

Architectural lineaments — adventures through the work of Peter Wilson

Guest editor: Mark Dorrian

Introduction: architectural lineaments — adventures through the work of Peter Wilson

Mark Dorrian 571

Some reasons for talking about Peter Wilson

Izabela Wieczorek 575

Peter Wilson and Mark Dorrian in conversation

Mark Dorrian 599

Auto portraits and the enigmas of self: geometries of distraction and detection in the work of Peter Wilson

Nicholas Boyarsky 639

Assisted/eccentric/adjacent: Bridgebuilding No. 4 Ponte Dell'Accademia

Adrian Hawker 659

Peter Wilson in the *Empire of Signs*

Mark Dorrian 688

Observer effects: experiencing emptiness in Peter Wilson's Osaka Folly

Annalise Varghese 710

Down by the river: Rotterdam seen from Bolles + Wilson's Luxor Theatre

Lars Lerup 736

Peter's File

Elisabetta Terragni 757

A suitcase full of shadows

Kurt W. Forster 769

Reviews

Book Review by Amelyn Ng

Medium design: knowing how to work on the world
by Keller Easterling

782

Book Review by David Salomon

Architecture as measure

by Neyran Turan

785

Peter's File

I have never seen Peter Wilson in Tirana, but I unconsciously followed his traces in the city. His name popped up in many meetings, during endless walks, and in late-night chats after jury duty. I finally dared ask: Peter who? The architect of the colours? The man behind the project to transform poor, grey, worn-out Tirana with cans of paint? Helping the city emerge from the devastating experience of forty years under Enver Hoxha's totalitarian regime? 'The moment when you feel the whole world is sliding away from under your feet', as the artist Anri Sala put it, leaves you in a gap, creates a rupture in time, and requires new bearings.¹ But those bearings are difficult to find when, as Sala continued, 'our sole compass was our intuition'. The ease with which colour could be splashed over dreary façades brought the desired within reach, making an instantaneous transformation palatable and putting a bit of firm ground back under your feet. It is impossible to imagine other action with a similar effect, not just on façades but on the appearance of the city itself. Only after such shock treatment could one go back and pick up the pieces of old and connect them back together in memory. This is also one of Peter's favourite games to play.

Once we had met, he gave me very useful material, but he made a false step by shooting back with his counter-espionage activities in the living room of the National Museum of Secret Surveillance that I had put together.² Only in one of its many rooms is the oppressive past present in minute details — in the furniture, the refrigerator, and the propaganda leaflets. Here he outed himself and gave me an idea (Fig. 1).

Being the architect of such a Museum made it possible for me to gain access to classified files. I started a search. This article is the forensic reconstruction of Peter's clandestine multitasking activities in Tirana. If there is only one Peter in Tirana, I reckoned, there must be a Peter's File and we promptly found it (Fig. 2).

My task was particularly difficult because he is a master of hiding his architecture in plain sight. The larger the projects, the more difficult is the task, but also the more intriguing and challenging. Peter started well before, in Münster, where he had to build an entire street to hide the Municipal Library; and when he designed a bar in Tirana he put it on the top floor so you cannot find it.

Early on, Peter discovered the DNA of Tirana, its 'propensity for the urban complex fractal collage of bits to absorb everything into a unified urban soup of parasitical addition, the logic of self-informing systems' (Fig. 3).³ His idea of urbanism in Tirana springs from this attitude, but he is ever aware of the city's history, its past and current social dynamic. In a city like this, people will help you in any case, covering and altering what you do; basically, an

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Figure 1. (overleaf, left)
Peter Wilson's email on counter-espionage activity in the living room of the House of Leaves, the National Museum of Secret Surveillance in Tirana, Albania, 2019

Figure 2. (overleaf, right)
Copy of Peter W. Dossier, with the appropriate title 'Architect, cultural agitator', Tirana, 2003

3/21/2018

Mail - [REDACTED]

Outlook Mail

ELISA

peter

New | Reply | Delete | Archive | Junk | Sweep | Move to | Categories

Search results

- In folders
- All folders
- Inbox
- Sent items
- Deleted items
- From
- Nicole Smith
- Kurt Welter
- Neilken Stabu
- Carolina Robinson-Cole
- Elisabetta Terragni

Options

With attachments

Date

- All
- This week
- Last week
- This month
- Select range

From

Wed 3/21/2018

To

Wed 3/21/2018

Coaching in Tirana

PW Peter Wilson [REDACTED]
Mon 3/20, 10:00 AM
Thu 3

Flag for follow up Start by Monday [REDACTED]

You forwarded this message on [REDACTED]

COACHING.doc 21 KB polychromik 21 KB The Object on Don B... 20 KB COACHING.doc 21 KB

Show all 4 attachments (25 KB) Download all Save all to OneDrive - Personal

Dear Elisabetta, nice to have you on the case. To be honest I have been engaged in counterspying...here I am relaxing in your House of Leaves with my assistant...



I was super impressed and would like to ask you for one or two official pictures for my "Some Reasons to Travel to Albania" book. It is now well underway section which deals with Tirana is finished. Luckily, because from it I can extract the following descriptions of our first Albanian experiences....

Mona in our office has I hope has sent and numbered the pictures which document chronologically [REDACTED] Ed's color politics.

1. One of Ed's colored facades photographed on our first visit
- 2/3. The [REDACTED] Masterplan competition. The French Architecture Studio won - it was rumored that the French Ambassador visited the then PM the day he sitting and offered substantial aid money
- 4 [REDACTED] our masterplan
5. The Polychromik Tower- before (the name is a bit too Slavic, but at that time we new little of the animosity between Albanians to the Serbs). The text d our first intervention in Tirana .

1 of 1

Emërtimi (3) nr. 15

DOSJE

Nr. 1129 (4) Viti 2003

Titulli i dosjes

PETER W. Tiranë

Arkitekt agjikator kulturor

Afati i ruajtjes.....

Ka filluar me 26.5.1981

Sasia e fletëve 74.....

Ka mbaruar në progres

Regjistruar në listën e dosjeve

Nr. 12.....

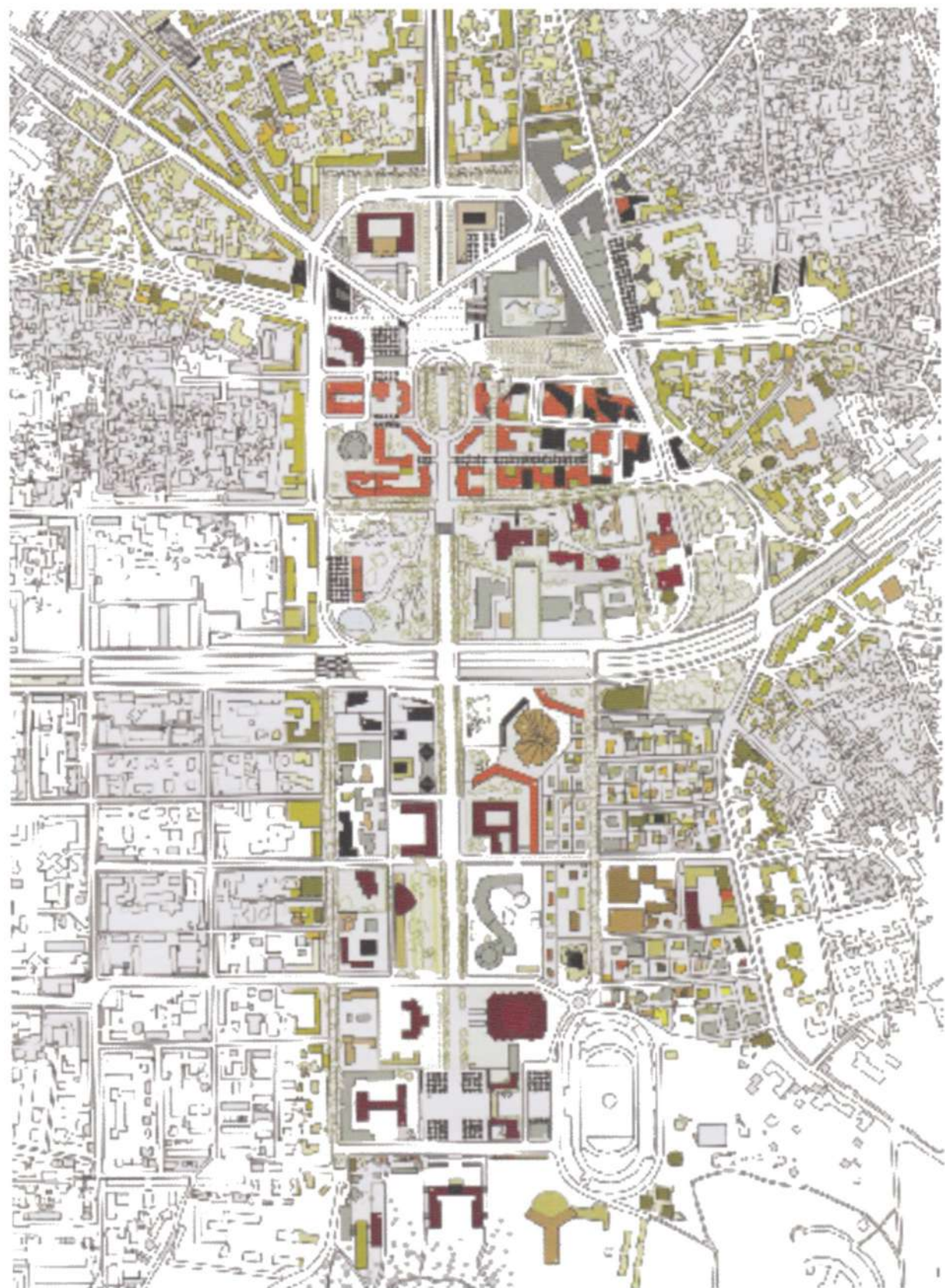






Figure 3. (overleaf, left)
Bolles + Wilson, details of the
Boulevard and the Centre of the
City for Tirana's Masterplan
Competition, 2005

Figure 4. (overleaf, right)
Parasitical additions, alterations, and
creative use of energy in a typical
corner of contemporary Tirana

Figure 5. (above)
Details of the 'Marriage of Air
Conditioners and Satellite Dishes'
on a façade in Tirana

entire population is helping Peter to hide his project.

I have always had a strange feeling wandering about in Tirana. Sometimes I start to see things, like well-made details, an intriguing pattern of colours or a smart move in the mess of the place; like using white squares to disguise air conditioners or satellite dishes that hang in random positions on every façade in Tirana (Fig. 4). These solutions are familiar and alien at the same time; familiar to a certain way of thinking, unusual in the chaotic urban setting. Suddenly you pause at the corner between Rruga Ismail Qemali and 4 Shkurti, between present and past sites of power, the Hoxha Villa and the Parliament, standing as warning signs that these hollow and distressed faces of old communist buildings have been deformed by 'our own freedom', as they say in Tirana after the collapse of the Regime. How can you blame them? The entire population lived in a gigantic grey structure 'with no windows to the Western World, completely collectivized and entirely opposed to individuals and to the expression of individuality in any form'.⁴

There are moments in history in which to erase traces or to impose order is equally wrong because they will bring back sinister memories. Peter was able to sort out from his magic baggage of thoughts the perfect solution to the conundrum. The AC modules on this red façade are replicated all over with white patches for future additions. This strategy makes the randomly positioned para-

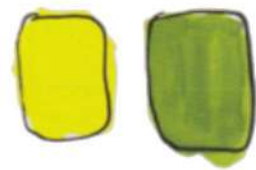


Figure 6.
Vector Façade, watercolour on
courtesy Peter Wilson

sitical boxes immediately possible and legitimate. You do not have a clue at which stage he entered into this civil and peaceful camouflaging game and where he stopped, but he is certainly the one who celebrated 'the Alchemical Marriage of Air Conditioners with Satellite Dishes'.⁵

Colours matter (Fig. 5). They opened a way to transform the ash grey city, but also started an intense public conversation about possibilities, about words, bringing fresh air from the outside and from within the country. Today some of the colours are fading, but the optimistic Vector façade is still there with the yellow signs pointing from left to right, and to the promise of a brighter



Figure 7.
Vector Façade, detail as executed,
photographed by Elisabetta
Terragni

future. This façade also registers a beautiful moment of hesitation in Peter's hand on the page of his sketchbook, a necessary, intimate imperfection in the tattoo on our skin that is now part of the public domain (Fig. 6).

Me jep ngjrat, Dammi I Colori, is a 2003 sixteen-minute colour video projection with sound by the artist Anri Sala who travels through the city at night and catches flashes of its new layers of life (Fig. 7). This video projection focuses on the changes to Albania's capital city, three years after a programme of urban



transformation was initiated by the city's then mayor and leader of the project (Fig. 8), the painter Edi Rama, transforming Tirana from 'a city where you are doomed to live by fate into a city where you choose to live'.

When I tried to learn more, it turned out that photos of bland grey communist-era buildings had been faxed to the Bolles + Wilson office in Münster. The architect then made hand-painted studies and sent them back to the client. In Tirana, the images were re-scaled and used to decorate the surfaces of buildings with a thin layer of paint. *Dammi I Colori* dispersed Peter's colours and signs liberally over numerous buildings - not a limited intervention but a running commentary on possible transformation. In the early years of the city's newly found liberty, Wilson raised the stakes by coaching.⁶ Now the game of hide and seek meant addressing the thicket of regulations with a bundle of responses, as if a game of *mikado* allowed both sides to go on subtracting obstacles until they reach agreement. The same pieces and the same restrictions were still in place, but now they were movable. Although Peter admits that it lasted only 'a short while, as an alternative form of practice', it helped refresh memories of Bolles + Wilson's student days and raised doubts

Figure 8.
Is the agent doing Peter's job? Or is
he adding comments and
redactions?

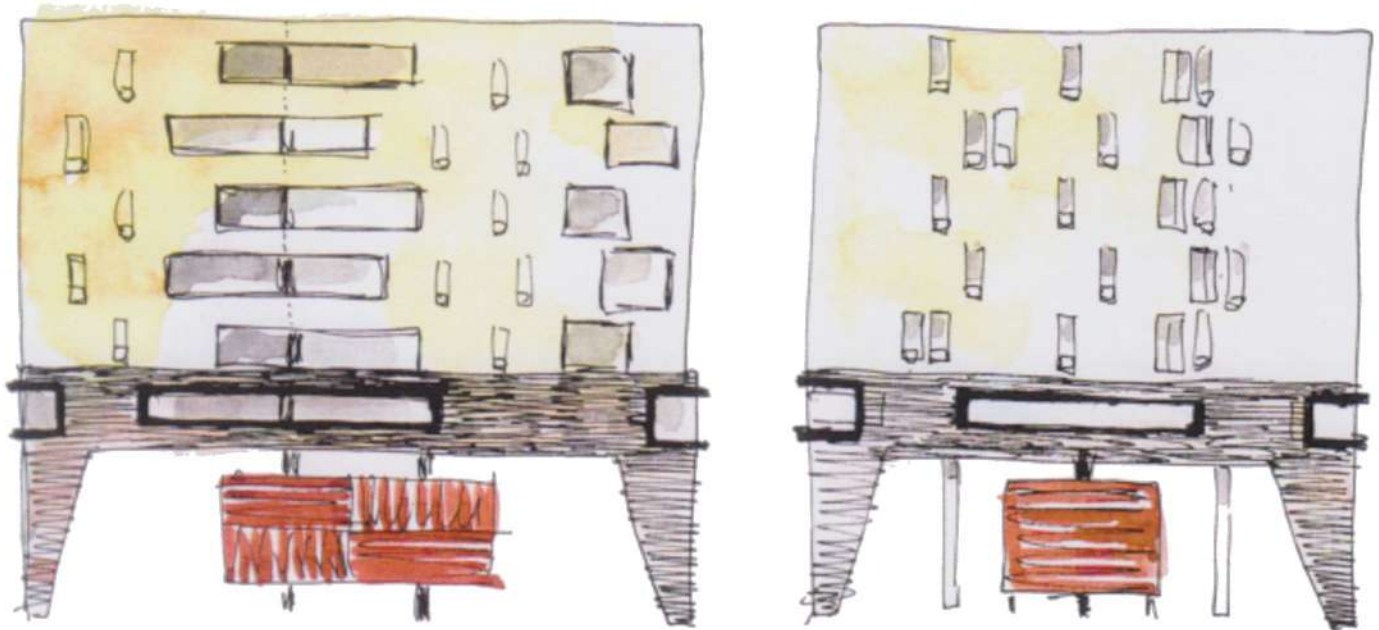


Figure 9.
Façade studies for the Rationalist
Apartment block, courtesy Peter
Wilson

Figure 10. (opposite)
Detail of the reclaimed brick tiles

about the role of conventional planning in a city like Tirana whose 'complexity is already coherent to those who live in it'. In an apartment building just off the southern end of Tirana's principal axis, the parts and pieces jostled together in the city turn up in a building that is entirely designed but does not look it. Several parts, including the reused bricks and terracotta tiles, were waiting to be adopted, while others add a whiff of newness. The whole amounts to an instructive medley à la Tirana, as if the architects had requested not just *colori* but also *mattoni*, not to mention a range of standard modern components. You need to look twice to know what is what (Fig. 9).

I close my eyes and wonder what would have been the outcome of the urban knitting proposal of 2003 had it been implemented? What might have been built first, what would have to be changed? It does not matter, because time is not the issue for Bollès + Wilson. Their patience and their resilience allow the pieces of the puzzle to come together before or after they picked them up. Modern Tirana started with a bang: Gherardo Bosio's *piano regolatore* of 1941 laid down, in the words of the writer Ismail Kadare, 'a boulevard without a city'. Much effort has been expended since on filling in the massive voids with new construction while salvaging a handful of fragments from earlier times. Perhaps Bollès + Wilson's interventions can be considered acts of recreation that will gradually dampen the contrast between a dogmatic view of the future and a liveable conglomerate of ad-hoc construction. Past and future thus enter into a reverse correspondence (Fig. 10): tempering the excess of planning and enriching the in-fill, they start from two extremes in order to close in on the present, astonishingly without leaving a definite stamp; there may yet be other Files to discover.



Notes and references

1. See *Albanie, 1207 km est*, ed. by Christine Macel, Alicia Knock and Edit Pulaj (Marseille: Mucem, 2017), p. 39.
2. Elisabetta Terragni, with Kurt W. Forster, 'L'appartement d'Ismaïl Kadaré à Tirana: Un site pour écrire à l'abri des regards', *Culture et Musées: Muséologie et recherches sur la culture*, 34 (2019), 288–94 <<https://doi.org/10.4000/culturemusees.4310>>; Arba Baxhaku, 'Stanze della grande solitudine', *Firenze architettura*, 1 (2019), 160–65; Peter Wilson, *Some Reasons for Traveling to Albania* (Zurich; Berlin: About Books, 2019), p. 371.
3. Wilson, *Some Reasons for Traveling to Albania*, p. 80.
4. This is how Peter Wilson named his project; see *AND*, 11 (January–April, 2008), p. 19.
5. Edi Rama interviewed by Paolo di Nardo, 'Datemi i colori!', *AND*, 11 (January–April, 2008) pp. 36–39.
6. Wilson, *Some Reasons for Traveling to Albania*, p. 80.