



EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH STEFANO BOERI

*Tirana Forces History
and Innovation to Merge*

By Rudina Hoxha

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StefanoBoeriArchitetti_Tirana2030

"With Francesca Cesa Bianchi, partner at Stefano Boeri Architetti, and our team (with Carlotta Capobianco, Andrea Zucchi, Besart Gjana..) we started in 2017 the design of an office building, the Blloku Cube, in the Blloku district of Tirana. Today the building, with its three-dimensional elements that vibrate and change with the changing sunlight, is already finished and we are very proud of it," the Founding Partner of "Stefano Boeri Architetti", Mr. Stefano Boeri says in his exclusive interview with **TRAILBLAZING MAGAZINE ARCHITECTURE & DESIGN**.

The world-known 66- year- old Italian architect and urban planner talks in this interview about why he chose Tirana as the location of his third office, how he sees Tirana while lists the projects his Studio is working in Albania.

"I'm very proud of all the projects currently under construction in Albania, but if I had to underline one intervention in particular, I would point towards the Three New Schools that we designed for Tirana – the Don Bosko Schools (opened in 2021), the Kodër-Kamëz Schools and the Shqiponja Schools," Boeri says, adding "These three projects – built with a very low budget–embody the ideal of the Open School, a model for the education of the future that can become an epicenter in the urban life of the neighborhoods, as a place open to everyone, for all ages, every day of the year."

Besides many projects in Albania, "Stefano Boeri Architetti," involved in 51 projects in 24 countries, is currently working in Durrës, after winning the competition organized by the Ministry of Culture and the Albanian-American Development Foundation (AADF) for the conservation, presentation, interpretation, enhancement and design



of the Roman Amphitheater, the Byzantine Forum, the Roman Baths and a series of urban routes in the historic center.

Full interview below:

1. How do you see the Albanian capital from the architectural transformation's point of view?

Tirana is incredible in terms of the 20th century history fragments that have blended into the city: it's a unique environment that forces history and innovation to communicate with each other. The significant demographic increase over the past 15 years has led to the intensification of a phenomenon of densification and saturation of urban space; which provides the opportunity – for example, with interventions such as the Master Plan for Tirana 2030 (TR030)

– to imagine a new way of living in the city. Tirana really has a huge potential to become a model for the other European capitals, with an effective possibility to intervene in order to actively improve the urban context. And this is the reason why we chose Tirana as the location for our third office.

2. You have an impressive list of projects in Albania. Who would you call your favorite and why?

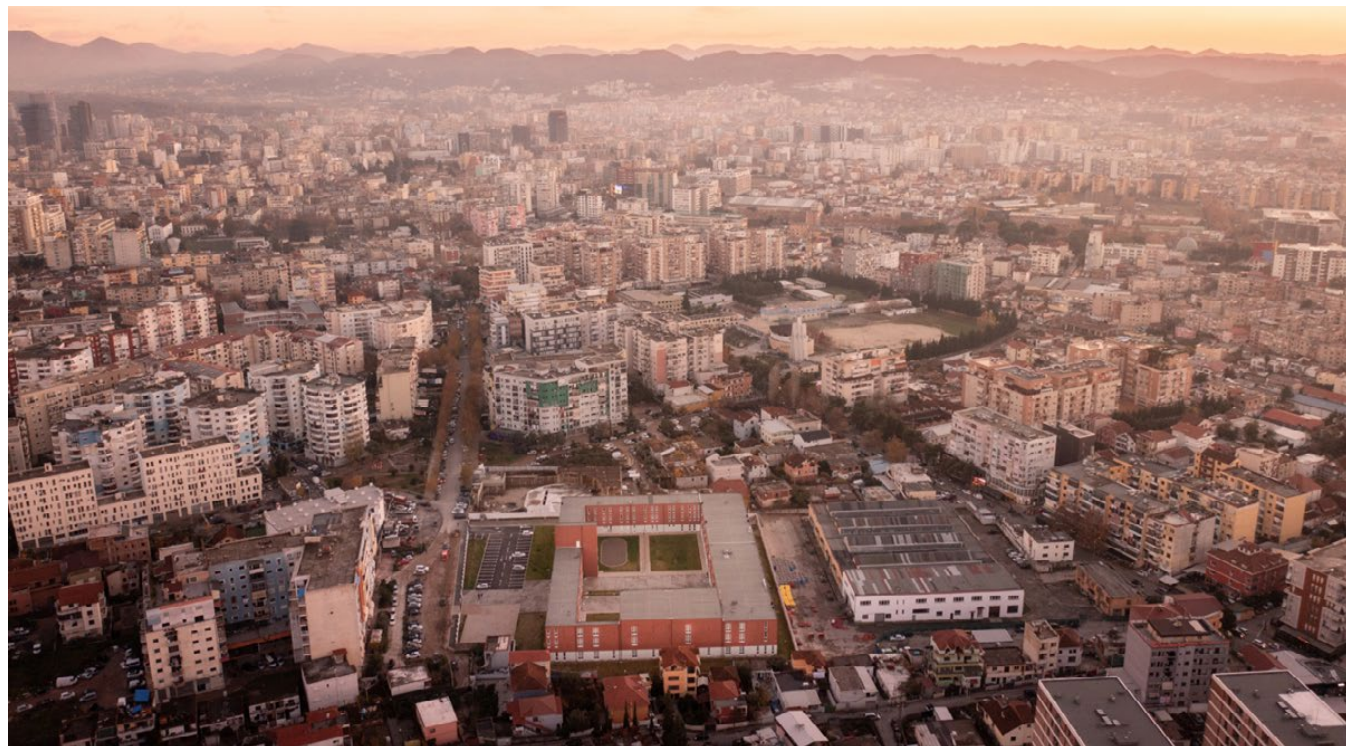
We have been very lucky to have the possibility to work and experiment in Albanian territory on different scales – from the architectural to the masterplan – and in different contexts. With Francesca Cesa Bianchi, partner at Stefano Boeri Architetti, and our team (with Carlotta Capobianco, Andrea Zucchi, Besart Gjana..) we started in 2017 the design of an office building, the Blloku Cube, in the Blloku district of Tirana. Today the building, with its three-dimensional elements that vibrate and



School "Don Bosko" by Stefano Boeri Architetti
Photo credit: Mendi Selmani & Lorenzo Masotto

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Then we moved towards the residential function with the West Residences project, in close proximity to the Albanian Government Presidential building, consisting of overlapping cubes, a series of slightly staggered independent residential modules where each housing unit has at least one loggia or a balcony.



School "Don Bosko" by Stefano Boeri Architetti • Photo credit: Mendi Selmani & Lorenzo Masotto



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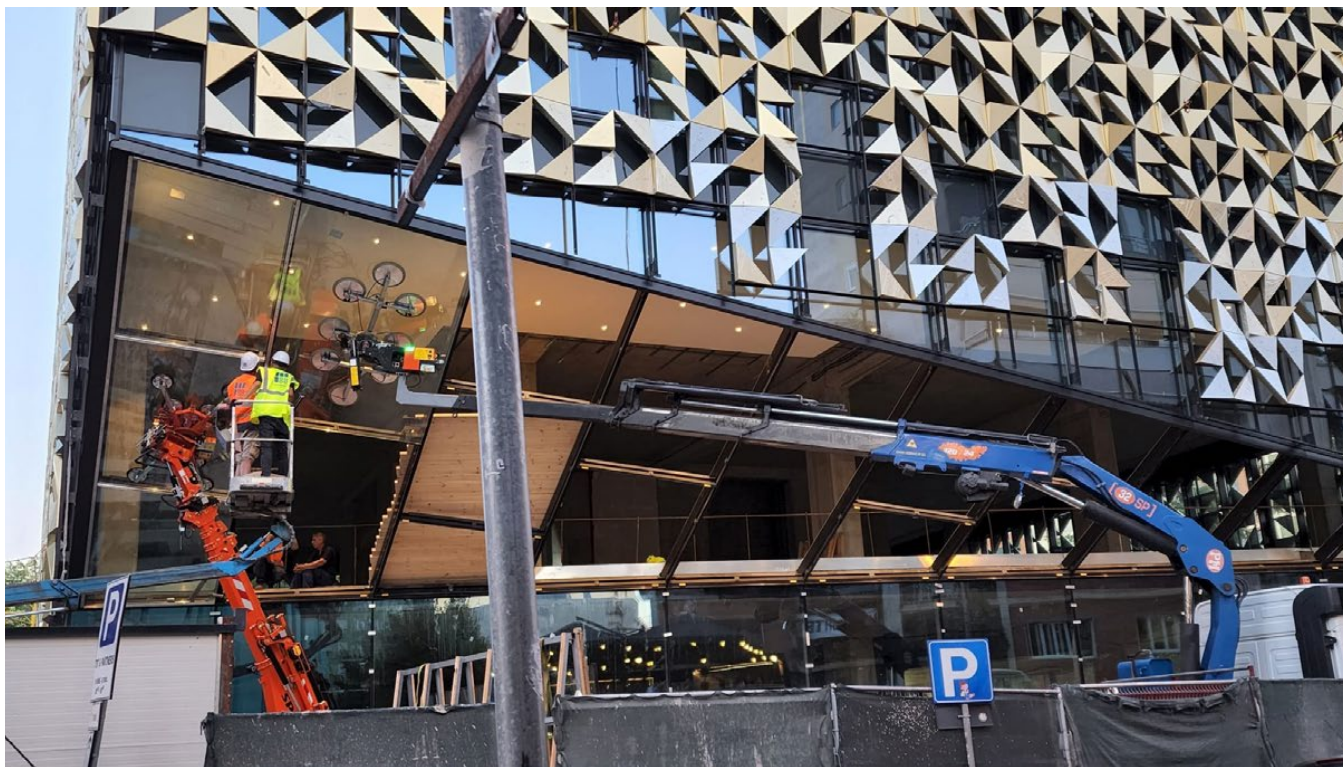
I'm very proud of all the projects currently under construction in Albania, but if I had to underline one intervention in particular, I would point towards the Three New Schools that we designed for Tirana – the Don Bosko Schools (opened in 2021), the Kodër-Kamëz Schools and the Shqiponja

Schools. These three projects – built with a very low budget– embody the ideal of the Open School, a model for the education of the future that can become an epicenter in the urban life of the neighborhoods, as a place open to everyone, for all ages, every day of the year. The result is a network of permeable and accessible urban spaces, in open dialogue with the surrounding squares, streets and parks; a new neighborhood centrality, active as a reference point of public life, 24/7 and 365 days a year that could improve the quality of education and of life for the community.

Lastly, I would like to mention the larger scale projects we are working on: the masterplan for Tirana Riverside, currently under construction, conceived as a large urban regeneration project planned to accommodate 12,000 people and which favors a functional and social mix, welcoming different cultures and backgrounds in an accessible and self-



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Blloku construction site by Stefano Boeri Architetti

sufficient district in terms of clean energy, water, food and all urban public services; the vision that embraces and crosses all these projects is Tirana 2030, our Master Plan based on some major themes – biodiversity, polycentrism, widespread knowledge, mobility, water, geopolitics, tourism, accessibility, agriculture and energy – which has become an international model for a new balance between city and nature defined as the “kaleidoscopic city”, in order to reclaim the natural dimension within Tirana’s urban environment toward urban forestry.

3. How would you consider your cooperation with the Albanian architects, especially the young ones, over various noteworthy projects?

We highly value the collaboration and support of local firms, especially if they include young architects since the cultural knowledge and nuances that a confrontation with these types of

studios brings are, in my opinion, crucial to the success of a project. I believe our partnership with Ilir Bejleri (SON Architects) is a good example of this approach. Also in our Riverside Masterplan we worked closely with several national firms, setting up a vision and, indeed, solutions for a masterplan, giving space to local studios especially for the detailed design and construction phase.

Moreover we participated, as international tutors, in the Designing Together: Tirana European Youth Capital 2022 workshop, which started in July and ran until October. In collaboration with Tirana Municipality and the main Architecture universities in Tirana, the workshop is dedicated to mainly Albanian students – but open to international enrolments – called to think about public space and design guidelines. The final projects will then be selected and eventually built, helping young architects to plan a space for the community.



Blloku construction site by Stefano Boeri Architetti

4. What would you say is the most interesting project you’re currently working on?

Currently, our studio Stefano Boeri Architetti is involved in 51 projects in 24 countries. We are dealing with various scales, different uses and contexts, always trying to move forward in specific aspects taking into account the objectives and specific project conditions. In terms of “Vertical Forest prototype” evolution, one of the perspectives we are most curious and glad to explore is the maximization of timber in architectural structures, which we are developing both in Milan and Paris. The ultimate goal is to achieve a completely timber-based structure, creating a circularity between production and installation, in direct dialogue with the issue of silviculture and forest management.

As far as large-scale projects are concerned, we are involved in urban plans with a strong social connotation, for

example for the reconstruction of various municipalities in central Italy, which have been severely affected by earthquakes in recent years; challenging projects which we are proud to undertake. We are currently working on large urban renewal projects, helping cities to become more resilient and responsive against climate change, for instance in Cairo, Riyadh, Cagliari and other Italian cities. While in China we are currently building a series of Vertical Forests, as well as two public architectures: a science museum and the Chinese biggest rehabilitation center in Shenzhen.

5. How is Tirana 2030 master plan going? How pivotal will this break-through plan be for the country and for your career?

We started working on the Tirana 2030 General Local Plan in 2016, the project has been delivered and the Municipality is in charge of the implementation of the overall vision through administrative and design projects. As mentioned, the vision



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Stefano Boeri Architetti
Trudo Tower Eindhoven.
Credits Paolo Rosselli

for Tirana2030 was aimed to create a “Kaleidoscopic City”, polycentric, dense and intense. We achieved that by stopping the spread development of the city outside its current borders with the creation of an orbital forest with 2 million new trees marking its boundary; in a nutshell, a continuous, irregularly shaped green belt surrounding the city center. Beyond it, no building is allowed, in order to stop soil consumption.

Then we envisage the construction of two green rings in the central city, for cycling and pedestrians, and we try to recover part of the degraded land to allocate it to green areas and public services, which were completely lacking when we started the project. We propose an implementation of public facilities, improving their distribution and accessibility in the city. Among those, the Plan defined the construction of twenty new schools for the city, open all day and offering services for the neighborhood. Our strategy defines 13 guidelines including to restore a new identity to the rural settlements, to create green and blue corridors in order to regenerate biodiversity, to improve clean mobility and to create a new energy corridor, converting the surrounding valley into a site for the

production of renewable energy. The aim was to create a metropolis where inhabitants can find a balance between the urban, the natural and the agricultural sphere while promoting a biodiversity of cultures and species and inhabitants. A plan such as Tirana2030, fostered by a vision that takes into account nature as the main element of the design, in a historical period when the challenges of climate change can no longer be postponed, is not only pivotal for the country, but as reference for all the other cities.

6. The Cube of Blloku, located in the ex-Bllok area, which is a key location for the urban regeneration of the city, is taking shape impressively. How key is innovation and creativity in your projects?

As I said, Blloku project is really peculiar also due to its proximity to the historic residence and headquarters of former communist dictator Enver Hoxha; it makes us particularly proud to see how the building is taking shape – during the past few weeks the elements that form the ‘second skin’ of the building, the triangular folded aluminum sheets, are being installed. And Blloku Cube could be considered an example of experimentation and innovation, where we created two



Stefano Boeri Architetti Trudo Tower Eindhoven. Credits Paolo Rosselli

“skins” in order to shade the internal spaces, leaving, at the same time, the freedom of view and creating ever-changing environments, depending on the movement of the sun and how it interacts with the triangles in the façade.

This philosophy is the same that drives all our projects, no matter the scale: starting from a place of creativity, innovation can't be underestimated or downplayed if we want to achieve a goal of improvement. The Vertical Forest in Milan is the first example: it was the first prototype of a new idea of architecture, the first building in which the relationship with living nature was

considered a fundamental design criterion. For us it was a true experiment, which today, almost 10 years after its construction, has proved successful. It helped us understand and study the typology in order to improve it and make it effective in relation to specific project challenges. The Trudo Vertical Forest in Eindhoven, for example, is a step forward and it represents the achievement of a true goal: to make the Vertical Forest typology accessible to everyone, even to tenants with low incomes, integrating nature and social housing, responding at the same time to the lack of affordable housing in contemporary cities and to environmental issues.



Stefano BoeriArchitetti
Trudo Tower
Eindhoven
Credits: Paolo
Rosselli



SBA Tirana Vertical Forest

7. You are the ‘inventor’ of Vertical Forests. How much would you recommend the building of Vertical Forests given the number one problem the world is facing today: the climate change? Can you apply this approach in the already built-in structures?

The Vertical Forest is one of the ways to implement urban forestry, one of the strategies through which to bring thousands of trees and plants into the heart of a built city, one – not the only one – of the solutions to climate change. Just think that, in the case of the Bosco Verticale in Milan, the greenery on the two towers – home to more than 800 trees and 20,000 plants – is equivalent to 2 hectares of forest OR 5 hectares of a park, despite occupying a very small area in the center of Milan.

I believe that the strength of the Bosco

Verticale also lies in this: in having been able to innovate while maintaining a very strong vision (a ‘house for trees that also houses men and birds’: this is how it was defined), despite the many challenges. From the irrigation and maintenance system to the structural design of the planter system, to the plants’ resistance to wind and the presence of solar panels and geothermal energy: everything in the Bosco Verticale was taken into consideration, for the first time in architecture, in order to guarantee the best growing conditions for the greenery, treating it as a real design element.

Therefore, on the one hand, the global vocation, the ability to give a response to some of today’s major critical issues (the lack of greenery in the city, air pollution, the growing sprawl that fragments the city...) and, on the other hand, the power

of the vision, I believe are the factors that have contributed to making the Bosco Verticale an icon of Milan and an example, a reference for a new contemporary architecture.

At the same time, the Bosco Verticale is not a point of arrival, but a starting point; it is for us an experiment, the first example, a case study, which constantly gives us the opportunity to understand, study and, consequently, improve various aspects of this new architectural typology.

The new Vertical Forests that have been built or are under construction – at this moment we have 21 active construction sites worldwide – represent for us steps ahead, in different directions, towards perfecting and adapting the typology: by cutting costs with sustainable and innovative technological solutions, as in Eindhoven; or by radically changing the urban landscape and the expectations of the population for a more liveable city, in a place where pollution is a huge issue, as

in Huanggang in China; or by dialoguing with the context starting from the local vegetation, adapting to a different climatic context, as in Egypt.

Even built-in structures can be approached with the same philosophy: in Bruxelles and Prato, for example, we are working on retrofitting on existing buildings, with the design of a self-standing structure that can be added to the previous one, creating a green external device, with all the ecosystemic benefits connected to living nature.

8. What will be next for you in Albania and in the region?

We are currently working in Durrës, after winning the competition organized by the Ministry of Culture and the Albanian-American Development Foundation (AADF) for the conservation, presentation, interpretation, enhancement and design of the Roman Amphitheater, the Byzantine Forum, the Roman Baths and a series of urban routes in the historic center. The



SBA Tirana Vertical Forest



Stefano Boeri Architetti: Vertical Forest.
Photo credit: Dimitar Harizanov



Boeri Studio Vertical Forest ph.Dimitar Harizanov 2020



project will create an archaeological park in the heart of the city for residents and visitors, aiming to connect the waterfront and port of Durrës with the city's main tourist attractions, as many peripheral cultural assets are still disconnected and difficult to access for residents and visitors, thus hindering the full development of tourism.

We truly believe this project will add an important value in terms of cultural heritage and archaeological research development, for Albania. We will do our best to show the world how Durrës is a palimpsest of historical periods. I'm used to say "when you land at Tirana Airport, if you go east, towards the Capital you can see the 20th century geopolitics embodied into architecture, if you go west, towards Durrës, you will see the history of Humanity."



Boeri Studio. Vertical Forest
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