

# My house is your house

It's both private home and public space, open to culture and the city. Renewed by the Italian architect Filippo Taidelli, the house-atelier of the artist Adrian Paci in Shkoder, Albania revives tradition and participation with the aim of countering miserly new real-estate initiatives and hampered social interaction



by LAURA RAGAZZOLA

Art and architecture combined to counter urban decay, building speculation and the loss of identity of the built surroundings: this is the idea behind Art House, the "open" residence of the artist Adrian Paci in the old city centre of Shkoder, Albania, 50 kilometres from the Adriatic Sea. Art House was made in collaboration between Paci and the architect Filippo Taidelli, and the design was shortlisted for the EU Mies Award 2019. Shkoder is a lively city, formerly a cradle of Albanian culture. For years now, it has been the victim of a development model that has progressively altered the urban fabric, allowing for the systematic demolition of traditional housing in favour of anonymous condominiums.

Adrian Paci, a Shkoder native, wished to give a sign of change. His interest in human vicissitudes and social dynamics is also seen in his work, which touches deep chords of sentiment. Paci has been living in Milan for quite some time, but divides his life between Italy and Albania. Over the years, he witnessed the contradictory growth of his city, and when he speaks about it, you can sense his emotional involvement. "It all started in the late 1990s. That's when the process began that denatured the urban morphology of Shkoder, as has happened in many other Albanian cities. The ancient dwellings were torn down, and in their place, complexes were erected that have no connection to the urban fabric or local traditions. In front of my family house, they constructed a nine-storey building. Its oppressive presence has not only changed the physiognomy of the neighbourhood, but also daily life and the relations between the people. It was an arrogant move of pure speculation, hoping to be a new model for the development in our area. My family and I decided to resist and oppose this, and Filippo Taidelli rose to our challenge very well."

And so, a new building was constructed on the land of the old family house, next to it. It's called Art House. Not only does it contrast with the characterless visual language of the surrounding new architecture, but it deliberately turns its back to the graceless tower and all the undistinguished new buildings that have popped up nearby. This gesture of resistance breathes fresh life into a small section of the city.

"It was a brave adventure," observes Filippo Taidelli, who has become good friends with his client. Born in Milan in 1972, Taidelli has worked on a broad range of projects, from the university campus of Humanitas in the periphery of Milan, to the master plan and new headquarters for the Tenova metal company in the province of Varese. "On the one hand, it was an exciting but big responsibility to work on a project that was important to Adrian's private life, his past and his family his-

tory. On the other, there was the stimulus of imagining the personal and professional future of an artist, to create a place that would meld two different types of spirit in a nonetheless complementary way." The new house had to have the twofold function of a family residence and an atelier that could open up to the community to offer an art-related experiences and initiatives involving the city's culture. Hence its special horseshoe shape with two independent but integrated wings, one private and one public.

On the south, the two-storey Art House is open to natural light. Large sliding windows, loggias and terraces capture the sun and show a dialogue in colours and materials with the beautiful Ottoman facade across the way. ("My grandfather was born there, and it is now inhabited by one of my relatives who is an active member of Art House," illustrates Paci). To the north, the house is protected by a more austere front, where a traditional stone wall is built with inserts of river pebbles, a local technique. A lush selection of greenery tumbles over it as a reference to the spontaneous plants seen luxuriantly peeking from the city's ancient homes. "The introverted character of the building was a forced choice," explains Taidelli. "It was necessary to create a distance from the new high-rises that have altered the proportions of Shkoder, which originally featured small houses built around courtyards, just like ours."

Inside, thanks to an open and flexible plan, the border between family space and public space (the atelier) is very fluid. The small garden functions as a place to socialise and meet new people and old acquaintances, just like it used to be in this city. "The courts of Shkoder have always been locations for parties, for evenings spent with friends and family, for the celebration of weddings," says Paci. This made it easier to abandon the idea of the house as an exclusively private entity, and embrace a combination of social and domestic.

Public and private, side by side, is a major focus at Art House, but also in Paci's artistic production. "In my work as an artist, I try to understand how these two realities can live together and

carry on a conversation. I look to the past and the future at the same time. Of course tensions are inevitable, and even necessary," underlines Paci. "It is positive that the public enters into the private sphere and calls it into question, but also that the opposite happens. Without the life experience that the private domain contains, the public domain risks becoming rhetoric, purely ideological, an enunciation of good intentions," says Paci. All this explains why a house, the quintessential realm of privacy, is able to acquire new vital energy by opening up to the community. In turn, the community can find inside a domestic space, an intimate, sincere experience where the individual is important.

Art House has become an important presence in the life of the neighbourhood and the city. Through a busy programme of events and initiatives, the house-atelier invites not only young artists to participate (see the Art House School), but also the worlds of art and international culture, and the locals themselves, who can take part in conferences and debates. In the courtyard of Art House and in four other courts in town, an independent film festival on art and artists takes place, accessible to everyone. Called "Lo schermo dell'arte", the show is a branch of its namesake initiative in Florence.

Despite its small scale, Art House can be considered part of a wider process of urban regeneration. As Taidelli says, "It is a project that well interprets two trends that are coming about in Italian cities as well. I am referring to sustainable urban retrofitting, which rehabilitates existing spaces before using new land. We now have the intellectual and technical means to do this well. I am also referring to an increase in social flexibility, which translates to the existence of shared areas and mixed areas, where public and private spheres, family and artistic spheres meld."

In a word, the house is not merely a concept, but "a space that generates interpersonal relations and that connects to what used to happen in the past, what is happening now, and what will happen in the future," as Taidelli concludes.



Top left: seen at the Marubi National Museum of Photography in Shkoder, Adrian Paci (back row, third from right) with Lucjan Bedeni (the director of Marubi, back row, first from left) and Michelangelo Pistoletto (hat) with the Art House team. Above: the exterior of Paci's house-atelier contrasts with the modern buildings surrounding it. Below: Paci (right) with Filippo Taidelli. Large sliding glass doors bring natural light into all the rooms

