

Connecting Urban Post-War Heritage of Totalitarian Regimes in Europe: the ATRIUM Cultural Route

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Introduction

A number of European cities bear the marks of the dictatorships and totalitarian regimes of the 20th century. The difficulty of dealing with this difficult material legacy and the debates generated around these sensitive and controversial material witnesses of traumatic events has been conceived of in terms of “dissonant heritage”, defined in Tunbridge and Ashworth’s work (1995) as a heritage which contains “messages that are dissonant in the context of the prevailing norms and objectives or in terms of the dominant ideology”.¹ The ATRIUM project (2011–2013) and the subsequent cultural route “Architecture of Totalitarian Regimes in Europe’s Urban Memory” which emerged from the project, with its specific focus on the architectural and built heritage of these regimes, is an example of the application of this general interest in dissonant heritage to a concrete situation. Its strong roots in local contexts and activity within the framework of the Council of Europe may enable it to be a useful example of the way in which local citizens can connect with this dissonant heritage within a transnational, European context.

This article will try to illustrate the ways in which ATRIUM has approached this dissonant heritage since 2011. It will begin by giving a general presentation of ATRIUM, followed by a brief history and overview of ATRIUM’s origins as the result of a funded European project. It will then explain the importance of the involvement of local citizens in the management of this particular heritage and the “bottom-up” and integrated approach which ATRIUM has encouraged. Lastly, it will discuss the importance of the transnational framework in which the route operates.

I. What is ATRIUM?

ATRIUM is a cultural route certified by the Council of Europe through the Enlarged Partial Agreement and its Cultural Routes programme. This programme aims at developing mutual understanding between European citizens by supporting cultural routes which focus on topics of cultural heritage that operate in a European framework. Following an application for certification, a cultural route can be awarded the “Cultural Route of the Council of Europe” label. Although there is an emphasis on sustainable and ethical cultural tourism, the primary function of the programme is to promote certain shared European values, such as democracy, human rights, and cultural exchange. The routes, then, function above all as *cultural* routes, connecting different European towns and cities within a single cultural frame, and not primarily as

tourist routes. Since 2014, ATRIUM has been a recognised Cultural Route of the Council of Europe,² one of the 45 such routes in 2021.³

ATRIUM’s focus is on the built architectural and urban heritage of totalitarian or dictatorial regimes.⁴ From Fascist Italy in the period 1922 to 1945, to the socialist societies of Eastern Europe from 1945 to 1989, it brings together different European experiences with the aim of uncovering shared historical elements and enabling citizens to come to terms with the material heritage of these oppressive regimes and their related traumatic stories. The novelty of ATRIUM is that this legacy is recognised as a part of a shared European heritage with a strong dialectical relation to the construction of democratic Europe as we know it. To reflect on this legacy, both local and transnational, the ATRIUM Cultural Route promotes critical discussions and multi-perspective approaches in the local communities around the themes of architecture and memory. The objective is thus not only a reflection on architecture or memory, but on the connections that can be made between these two terms.

Examples of material legacy of the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century in terms of built urban and architectural heritage can be found in each of the 18 member cities or towns of the route. At the time of writing, these are located in five different European countries in southern and eastern Europe: in Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Italy and Romania. ATRIUM therefore focuses on the legacy of Fascism, as in the case of the Italian municipalities (Bertinoro, Carbonia, Castrocaro Terme, Cervia, Cesenatico, Ferrara, Forlì, Forlimpopoli, Merano, Predappio, Torviscosa and Tresignana) as well as in Croatia given the Italian expansion in the Fascist period (Labin and Rasa); and on the legacy of Communism or Socialism, as in the case of Bulgaria (Dimitrovgrad and Sofia) and Romania (Iași and Ștei). Albania, with its built heritage from both the period under Italian fascist domination and from the post-war socialist period, presents legacies from both types of regimes.

To understand ATRIUM’s democratic position and its vehement opposition to any positive reassessment of any totalitarian or anti-democratic regime, the statute of the association states in article 2 that its activity “is inspired by the principle of the promotion of the values of democracy and cooperation between peoples as the foundation for peaceful and civil coexistence. In no case and in no way does the Association accept expressions and forms of exculpation for totalitarian, dictatorial, authoritarian or non-democratic governments”.⁵ This article in its statute has been considered necessary in order to make its political and ethical position clear. This is particularly important in a context in which



Fig. 1 Ceramic on the town hall in Dimitrovgrad (Bulgaria)

some political nostalgia could interpret ATRIUM as a way of rehabilitating the regimes.

The management of the architectural and urban heritage of regimes can represent a significant challenge for any local administrators looking for new solutions to transform this heritage into an asset for the democratic and sustainable development of their communities. It should be pointed out, however, that ATRIUM does not manage directly any of the sites and has responsibility only for the running of the transnational association. ATRIUM is thus principally concerned with promoting and encouraging a critical reflection on the processes regarding the management of this complicated and dissonant material heritage, encouraging at the same time its preservation rather than destruction.

II. ATRIUM as a European project

As a European cultural route, ATRIUM has an important transnational dimension, but the original ATRIUM project had local origins, in Forlì in Italy. From 1922, with the rise to power of Benito Mussolini, this medium-sized provincial city underwent an important process of urban transformation and expansion. Indeed, Mussolini intended to build a new

Fascist city, a “*città del Duce*”, conceived as a showcase for the regime, a stopping place for pilgrims on their way to his birthplace in Predappio, a small town in the hills outside Forlì. This city has therefore a very particular dissonant heritage.⁶ After the end of the Second World War, the difficult nature of the architectural legacy of the Fascist regime was repressed and not openly discussed.⁷ In the early 21st century, when the question of what to do with this recent and unexplored heritage was raised, the response was mixed, with a rejection of the Fascist regime on the one hand, and the desire to promote critically this historical past and architectural heritage on the other. These two influences led to the formulation of the ATRIUM project, born as a European project with a significant European dimension. The project involved a wide partnership made up of 18 different institutions from eleven countries – Italy, Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Hungary, Romania, Slovenia, Serbia, and the Slovak Republic – involving nine local or city governments, two tourism development agencies, universities and research centres, two information technology experts and one National Ministry (the Bulgarian Ministry of Culture). The creation of this network led to the presentation of the original ATRIUM project in September 2010 in response to a call entitled “Development of transnational synergies for



Fig. 2 Former Casa del Fascio e dell'Ospitalità in Predappio (Italy)

sustainable growth area”, part of the South East Europe Programme of the European Union. From January 2011 to June 2013, the ATRIUM-SEE project had as its specific objective the foundation of a cultural route, with outputs including the establishment of a knowledge base, the construction of an institutional framework to manage the network, and three experimental pilot events. The objective of the project was to give birth to a cultural route which could approach the legacy of totalitarian regimes from a new perspective. In this way there could be a move away from the framework of traumatic memory towards a multi-faceted approach to the heritage as dissonant in which the material traces of regimes could be examined thoroughly and interpreted in diverse and complex ways.

One of the particular strengths of the original project lay in the multiplicity of stakeholders, who joined forces to provide a sound knowledge base. This was particularly important in a field as perfidious as dissonant heritage which necessarily treats a topic that was experienced differently in different cultures. This work resulted in two extensive research reports: the *ATRIUM Transnational Survey of architectural case studies* with 71 case studies in ten different countries, and a *Manual of Wise Management, Preservation, Reuse and Economic Valorisation of Architecture of Totalitarian*

Regimes of the 20th Century.⁸ These documents framed the field of study of ATRIUM and demonstrated the importance and need for critical research on individual architects, buildings or urban developments on a case-by-case basis. The construction of this knowledge base, as well as the institutional framework and the pilot events that concluded the project, were made possible through the financial support given by the South East Europe Transnational Cooperation Programme of the European Union. In this way, European institutions, and in particular the programmes working towards transnational cohesion,⁹ demonstrated their support for a project which was, and continues to be, delicate, complex and controversial from a political and historical point of view.

The particular constraints of project funding, however, entailed some significant weaknesses. One of these was geographical limitation: the programme funding was restricted to the 16 countries eligible for funding under the South East Europe programme,¹⁰ and there was thus no possibility of including in the project partners from, for example, Germany, Poland or Spain. Another, naturally, was the finite temporal scope of funding, limited to the period 2011–2014, covering start-up costs but with no further financing to guarantee sustainability.



Fig. 3 Former Enver Hoxha Museum in Tirana (Albania)

We may add a further comment on the integrated approach to dissonant heritage. The original project, as has been mentioned, brought together a variety of different actors, including universities, research centres, local associations, tourism agencies, and local authorities. This variety was crucial to the constitution of an appropriate knowledge base for the route. But the different perspectives and interests of these actors made it very difficult to integrate them into a single workable governing body that could subsequently manage the route. Thus, the statute of the transnational association, the institutional framework which was chosen to govern the route, laid down that full membership was to be limited to municipalities and local governments, with other actors being involved only with subsidiary status as part of a ‘University and Research Centre Network’ or as ‘Friends of the Route’. Addressing the question of how to include different actors in the strategic running of the route, and in general their inclusion in the development of the management of dissonant heritage sites, remains a pressing concern.¹¹

III. Integrating local citizens

Since 2014, the ATRIUM cultural route and its members, mainly local municipalities, have been committed to the integration of communities in their work. Indeed, it is felt that active citizen participation and involvement is of paramount importance to ATRIUM: citizens can be the best interpreters or ambassadors of their own heritage. Local communities are therefore integrated as principal actors in the co-construction of new meanings and the reinterpretation of their heritage. Many of the projects carried out by ATRIUM in Forlì, for example, have invited citizens to contribute to a reflection on the issues raised. In particular, ATRIUM has funded and promoted a series of plays, exhibitions and short films on themes related to totalitarianism or non-democratic regimes and in particular their relation to architecture and urban structures.¹² ATRIUM has thus demonstrated its willingness to offer a variety of approaches to the dissonant heritage of the totalitarian regimes, especially through collaboration with artists, actors and video art professionals. A good example is the play *Il Muro/Die Mauer*, which tells the stories of the individuals who struggled to cross the Berlin Wall and

those who eventually brought it down. The play, the result of two years of research including numerous interviews, was presented to 500 high school students from Forlì.¹³

Another example is the “Totally Lost” project, a European competition launched by a local association from the Forlì area, *Spazi Indecisi* (undecided spaces). Professional and amateur photographers and videographers were asked to send in photographs or videos of abandoned architecture relating to a totalitarian or non-democratic past with the aim of discovering and mapping this heritage. The competition received a huge response from citizens, and a large number of photos and videos were submitted. The selected images were then exhibited in Forlì but also subsequently in Luxembourg and Gyor (Hungary) as part of an ongoing, open project.¹⁴

This example of an activity supported by ATRIUM shows that its focus is not only on new knowledge but also and perhaps above all on the promotion of a new awareness among local cultural associations and young people. In this, the Route adheres to the principles and procedures of the *Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society*,¹⁵ otherwise known as the Faro Convention, formulated in 2005. This convention follows a bottom-up approach by giving importance to “the role of civil society and communities in heritage governance as a way to promote human rights and democracy (...), people-centred, inclusive, forward-looking, more integrated, sustainable and cross-sectorial approaches to cultural heritage, and (...) innovative models of participatory governance and management of heritage”.¹⁶ In accordance with the Faro Convention, ATRIUM aims to involve local communities in the appropriation and creation of their own heritage. The purpose is to help to establish new relationships between local authorities, local associations and, of course, citizens, in order to stimulate the development of projects for the benefits of local communities.

IV. ATRIUM as a European cultural route

In 2013, the network involved in the original transnational cooperation project created the ATRIUM Association, a non-profit association under Italian law, and in 2014, ATRIUM was officially awarded the “Cultural Route of the Council of Europe” label. Recognition on the part of the Council of Europe is subject to a re-certification process that all certificated Cultural Routes have to undergo every three years in order to verify the extent to which they still comply with the values and the development criteria the Council itself lays down.

The European framework for ATRIUM is significant in three main ways. First, recognition and certification on the part of the Council of Europe provide ATRIUM with crucial international legitimacy. The Council of Europe has its roots in rights-based international jurisprudence, and its recognition of the work of ATRIUM gives it precisely the international, institutional and scientific authority which is crucial to its success. It is only too easy to misunderstand the intent of ATRIUM and interpret it as an organisation whose intentions are to reappraise positively non-democratic regimes. Its intent, instead, as we have pointed out, is to constitute a valid scientific and cultural frame within which to be able to

critically assess and evaluate the enormous physical impact of non-democratic regimes in 20th century Europe. But the positioning of ATRIUM on a knife-edge between this critical historical viewpoint and revisionism is always a balancing act, and international recognition of the Council of Europe is crucial to this positioning.

Second, the European framework enables ATRIUM to work with other institutions and associations with common objectives. The support and encouragement of the European Institute for Cultural Routes based in Luxembourg has been crucial in this respect, offering the opportunity to work alongside other cultural routes in a variety of activities. Collaboration with other routes enables them all to benefit from particular synergies and the development of managerial competences through the systematic sharing of best practices. The European framework has also allowed ATRIUM to collaborate successfully with other informal groups such as the Urban Agenda for the EU Partnership on Culture and Cultural Heritage, and in particular with the Action 10 ‘Dissonant Heritage’ group.¹⁷

Third, the cultural routes programme and the ‘quality control’ exercised by the Council of Europe helps the route identify and follow paths of development which are in line with overall international criteria for cohesion and development. For recertification, for example, the routes have to demonstrate activity and strategic planning in five key areas: research and development; European memory, history and heritage; cultural exchange for young people; contemporary cultural and artistic practice; and sustainable tourism. The Council of Europe, then, functions not only to certify and legitimate the individual cultural routes (particularly important regarding a route such as ATRIUM which deals with contested and difficult heritage), but also to give overall orientation in terms of the activities and strategic development of the route.

Conclusion

The European framework within which ATRIUM operates enables local municipalities and citizens to collocate the particular dissonance of their local heritage within a wider

geographical and historical framework. The construction of a common European perspective regarding the dissonant heritage of its totalitarian or authoritarian regimes will be slow and laborious. But the European perspective which the cultural routes programme has offered to ATRIUM may be a significant step in this construction.

ATRIUM has enabled a number of European cities with their own particular dissonances to come together to promote a common heritage built out of these individual experiences. The cities that make up the network include, at the time of writing, Forlì, the *città del Duce*; Carbonia and Tresigallo, foundation towns of Fascism, along with Labin and Rasa in present-day Croatia; Merano, a city impacted by the Italianisation of the Alto Adige region under Fascism; Tirana in Albania, with its architectural heritage from both the fascist and Enver Hoxa regimes; Ştei and Iaşi in Romania, with their traces of the Ceaucescu regime; and Dimitrovgrad, a city whose name inevitably recalls the leader of the Bulgarian Communist Party. These cities may at times have tried to forget parts of their history, but the past has a habit of coming back. ATRIUM has thus created a space, a forum in which these contested heritages can be discussed beyond local and national borders. In this way, dissonance can be embraced as an essential value and a key interpretive tool. Heritage is a relation between past and present, and must be constructed by local communities themselves through the participation of local citizens. Through the process of appropriation and heritage-creation proposed by ATRIUM, the legacy of totalitarian and dictatorial regimes can become a cultural heritage, something which cannot take place before this process of appropriation. Following the methodological approach of the Faro Convention, which provides the framework for its activities, this process of heritage-creation with local communities, in a European framework, can be seen as the key to the activity of the ATRIUM cultural route.

Credits

Fig. 1: © ATRIUM Archives

Fig. 2: © Luca Massari

Fig. 3: © Hélène Veilleux (*Spazi Indecisi* Archive)

¹ J. E. TUNBRIDGE and G. J. ASHWORTH, *Dissonant Heritage. The Management of the Past as a Resource in Conflict*, New York 1995, p. 30. See also T. LÄHDESMÄKI, L. PASSERINI, S. KAASIK-KROGERUS and I. VAN HUIS (eds.), *Dissonant Heritages and Memories in Contemporary Europe*, Basingstoke 2019.

² See Council of Europe, *Cultural Routes Management: from Theory to Practice. Step-by-step Guide to the Council of Europe Cultural Routes*, 2015.

³ Council of Europe, *Explore all Cultural Routes by Theme*, 2021 [Online <https://www.coe.int/en/web/cultural-routes/by-theme>. Accessed 08/10/2021].

⁴ The association was established for the purpose of “disseminating knowledge, protecting and promoting the European heritage both tangible and intangible – associated with the architecture and history of the 20th century, with special focus on periods marked by dictatorial and totalitarian regimes in Europe” (ATRIUM, “Art. 3 Purpose” in: *ATRIUM – Architecture of Totalitarian Regimes of the 20th Century in Europe’s Urban Memory Interpreted to Promote Human Rights and Democracy*, Association STATUTE – 2nd amendment approved on 16th May 2019 [General Assembly, Lastovo-Ubli HR], 2019, p. 2 [Online <https://www>.

- atriumroute.eu/about-us/atrium-association. Accessed 08/10/2021].
- ⁵ ATRIUM, “Art. 2 Principles” in: see footnote 4.
- ⁶ See in particular Ulisse TRAMONTI and Luciana PRATI, *La città progettata: Forlì, Predappio, Castrocaro. Urbanistica e architettura fra le due guerre*, Forlì 1999.
- ⁷ For this ‘minimalist’ approach to dissonance in the case of Forlì and Predappio, see Patrizia BATTILANI, Cristina BERNINI and Alessia MARIOTTI, *How to Cope with Dissonant Heritage: a Way towards Sustainable Tourism Development*, in: *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 2018. DOI: 10.1080/09669582.2018.1458856.
- ⁸ Both these publications can be consulted on the ATRIUM website (<https://www.atriumroute.eu/library/online-publications>). Accessed 08/10/2021.
- ⁹ The overall objective of the South East Europe programme, which ran from 2007 to 2013, was to improve “the territorial, economic and social integration process and contribute to cohesion, stability and competitiveness” of the countries eligible for financial support through the development of transnational partnerships [Online https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/atlas/programmes/2007-2013/crossborder/operational-programme-south-east-europe-see, accessed 08/10/2021].
- ¹⁰ These countries were Albania, Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Ukraine. In the case of Italy and the Ukraine, only some regions of the countries were eligible for funding (*ibid.*).
- ¹¹ A modification to the ATRIUM statute in 2019 allowed for the possibility that universities and research centres become full members of the Association.
- ¹² See the initiatives listed on the ATRIUM website under “Practices of Contemporary Art” <https://www.atriumroute.eu/about-us/chi-siamo/411-practices-of-contemporary-art>). Accessed 08/10/2021.
- ¹³ See ATRIUM, *ATRIUM and the 30th Anniversary of the Fall of the Berlin Wall, 2021* [Online <https://www.atriumroute.eu/events-tourism/events/359-atrium-and-the-30th-anniversary-of-the-fall-of-the-berlin-wall>. Accessed 08/10/2021].
- ¹⁴ See Spazi Indecisi, *Totally Lost, 2021* [Online <https://www.totallylost.eu/>. Accessed 08/10/2021].
- ¹⁵ Council of Europe, *Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society, 2005* [Online <https://www.coe.int/en/web/culture-and-heritage/faro-convention> <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/rms/0900001680083746>. Accessed 08/10/2021].
- ¹⁶ Council of Europe, *Enhanced Participation in Cultural Heritage: the Faro Way*, in: *Council of Europe Culture and Cultural Heritage* [Online <https://www.coe.int/en/web/culture-and-heritage/the-faro-way>. Accessed 08/10/2021].
- ¹⁷ See the website Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development, *Integrated Approaches to Dissonant Heritage in Europe* [Online: <https://www.bbsr.bund.de/BBSR/EN/research/programs/ExWoSt/FieldsOfResearch/dissonant-heritage/01-start.html>]