect Stefano Boeri told Dezeen.

“It’s very difficult to find an architect that is not working in Tirana or Albania right now,” added OODA co-founder Diogo Brito. “What we are seeing in Albania is quite unique.”

Focus on “artistic expression”

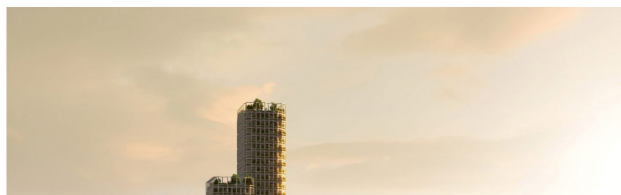
A wave of radical high-rises are currently proposed or under construction in the Albanian capital, often designed by prominent foreign studios and often taking outlandish forms.

Examples include a tower in the shape of the former communist state’s national hero by Dutch studio MVRDV and another that resembles a stack of gabled houses, designed by Italian studio Network of Architecture (NOA) in collaboration with locals Atelier 4.

Tirana is a rare case of an environment in which architects are being encouraged to push the boundaries, NOA co-founder Lukas Rungger told Dezeen.

“It’s a maximum of artistic expression that goes first, and then you find ways of building it,” he said of the design and build process in the city.

“I think the brief is much more to produce a piece of art or a sculpture, or anything that is starting more from storytelling, than from a structural approach or an aesthetics approach.”



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Above: OODA has unveiled designs for a pair of kinked skyscrapers in the city. Image by Plomp. Top: MVRDV has designed a tower in the shape of a head. Image by MVRDV

Portuguese firm **OODA** is among the most active foreign studios in Albania, with eight proposals under development.

These include the **Hora Vertikale** skyscraper, composed of 13 staggered cubes reaching 140-metres-tall, and its more recently unveiled **Bond Tower**, which will comprise two connected skyscrapers rising 50 storeys and designed to evoke "the grace of ballet".

OODA co-founder Brito said that overseas architects are being drawn in by the creative freedom on offer, facilitated by relatively relaxed planning laws and building codes compared to elsewhere in Europe.



Read:
Eight unusual skyscrapers set to transform the skyline of Tirana

"[Albania] is giving a great deal of power to the architects in order to design with much less bureaucracy and laws and coding that we find in other countries, but also giving us architects more responsibility to do it well," he told Dezeen.

"What we are seeing in Albania is quite unique," he added. "We are getting the possibility to work in such striking and amazing opportunities, like big towers and amazing resorts in the south, where the architect plays a significant role in all the project scope."

"All the most prominent architects are just starting to build there or approving projects, and it's very difficult to find an architect that is not working in Tirana or Albania right now."



The **Hora Vertikale** skyscraper will comprise 13 stacked blocks. Image by Plomp

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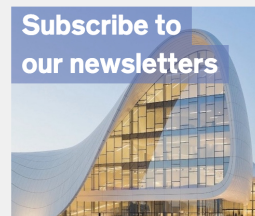


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the flora verukae skyscraper will comprise 13 stacked blocks. image by r1omp

The influx of foreign architects is helping to plug an experience gap in Albania's architecture workforce and raise the profile of the existing design scene, according to Atelier4 director Andi Efthimi.

"We don't try to bring only big names, just in the beginning, just to be taken seriously," he told Dezeen. "Right now, only the people that are having these nice and creative ideas are the ones having new projects."

Contemporary architecture playing a "main role"

The boom is being spearheaded by Tirana's mayor, Erion Veliaj, who was elected in 2015, and Albanian prime minister and fellow Socialist Edi Rama.

They have made architecture and urban design a key part of the strategy to boost Tirana's international reputation as Albania seeks to attract more tourists and sustain economic growth.

"I think it's a very clear idea, which is to make a city that is really a world city," said Boeri, who was commissioned to develop the [Tirana 2030 masterplan](#).

Boeri's plan prioritises transport services, green areas, controlled urban expansion and the protection of the city's architectural heritage.

He has since opened an office in Tirana, in recognition of the fact that it is becoming an important architecture hotspot.



Boeri's studio is also designing one of its vertical-forest towers for Tirana. Image courtesy of Stefano Boeri Architetti

"[Rama] decided to make Tirana a place where the presence of contemporary architecture is really playing a main role in the future of the city," explained Boeri. "That's why he's interested in architects coming from all the parts of the world."

The concept of internationalism is still a relatively novel one in Albania, which after being occupied by fascist Italy and the Nazis during world war two spent much of the 20th century under an oppressive communist dictatorship, isolated even from the Soviet Union and China.

A chaotic transition to capitalism in the 1990s stunted its growth, and despite greater political stability in recent years it remains one of the poorest countries in Europe.

"It was a closed city"

However, Tirana does have a track record of using architecture as a tool for social transformation.

Rama, an artist who served as Tirana mayor from 2000 to 2011, led initiatives to restore the city's public buildings and inviting development through international competitions.

Most famously, he had communist-era structures painted in bright colours and patterns.

"I think what Edi Rama has done is super important," Boeri said. "It was a way to not erase these legacies, but try to superimpose these legacies and other processes that are more oriented to a cosmopolitan identity for Tirana."

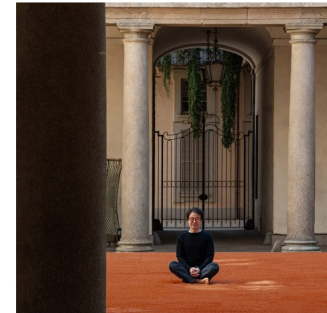
"It was a closed city in a closed front with a closed imagination, and they had no possibility to communicate; they were completely isolated."



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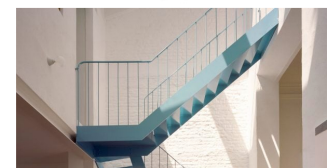
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Puzzle Tirana was designed in response to Albania's history. Image by NOA and Atelier4

Some of Tirana's new architecture picks up on the theme of reframing the past in a positive way.

For example, NOA and Atelier 4's mixed-use tower of stacked, house-shaped volumes, named Puzzle Tirana, is described by Rungger as a "response to what happened" in Tirana under communism.

"Everybody needed to be the same," he said. "I think this is why it's so open nowadays."

"Of course, it's a very complex thing and there's many different layers that are coming together, but I think our design proposal for Puzzle Tirana was touching on what we have found so far, not just on a built context, but also on a cultural, social and evolutionary context of the last decades."

"The country doesn't shy away from its past"

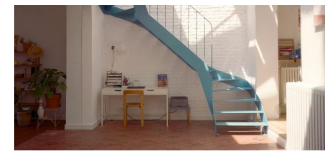
Another building that seeks a connection to the past is MVRDV's Skanderbeg Building, which was designed to double as a "figurative sculpture" of the country's prominent historical figure Gjergj Kastriot – known locally as Skanderbeg – who revolted against Ottoman rule in the 15th century.

Currently being constructed in the city's Skanderbeg Square, similarly named after the national hero, the 85-metre-tall structure is modelled on Kastriot's bust.

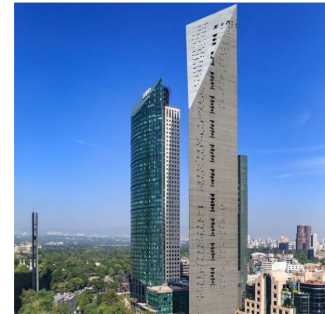
The widest part of the building depicts his shoulders while the upper levels round off to create a head-like shape. Protrusions in the form of balconies are intended to echo a nose, ears and beard.

"The country doesn't shy away from its past – it wants to confront it and make it part of its future," said MVRDV co-founder Winy Maas. "That's where architecture can be a powerful tool."

"As the city continues to grow and evolve, it's crucial that all new developments strike a balance between innovation and respect for the past."



Ten skyscrapers that buck the all-glass trend

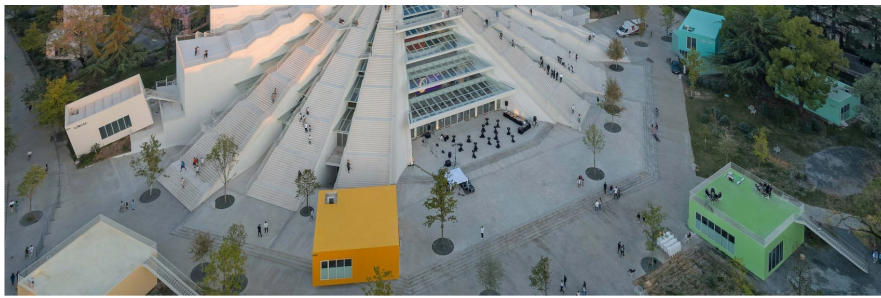


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MVRDV transformed the Pyramid of Tirana into a cultural hub. Photo by Ossip van Duivenbode

Working with local studio [IRI Architecture](#), MVRDV also recently completed a playful renovation of the Pyramid of Tirana, first opened in the 1980s as an homage to dictator Enver Hoxha but now a cultural hub.

The pyramid, as well as the painting of the communist-era blocks, form part of a strong tradition of architectural eclecticism in Tirana that contemporary architects are seizing upon with zeal.

"Tirana is a city where diversity and uniqueness thrive, shaping all parts of society," said Maas.

"This is also evident in how the city grows – more like a colourful collection than a uniform whole," he added. "The newly emerging designs create something unique and help the city stand out."

"A risk to become a little bit too heterogeneous"

Boeri has attempted to encourage this architectural diversity in his masterplan.

"I insist on the fact that this variety of styles is a way to import the roots of creativity of different architects and designers from different parts of the world, and to install them in Tirana," he explained.

It is a philosophy that comes with risks, however – namely the potential for a hotchpotch of badly mismatched buildings.

"We need to do it well, otherwise there will be this massiveness of ideas that are not well done," said Brito.

Boeri too is alive to the challenge, particularly as development in Tirana shows no sign of slowing down.

"It's very strong this kind of explosion of openness and this explosion of contemporaneity, which has a risk to become a little bit too heterogeneous," he said.

That could mean that, as in China, where [president Xi Jinping famously put a stop to "weird architecture"](#), Albania's status as a playground for ambitious foreign architects may prove to be short-lived.

"Tirana is changing so fast, so very, very fast, and in an explosive way," said Boeri. "I think now is the moment to propose new rules."

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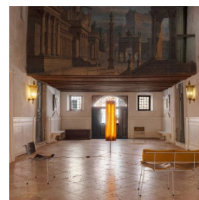
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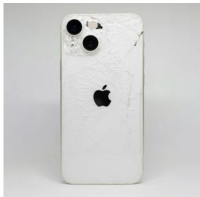
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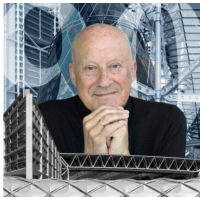
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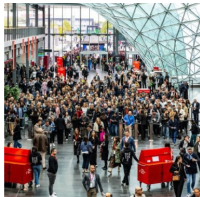
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Scanderbeg is a rather important historical figure across Europe. A simple Google search before you hit publish, folks...
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So much better than the bland SimpsonHaugh rectangles that are dominating Manchester's redevelopment!
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Without an underlying master plan, this is a dangerous development for Tirana.
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I dislike having to link geopolitics with architectural development but I'm very curious about where the money is coming from to build all these towers. In 2024 , the Albanian PM OK'd a \$1.5B investment closely linked to Jared Kushner to develop a resort along the coastline. <https://balkaninsight.com/2025/01/22/albanian-pm-accused-of-ceding-island-to-curry-favour-with-trump/>
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- tom roberts**
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I love the one with the little houses.
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- Migena**
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Even a paid article can't hide the truth. The residents of Tirana know all too well the disfigurement the city has suffered over the past decade. Tirana has become a massive money-laundering machine, filled with scandalous high-rises that contribute nothing to its cultural heritage or aesthetic appeal. Beyond their soulless design, these towers have worsened urbanization issues, exacerbating problems with construction, roads, and parking. Today, Tirana stands as one of the most chaotic and poorly planned cities to live in. As for the authors of this article – who knows how much they were paid to write it? Especially now, when both Architect Boeri and the recently arrested Mayor of Tirana are under investigation for corruption.
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- Deezen** Mod → Migena
6 months ago
Hi Migena, thanks for your comment! Deezen was not paid to write this article. All partnership content is clearly labelled. More information here: <https://www.deezen.com/partnerships/>
Best, Saudatu/Deezen.
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— ...
- BrettS**
6 months ago edited
Generally, trying just a bit too hard? Although I do like the Hora Vertikale project.
0 0 Reply Share

— ...



Sokol Hazizi 
6 months ago edited

— ...

Tirana is a free canvas space for every influential Architect's brush to paint with a free artistic spirit, but the prospects for the people actually living in Tirana are dire, to say the least. Not only do these developments not abide by the building site rules, like staying inside the fence with machinery and materials, but they also occupy indefinitely public spaces by encompassing them into their building site, like whole sidewalks and car lanes. The irony is that the bigger and more famous the project, the more they are allowed to abuse public space and architecture.

The second and most relevant point is that these buildings are tearing the (used to be) better urban fabric of Tirana. While the old grid still lives on, this new more aggressive one is being applied on top, devouring virtually every urban public space and increasing the building density to almost collapse throughout the inner ring of Tirana: Almost every kind of transportation and movement is affected, and emergency paths are non-existent anymore.

The recreational activities are being severed by compartmentalizing the remaining ground spaces into glazed cubes to give to adjacent businesses, mainly cafes. You cannot find a public bench anymore, you have to pay for seating nowadays by buying a coffee. All this is under the stench of a growing gentrification: always more exclusive spaces, always more wealthy people disregarding the law, always fewer services and goods for the rest, and a growing feeling of not belonging.

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J.P.  → Sokol Hazizi
6 months ago

— ...

The money to build these projects seems abundant--such a shame that no (even *general*) master planning was done. But it appears the government just says "Yes" if a developer says "Here's money--I want my building right there."

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Verald Selita
7 months ago edited

— ...

The timing of your article is not the best. The mayor of Tirana, Erion Veliaj, was arrested a few days ago for corruption and money laundering.

👍 2 🗨️ 0 Reply Share >



J.P.  → Verald Selita
6 months ago

— ...

Elsewhere in Albania, the PM is literally selling off the country to the highest bidder--in this case the Trumps. <https://balkaninsight.com/2025/01/22/albanian-pm-accused-of-ceding-island-to-curry-favour-with-trump/>

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Karl
7 months ago

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Junk.

👍 2 🗨️ 1 Reply Share >



pims 
7 months ago edited

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Isn't Albania a hotspot for money laundering?

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arhmatic  → pims
5 months ago edited

— ...

Evidence?

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Alfafafafelmoose
7 months ago

— ...

Interesting stuff, well done to them 🍷

👍 1 🗨️ 2 Reply Share >



Marius 
7 months ago edited

— ...

I saw Tirana before the end of communism, it was an interesting, not an overwhelming experience. Respecting a couple of fine Albanians I know and work with, I have to say: give it time, cannot expect immediate transformation.

Quoting my grandfather: a Tuxedo fits well only in the second generation, for tails, you need three, or more.

👍 1 🗨️ 0 Reply Share >



apscoradiales 
7 months ago edited

— ...

Albania, Tirana in particular is trying to catch up to rest of Europe. Sometimes good decisions will be made, and sometimes bad ones will be made too.

👍 3 🗨️ 1 Reply Share >



Souji
7 months ago edited

— ...

Another example of "money doesn't buy taste". I'm just having trouble with which is worse, Olgiati's mess or OODA's mess, either way, all these renders just seem like pseudo-architecture and give the profession a bad name.

👍 2 🗨️ 6 Reply Share >



AlfredHitchcock 
7 months ago

— ...

Presumably because they have very flexible planning laws and will allow anything to be built for the right price.

👍 0 🗨️ 0 Reply Share >



RK

7 months ago edited

As Katya Adler's interesting two-part series on the Balkans discusses <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0027nkk> Albania is quickly becoming a hotspot for global inward investment owing to the amount of rare earth metals it sits on.

Experience shows that whenever states vie for control there's almost always an accompanying slush fund which often manifests itself in the form of new buildings. Frequently 'iconic' / 'instagrammable' / 'luxury'. Going by the state of the proposed buildings that have been showcased on dezeen it would seem reasonable to assume that there's probably a lot of Chinese and / or Middle Eastern money flowing in Tirana at the moment.

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Whateverandeveramen

7 months ago

This article proves you should never ask an architect about economics.

👍 3 🗨️ 4 Reply Share ›



Frank Lloyd Wrong ➔ Whateverandeveramen

7 months ago edited

This article proves you should never ask architects PERIOD. It's like the blind leading the blind most times.

👍 2 🗨️ 3 Reply Share ›

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