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Abstract: This research paper examines the transition of urban spaces and architectural changes in Elbasan, Albania, from Ottoman influence to modernity. By analyzing urban development and architectural styles from both the Ottoman and contemporary periods, the paper aims to provide a comparative perspective on the architectural language between these two periods. The study explores the alterations in characteristics of city urbanism and architecture in Ottoman and post-Ottoman times, spanning from the early 19th century to the present day. It also examines the implications of these changes for urban spaces and cultural identity.

Through case studies and comparative analysis, the paper highlights the dynamic evolution of Elbasan's architectural landscape and provides insights into its future development. The data was collected using a multi-faceted methodology, including archival drawings, scholarly works, maps, field visits, and observations. The results reveal significant variability in the urban and architectural patterns of the city. The differences between 18th- 19th century Elbasan and that of the 20th and 21st centuries are profound and distinct. However, the central area of the city, which remains the most historic part due to the survival of structures such as the castle, the clock tower, old bathhouses, and the king's mosque, still retains traces of the Ottoman city.

Keywords: Urban Transition, Ottoman Architecture, Modernity, Elbasan, Cultural Identity, Urban Development

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Introduction

Archaeological and historical sources confirm that most Albanian cities have been inhabited from ancient times until Ottoman period where each period has left very significant traces in the cultural, architectonic, and social organization of the cities. As classified by Shkodra (1984, pp. 17) the Ancient period demonstrates the birth of prominent urban centers such as Shkodra, Lezha, Durrës, Berat, Vlora, and Saranda. The medieval period before the coming of the Ottomans indicates the development of cities such as Kruja, Gjirokastra, and Janina. The Ottoman period, moreover, enhanced the urban environment to cities such as Dibra, Kavaja, Peqini, Tirana, Elbasan, Korça, Përmet, and Delvina, among others.

Albanian cities were formed mainly within the walls of the fortresses during pre-Ottoman days. After the Ottoman conquest, Albanian cities stretched beyond the walls of the castles and formed new districts, referred to as *Varosh*. (Shkodra, 1984, pp. 18) This urban expansion outside the castle walls with new districts also brought many architectural accomplishments. One of the most significant changes during Ottoman rule in Albanian cities was the establishment of metropolitan centers and the design of new channels that connected the cities' core or center to the surrounding peripheral areas. During this time, urban centers commenced a process of expansion and rejuvenation. This urban evolution manifested in two distinct ways: in certain instances, new urban cores were constructed atop existing foundations, while in others, entirely new urban development emerged from scratch (Caka, 2021, pp. 245).

Elbasan's history begins with the ruins of an old Roman citadel, Scampia (Ceka, 1975, pp. 148) which provided the required foundations for the establishment of the city in 1466 under Sultan Mehmet II, (Buharaja, 1989, pp. 504) who named it Ilbasan (Caka, 2016, pp.101) and transformed the city into a flourishing metropolis. The city's significance and importance grew throughout time, and it was designated as a critical and significant center for the region (Kiel, 2012, pp.137). Elbasan began as a fortified city

first and later, during its early years started growing with residential houses settled within its protective walls. As the city gradually expanded, by the 15th century, the urban development began expanding beyond the fortress. This expansion was enabled by its strategic location at the crossroads of crucial commercial and military routes, leading to rapid population growth in the urban centers (Meksi, et.al, 2016, pp.625).

However, Elbasan, re-founded by Mehmet II (Buharaja, 1989, pp. 504; Kiel, 2012, 137; Caka, 2016, pp.100) and considered one of the most important cities during the Ottoman Empire, was largely demolished after independence due to several factors, leaving it with few traces of its past. Some reasons include natural factors like the earthquake in 1920 (Pasmaqi & Hasekiu, 2014, pp. 556) and the biggest changes happened during the approach to industrialize the city under the communist regime, with the establishment of numerous metallurgical factories that altered the urban landscape drastically (Mitrojorgji, 2014, pp.53). Many structures erected during the 15th to 19th centuries were demolished to make space for new development. Despite these changes, the central area of the city, which remains the most historic part due to the survival of structures such as the castle, the clock tower, bathhouses, and the king's mosque, still retains traces of the Ottoman city.

Urban spaces and architectural landscapes in Elbasan, Albania, have undergone significant transitions from Ottoman influence on modernity. This research paper aims to analyze the urban development and architectural styles from the Ottoman to contemporary periods, providing a comparative perspective on the architectural language between these two eras. The significance of this study lies in its ability to highlight the dynamic evolution of Elbasan's architectural landscape. By using case studies and comparative analysis, the research offers valuable insights into the city development. The findings reveal considerable variability in Elbasan's urban and architectural patterns, highlighting profound and distinct differences between the city before Independence, in the early19th century and its form in the 21st century. By examining the characteristics of Ottoman urbanism and architecture in Elbasan and contrasting them

with post-Ottoman developments, the study aims to understand the implications of these changes for urban spaces and cultural identity.

Methodology

This research employs a multifaceted approach to investigate Elbasan city's urban development and architectural evolution. Firstly, a comprehensive literature review synthesized existing studies on the city's urban landscape. Secondly, archival analysis of historical maps and drawings provided foundational insights. Additionally, extensive field visits documented current urban conditions and architectural changes. These methods were applied independently and in combination to analyze Elbasan's developmental trajectory. Findings were presented through descriptive analysis, supported by maps and photographs where necessary, enhancing understanding of urban planning and architectural development.

Urban and Architectural Development of Elbasan during Ottoman Period

Urban Development

Papa illustrated Balkan ottoman cities as a collection of several main elements (fig. 1) of fortress for protection, residential areas, a market-place (bazaar) for trading, public buildings, and mosques and *hamams*. This layout was typical in Ottoman-influenced cities across the Balkans, including those in Albania. These cities were designed to harmonize the natural landscape, utilizing the topography and terrain features. This allowed neighborhoods (called 'mëhalla') to evolve and adapt freely. (Papa, 2020, pp. 127-128)

As grouped from Shkodra (1984, pp.17-18), Elbasan is considered an Ottoman established city, since with its previous existence disappearing before 1466. Unlike other cities where the castle was typically situated in the highest geographical area and life expanded outside the fortress walls, Elbasanwas situated on a flat surface atop Roman foundations (Scampis).

Here, life was formed inside the walls of the fortress, giving Elbasan the designation of a castle-type city. Ottoman cities typically adapted to their terrain, and according to Mitrojorgji (2016, pp. 86), Elbasan's urban planning reflects this traditional settlement and urban design.



Figure 1: Ottoman cities components in Balkan diagram. Source: Papa (2020)

The Ottoman influence on Elbasan's architecture was profound, shaping not just the physical landscape but also the city's economic, social, and cultural fabric. Elbasan, in particular, has experienced rapid urban development, as evidenced by archival data that recording population numbers and the variety of professions practiced during the 15th and 16th centuries and later (Caka, 2023, pp.71). According to several scholars (Shkodra, 1984; Caka, 2016), Elbasan was a dynamic center of activity encompassing agriculture, livestock, crafts, trade, industry, and administration. Daja (2022, pp.38-43) states that Elbasan's urban morphology is characterized by distinct neighborhoods, mosques, churches, bazaars, plazas, and civic buildings.

However, in analysis of Elbasan's urban development, Depicted in Figure 2, reveals a central mosque surrounded by residential zones protected by castle walls. Parallel to fortress walls, the main bazaar extends, with additional residential nuclei, each featuring its own mosque or church, *hammam*, and connecting roads. The layout and organization of Elbasan's urban morphological elements demonstrate a careful balance between residential, commercial, and religious spaces, creating a cohesive and dynamic cityscape.

During the Ottoman period, Elbasan experienced significant urban development, expanding beyond fortress walls to create new districts. This outward expansion led to demographic and architectural growth, nurturing cultural diversity and economic prosperity within the city.

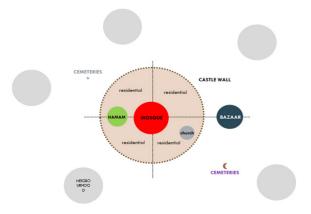


Figure 2: Elbasan city urban components diagram. Source: Author

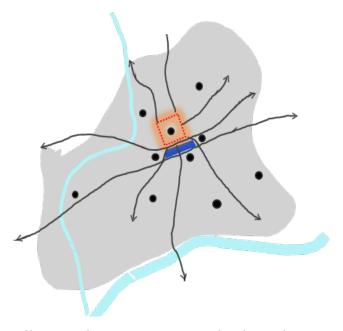


Figure 3: Elbasan urban structure growth & its main components: fortress, mosques, and bazaar and road directions. Source: Author.

The Ottoman influence can be seen in historical artifacts and the types of buildings typical of an Ottoman city, such as mosques, schools, markets, hammams (public baths), clock towers, and complex "külliye" structures. Çelebi notes the presence of mosques, numerous tekkes, schools, fountains, a very prosperous bezistan, and over 1150 large mansions (Çelebi, 2000, pp. 91-90). Additionally, the "waqf" system played a pivotal role in the city's transformation, enabling the construction of mosques and other essential infrastructure (Caka, 2021. pp. 246). For example due to "waqf" system, Sinan Pasha built mosques, tekkes, schools, imarets, and hamams in Elbasan, similar to the külliye complexes in Rumeli and Anatolia during the first centuries of Ottoman rule (Caka, 2023, pp. 60).

An early 19th-century drawing from the Albanian State Archives (fig. 4) illustrates the layout and expansion of the city. The map (fig.4) shows the main road system and the neighborhoods developed both inside and outside the castle walls. The main axis of the road system passes through the castle, which serves as the heart of the city's development.

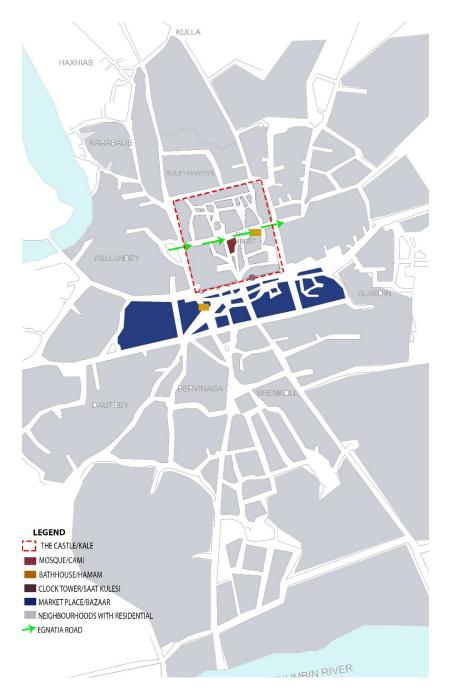


Figure 4: Illustration map of year 1800. Redrawn from the author referring to the original file found in Elbasan Digital Archive.

The map illustrates the city's arterial roads emanating from the castle, extending in all four directions. One of the most significant commercial and economic routes, the Egnatia Road, passes through the middle of the castle. The main roads connect community buildings with religious and commercial structures. Within the castle, the mosque is centrally located, with the bathhouse (*hamam*) adjacent to it, surrounded by clusters of neighborhoods. The clock tower is situated on the southern wall of the castle and still stands today. Opposite the southern gate of the castle used to lie the marketplace, which consisted of numerous shops, inns (*han*), the bazaar bathhouse, and the bazaar mosque. The marketplace is connected to other parts of the neighborhoods and residential areas.

The city's skyline, as evidenced by old photographs from various post-cards found in the Austrian State Archives and the digital archives of Albania, was low, with the tallest elements being the clock tower above the castle walls and the minarets of the mosques. Every other development maintained a proportionate relationship to this height. Minarets were a dominant architectural element in the city, their numerous vertical structures adding vitality to the cityscape and reflecting the predominantly Muslim society. In a way, the urban planning and architecture of the city, with all its constituent components, mirrored the social and religious structure of Elbasan's society.



Figure 5: Photo of Elbasan city taken from above by Edwin Jacques in 1930.

Source: archieve.org

Architectural Development

Regarding the architectural stylistic approach to the buildings, it predominantly featured early and classical Ottoman styles. The early Ottoman style is seen in the mosques built during the 15th and 16th centuries, such as the King Mosque and Tabaket Mosque. These structures are characterized by their simple designs and were covered with pitched roofs. The classical Ottoman style, which emerged later, was applied to religious Islamic buildings as well as hammams. The greatest craftsmanship of classical architecture is evident in the Naziresha Mosque and Aga Mosque, both constructed in the 16th century (Meksi, 2015.

pp.72). These mosques were built with stone, featuring a lead-covered dome on top and an elegant pencil minaret on the right side.

Another prominent architectural structure is the clock tower, originally built in the 17th century. However, after being destroyed by fire, it was reconstructed in the early 19th century 2(Coku, 2022, p.134), maintaining the same style and appearance it has today. Residential houses were pitched roof one- to two-story building, with "hayat" or "cardak" (a type of porch or balcony), and were often complemented with garden inside the fences. Additionally, these structures demonstrate the blend of functional and aesthetic elements typical of Ottoman architecture, emphasizing both the spiritual and communal aspects of the buildings.







Figure 7: Photo of clock tower. Source: Author



Figure 8: Fortress bathhouse (hamam).

Source: https://albanien.ch/albanien_info/elbasan/elbasan_hamam



Figure 9: Naziresha Mosque. Source: Author

Urban and Architectural Development of Elbasan Post Ottoman Period

Urban Development

After gaining independence from the Ottoman Empire, Albania underwent significant changes, although these were not immediately evident in the early years following independence. Basically in 20th century urban transformations occurred into three (3) phases:

The First Phase (1912-1924): There were no significant developments in either urban planning or architectural constructions during this period (Daja, 2020, pp.44). In the initial period following the declaration of independence, we observe almost the same urban planning and architectural state left by the governance during the Ottoman period. The city-scape was characterized by the minarets of mosques, approximately 31 mosques in the city, with the market and the social, cultural, and commercial life resembling that of the Ottoman era. There were schools and madrasas, hammams, and inns everywhere. Houses with gardens were one or two stories high, both within and outside the castle walls.





Figure 10: Photo of Elbasan city looking towards the Bazaar from above by Edwin Jacques in 1930. Source: archieve.org

Figure 11: L. Forstner, Landscape from Elbasan, drawing from the year 1918. Source: Hudhri, F. (2021)

The Second Phase (1924-1943): This phase is associated with Ahmet Zogu's rule and the Italian occupation of Albania. During this period, Elbasan saw major development in severalareas, including infrastructure. This included building roads to Tirana, Durrës, Korçë, Gramsh, Dibër, and other places. The city also saw the construction of an electric power plant and a water supply system. The economy flourished during this time with the establishment of various facilities such as factories producing oil, soap, alcohol, and tobacco products, while traditional artisanal work continued to thrive. (Mitrojorgji, 2014, pp.53).



Figure 12: Elbasan panorama city view in 1935. Source: https:// memorie.al



Figure 13: Photo of Oil Factory taken by Edwin Jacques in 1930. Source: archieve.org

The Third Phase (1944 - 1990): After the communist regime came to power. The Communist Party oriented the country towards the Soviet model of development, emphasizing centralized economic planning and urban development. Collective housing was assigned, and private construction was banned to maintain aesthetic consistency. The Cultural Revolution led to the closure of religious sites, transforming them into cultural and sports centers, significantly altering the urban land-scape. The 1970s also saw the construction of the Metallurgical Complex in the Shkumbin Valley (Daja, 2020, pp. 46).



Figure 14: Elbasan boulevard in 1966. Source: https://www.delcampe.net/



Figure 15: View from Skampa Theater and old tourism. Elbasan in the 1980s.

Source: Elbasan Digital Archive

Today, Elbasan is an important industrial center and one of the largest cities in the country, with a population of approximately 141,715 inhabitants (AZ Nation, 2024). Considering the population in the 1960s, which was around 20,000, we see that the population has increased sevenfold. This population growth demonstrates not only the city's expansion but also increase in the density and scale of the construction. As a result of demographic growth, many constructions took place in Elbasan. These constructions were often carried out without the proper permits from the relevant offices, disregarding urban planning regulations and frequently failing to blend with the surrounding environment. Comparative maps, which show the distribution of the city's development in various periods, illustrate the significant changes in the urban form of the city.

Figures 16 and 17 depict a comparison of urban sprawl between the 18th and 20th centuries, utilizing archival maps (Fig. 16) and a 20th-century map of the castle neighborhood. These illustrations clearly highlight the increased building density, loss of open spaces and greenery, and demographic growth over time.

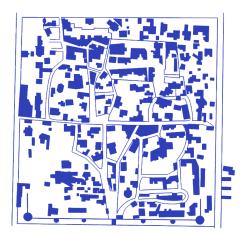


Figure 16: Site plan of Kala neighborhood in 18th century, Source: Source: Drawing from author referring to State Archive)

Figure 17: Site plan of Kala neighborhood in 20th century, Source:

Author.

This type of growth pattern is observed in all morphological districts that constitute the entire city of Elbasan. The map below in Figure 18 presents a distribution of buildings and structures throughout the city. It overlays structures with the road network from 1960. Meanwhile, the map in Figure 19 depicts the current state of the city, its current growth, and density.

In the past 50 years, Elbasan has experienced significant urban growth, leading to infrastructure modification as well. These modifications are characterized by the construction of more roads, the expansion of major thoroughfares, and the development of numerous new residential buildings. However, this expansion has led to a noticeable reduction in green spaces throughout the city, affecting both the urban landscape and residents' quality of life. The construction of new roads and the widening

of main streets have improved transportation and connectivity, show-casing Elbasan's efforts to accommodate its growing population and enhance infrastructure. Yet, the surge in residential buildings has come at the cost of green areas, potentially impacting environmental sustainability and overall well-being in the city.

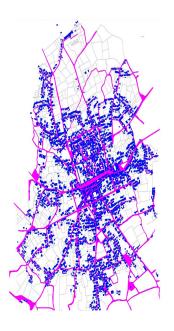


Figure 18: Urban distribution in the year 1960 and road network. Source: Author working on layers from the work of Mitrojorgji, 2014, pp.55)

Figure 19: Part of the general territorial plan of Elbasan from 2016 approved by the Prime Ministry, overlaying the road network with the urban expansion of buildings.

Source: Author

Based on the literature reviewed and the documented architectural structures in Elbasan before the regime, it is evident that the urban fabric has significantly changed. Observations of the current city reveal that many important buildings, which once supported the city's routine and needs, have been altered.

The city skyline of Elbasan has also undergone significant transformation. Historically, the tallest elements were the clock tower and the minarets, which dominated the skyline. This changed with the establishment of communist rule, during which more than 80% of religious buildings were demolished. Additionally, schools (medrese), water taps, fountains, and the bazaar were destroyed, and the Namazgah field was converted into a bus stop. The demolition of several inns and Beyler mansions paved the way for new construction, leading to the city's transformation into an industrial and modern urban center.

Today, the few remaining buildings from the Ottoman era are mostly located within the castle walls, with the Naziresha Mosque standing at the city's exit. Elbasan's shift from Ottoman influence to modernity was marked by several socioeconomic and cultural changes.



Figure 20: View of skyline fo the city. Source: Wikimapia/Elbasan

Urbanization, industrialization, and westernization played critical roles in transforming the city's architectural environment. Modern architectural influences led to the creation of new buildings and the modification of older ones to suit contemporary aesthetics. These urban changes are reshaping Elbasan's cityscape and impacting the daily lives of its

residents. While improvements in transportation and infrastructure signify progress, the loss of green spaces and the demolition or transformation of historical structures raise questions about the city's future development and cultural identity.

One detail we noticed during our visit was that the area where the bazaar used to be, now transformed into city plazas, still maintained the tradition of a commercial zone by hosting an open market throughout the area on Sundays. This adaptation underscores the city's commitment to maintaining cultural practices and nurturing community ties within urban development. It also highlights the crucial role of public spaces in promoting social cohesion and community interaction.

Architectural Development

Referring to the architectural style of the buildings, it is observed that there is a significant transformation and departure from the Ottoman style that predominated until the close of the 19th century. In the post-Ottoman era, a new paradigm emerged in the treatment of architectural stylistic language, encompassing not only the verticality and scale of buildings but also their design and aesthetic principles. Previously characterized by predominantly low-rise structures, the urban landscape began to accommodate the need for taller edifices.

This shift was accompanied by the adoption of European architectural styles, notably those influenced by fascist Italy. As mentioned in urban section, the new political order brought changes in architectural style and expression too. In Albania, after the 1920s, a distinct local and regional expression became prominent. This type of architecture can perhaps be classified as regionalist architecture, reflecting the region, symbolizing local customs, and responding to the local context. This influence is manifested in landmark structures such as the Skampa Theater built in 1938, the city library built in 1934, and the sports palace built in 1982, which exemplify the grandeur and stylistic rigor of this new architectural ethos.



Figure 21: Scampa theater view. Source: Wikimapia/Elbasan



Figure 22: Sport Palace view. Source: Wikimapia/Elbasan

Later, architectural language evolved to embrace a more modern and contemporary approach. Even in religious architecture, there emerged a desire to present Islamic buildings in a style that is both contemporary and Eastern. It can be said that we witness a blending of styles without a clear definition of any specific movement. Among the examples, we can mention the reconstruction of the Pasha Mosque, which, while diverging significantly from its original design, retains the mosque's fundamental elements such as the minaret, arch, and dome. Another example is the Ballie Mosque, which represents a completely new reconstruction in both its layout and architectural style approach.



Figure 23: Ballie mosque today. Source:Wikimapia/Ballie mosque



Figure 24: Elbasan flat development. Source: https://adria.fun/ en/elbasan-an-ancient-city-richin-history-and-culture/

Architecture also reveals a transformative approach to construction materials, notably the integration of concrete and steel. These advancements have facilitated the development of high-rise edifices, particularly residential apartment complexes. Consequently, in suburban areas beyond the city center, the construction of 15 to 20-story apartment buildings became prevalent post-2000. Additionally, on lands repurposed from agricultural to industrial use, numerous factories were established, characterized by their red brick façades and adherence to industrial architectural styles.

Discussion and findings

Urban Changes and Transformation

The urban structure of Elbasan has been greatly modified over the course of its evolution, which reflected a range of successive historical-socio-political developments. Being initially a fortified town, the urban structure of Elbasan was earlier restricted within the defensive walls of its Roman and later Ottoman citadel. During the Ottoman era, the city exhibited a well-integrated organization of residential, commercial, and religious functions, resulting in a dynamic and multifunctional urban landscape of the period when was developed. Distinctive urban quarters emerged, each anchored by mosques, bazaars, and civic buildings, collectively fostering a vibrant urban life.

The post-Ottoman era, particularly under the communist regime, saw a radical shift in land use and urban density. The strategic development of an industrial rather than an agrarian economy necessitated large-scale infrastructural networks and industrial institutions, leading to the disintegration of Elbasan's former compact urban fabric. The installation of numerous metallurgical factories and other industrial infrastructural units transformed the city's landscape, often resulting in the destruction of historical edifices dating from the 16th to 19th centuries to accommodate modern development.

Urban transformation has continued in the recent past through the urbanization of residential neighborhoods and the construction of upscale high-rise apartments. This transformation is particularly noticeable in peri-urban areas, where between 2000 and the present, 15 to 20-story buildings have become a common feature. The conversion of agricultural farmland to industrial use has been evident, with new industrial buildings featuring red brick and industrial architecture forms, contributing to the evolving urban skyline. The activities reflect a significant increase in urban density, resulting in the transformation of the city's spatial form and impacting its cultural and historical identity.

Architectural Changes

Elbasan's architectural evolution from Ottoman to contemporary influences represents a larger narrative of stylistic evolution and adaptation. During the Ottoman period, the city's architectural language was characterized by low-rise structures with ornate detailing, constructed from materials like stone and clay. Structures from that era, such as the Naziresha or Aga Mosque, exemplify the classical Ottoman style, alongside residential houses featuring gabled roofs and tiled finishes, contributing to a skyline adorned with minarets and the clock tower.

The post-Ottoman era marked significant departures in the styles and construction materials. The communist regime's push for industrialization facilitated the construction of utilitarian buildings, primarily made of reinforced concrete and steel. The period saw the demolition of numerous historical edifices, including some religious buildings, to make way for new industrial and residential developments. The architectural style increasingly leaned towards European influences, particularly regionalism. It is during this era that notable buildings in the city, such as the Skampa Theater and sport palace, were constructed.

In the recent past, the architectural language of Elbasan has modernized to incorporate modern and contemporary approach. Additionally, newer buildings typically maintain a modern outlook while traditional additions, creating a hybrid architectural sensibility. For instance, the new Pasha Mosque is designed with modern aesthetics but still retains traditional elements like arches and domes. This blend of old and new reflects an architectural approach that respects the past while embracing the present. Elbasan's architectural evolution is a dynamic mix of historical continuity and contemporary adaptation. The transition from low, intricately detailed Ottoman buildings to tall, modern structures highlights the city's changing identity. This evolution isn't just about new building materials and styles; it also reflects broader socio-economic and cultural shifts that have shaped Elbasan's urban and architectural character over time.

Conclusion

Elbasan's transformation from its Ottoman roots to its modern form tells a rich story of historical, socio-economic, and cultural changes. Originally, during the Ottoman period, the city flourished not only within its fortified walls but also beyond them, developing well-planned residential, commercial, and religious areas that contributed to a strong cultural and architectural heritage. After the Ottoman era, particularly during the communist regime, Elbasan experienced a dramatic shift towards industrialization. This shift led to the demolition of many historical buildings to make way for modern industrial complexes. The use of concrete and steel brought about high-rise residential towers, significantly altering the city's skyline. Unfortunately, these changes also resulted in the gradual neglect and decay of old Elbasan, with many historical structures falling into disrepair.

Today, Elbasan showcases a mix of modern and traditional architectural styles. However, this blend often lacks cohesive aesthetic planning, creating a disjointed cityscape. This highlights the urgent need for strategic urban planning and design. It is crucial for policymakers and architectural professionals to focus on preserving Elbasan's architectural heritage and improving its urban aesthetics. With thoughtful restoration and innovative contemporary development, Elbasan can be reimagined as a prestigious example of architectural integrity and cultural representation, celebrating its rich history while embracing a vibrant future.

Contribution Rates and Conflicts of Interest

Ethical Statement	It is declared that scientific and ethical principles have been followed while carrying out and writing this study and that all the sources used have been properly cited
Author Contributions	
Data Collection	BB (%60), ZA (%40)
Data Analysis	BB (%60), ZA (%40)
Research Design	BB (%60), ZA (%40)
Writing the Article	BB (%60), ZA (%40)
Article Submission and Revision	BB (%80), ZA (%20)
Complaints	journalbalkan@gmail.com
Conflicts of Interest	The author(s) has no conflict of interest to declare.
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