PAINTING THE TOWN

How Edi Rama reinvented Albanian politics.

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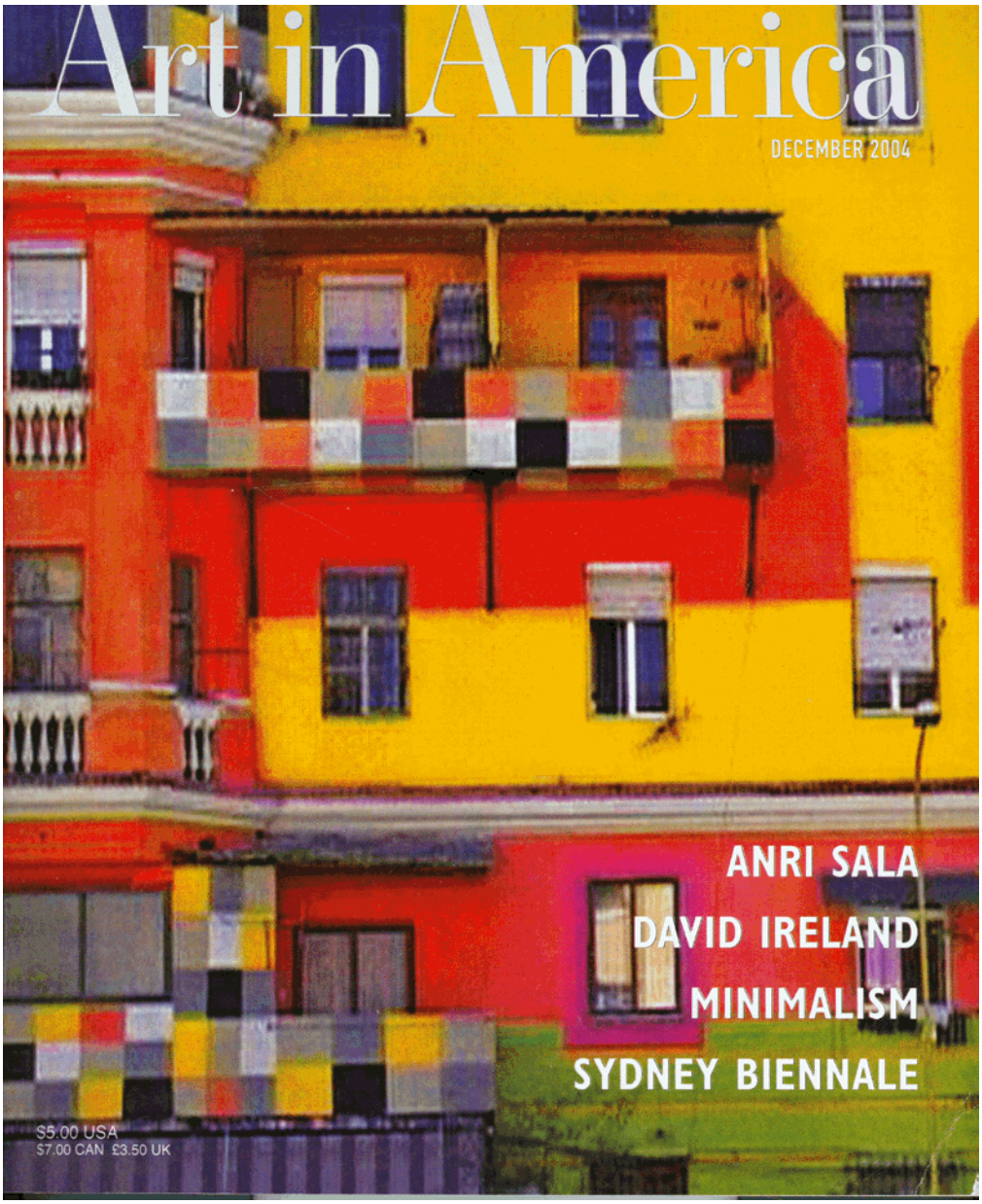

Edi Rama is the mayor of Tirana, Albania and it's safe to say that the Balkans have never produced a politician so beguiling. You see him everywhere: six feet six, three-day beard, baggy black pachuco pants, funky black vest, red shirt, red socks, and the kind of shapeless black frock coat that East German clergymen used to wear. You hear him everywhere: a gravell basso exhorting the lazy, seducing the skeptics booming his way through a hip-hop track about Tirana that half the city seems to own. He is inexhaustible. He spends his days repairing the body and soul of a shattered capital and his nights prowling its streets, seeing that the work got done, and that no one has been stealing street lights or dropping beer bottles or cigarette wrappers—that people are behaving like citizens. Rama is a Balkan original, and maybe the most original thing about him is that he isn't really a politician. He is an artist who, you might say, took Tirana for his canvas.

Rama has been in office for nearly five years (he was elected in 2000, at the age of thirty-six, and reëlected three

years later), and the first thing he did as mayor was to order paint. He blasted the façades of Tirana's gray Stalinist apartment blocks with color—riotous, Caribbean color—turning buildings into patchworks of blues, greens, oranges, purples, yellows, and reds, and the city itself into something close to a modern-masters sampler. (Art in America put a Tirana façade on its December cover; it looked like an abstract painting.) It was an extravagant gesture, but Rama thinks in extravagant gestures. "The city was without organs," he says, meaning that it was a dump, and that nothing in it functioned. ("Kandahar" is how he usually describes it.) "I thought, My colors will have to replace those organs. It was an intervention."

The interventions continued. Within a few years, Rama had managed to clear the choked, riverine city center of two thousand illegal kiosks and bars and cafés and shops and whorehouses and sleeping barracks and traffickers' storeroom "motels"—the detritus of a decade of post-Communist freedom frenzy on city property. He carted away a hundred and twenty-three thousand tons of concrete and ninety thousand tons of garbage. He dredged Tirana's Lana River, seeded thirty-six acres of public parks, relaid old boulevards, and planted four thousand trees. He lit the city—literally, since only seventy-eight street lights worked when he took it over. He cajoled the money for all this transformation out of the World Bank and the European Union and the United Nations Development Program and George Soros and the score of foundations and aid agencies and N.G.O.s that had set up shop in Albania in the early nineties. And he cajoled the work out of local contractors: anybody who wanted to build anything in the capital had to "contribute." People enjoy Tirana now. They stroll and shop on the shady streets of what used to be their Politburo's version of a gated neighborhood. They read the paper and drink espresso under the white umbrellas of cheerful, sprawling cafés. There is nothing remotely like Tirana in the rest of Albania. Most of its cities are still Kandahar. And its politicians, as often as not, are the clan bosses who control the contraband.

"People can say that my color is only makeup," Rama told me, as we walked through town one mild February night, stopping on an old stone Ottoman footbridge he had just restored. "But suppose all makeup disappeared. Suppose all women had no makeup, no pretty dresses, no pretty hair." It is Rama's belief that Albanians are somewhat aesthetically challenged—and his mission is to meet that challenge. "These are not Parisians," he said. "They can be calmed by beauty."

Not long ago, Edi Rama was living a happy hardscrabble artist's life in the City of Light. He was a good painter, not a great one, and the only real difference between him and hundreds of other young painters making their vie de bohème in Paris then was that Rama was an Albanian painter—a breed not much seen in the West, or, for that matter, in most of the East, in the half century since a Communist Party Secretary named Enver Hoxha put Albania in the deep freeze of Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy and shut the door. Rama had come to Paris in 1995 on a two-year fellowship to the Cité Internationale des Arts, and stayed. He didn't have much, but it was pretty much all he wanted: a cheap apartment on the Rue du Faubourg-Saint-Antoine; a friendly neighborhood café; a great-looking German girlfriend; an old laptop; and his paints. He had had some shows, his paintings were selling, and he was feasting on Western art. He had fallen in love with Picasso on a trip to the Kunsthalle Bremen ("I saw my first Picasso; I thought, I'll die") and then with Mark Rothko and Francis Bacon and Max Ernst. Now he was in love with the Louvre and its Paolo Uccellos, and was working day and night on a series of new paintings. "Edi was a free spirit," his friend and occasional Paris roommate, the Albanian video artist Anri Sala, says. "He was never interested in things, only in things that brought him closer to his vision." He certainly wasn't interested in trading Paris for Albania.

People were leaving Albania then (nearly a million, by the end of the nineties), not returning. The country was in chaos. Depending on whom you asked, it was "recovering from fifty years of Communism" or "making an irrepressible transition to democracy" or "being its Balkan self," which, for practical purposes, meant that it was held hostage to a collection of traffickers, mobsters, hustlers, money launderers, and politicians who were bent or brutal (or both). Albania's last Communist Prime Minister, a born-again Socialist Party leader named Fatos Nano, had been thrown in prison on unsubstantiated (if unsurprising) charges involving eight million dollars that had gone missing from an emergency food-aid deal with Italy a few years earlier. Albania's President, an old Politburo doctor and new Democratic Party leader named Sali Berisha, was extolling the purity of Albanian money while two-thirds of the people—united, briefly, in a mass hysteria they took for capitalism—sank their

pensions and their life savings into pyramid schemes that left the country bankrupt, its arsenals looted, and close to civil war.

The choice between Albania's new "Socialists" and its new "Democrats" (two misnomers, used mainly because they sounded Western) amounted to what one Albanian called the poison or the axe, and it was not a choice anyone should have had to make. Rama's own politics then were, by his description, "Paris left and Tirana trouble-maker radical." He had put in time as a leader of Albania's young democracy movement in the early nineties, and had sat on Soros's local Open Society board with a group of like-minded intellectuals determined to open their country to the West and escape what the anthropologist Mariella Pandolfi calls the Balkan conundrum of "permanent transition." He had left a reputation, and a following, behind him—a reputation he maintained in Paris by writing columns for a Tirana paper on the subject of what was wrong with Albania. ("My bottles in the sea," he calls his dispatches.) Safe in Paris, he was making the satraps tremble. In the winter of 1997, when he was home visiting his parents, two thugs rumored to be Berisha hitmen intercepted him on a dark road, beat him senseless with lead pipes, and left him for dead—an event he commemorated, in what has come to be known as "the Edi Rama style," by staggering to a photographer's house, on his way to the hospital, and posing for pictures of his cracked skull and his smashed, swollen, bloody face. "Thirteen blows," he told his friends when the doctors removed his feeding and breathing tubes. (Berisha denies having ordered the attack.)

A year later, Rama flew home for his father's funeral. He told his girlfriend, "I'm back in four days." By the next morning, Fatos Nano—fresh from jail, Prime Minister again, and looking for a clean face to decorate an otherwise murky cabinet—had named him Minister of Culture. (His first "intervention" as a minister was to underwrite a movie theatre for Tirana, telling his colleagues that in terms of public morale and safety "a dark theatre with a good movie is more effective than an unlit street with a thousand police.") In two more years, he was Tirana's mayor. This spring, he was travelling to meetings every Sunday, and people said he was weighing the chances of becoming Prime Minister himself—something that most Albanians would welcome. Rama said no, that he had made a "moral contract" with Tirana, and that he "would not tear up this contract, even if they offered to make me king, let alone Prime Minister." (Elections are in two weeks, and he is campaigning for the Socialists.) But the pols were already so alarmed at even the thought of an Edi Rama government that they had been doing all they could to derail him. Months before Tirana's last mayoral election, Berisha had produced a dossier of Rama's "crimes"—trafficking, laundering, mob connections, drug connections, terrorist connections, everything bad he could think of—and demanded a parliamentary investigation. Rama's response was to wrap City Hall in sheets, like a Christo, with the accusations printed across them in big red letters. He called it "Happy April 1st from the Doctor."

"Going from art to politics—I wouldn't in any normal situation have done this," Rama told me. "It's impossible, it's Kafka, it's like changing sex. But I wanted to leave my name in the history of this city, this country. On the day of his funeral, my father gave me his most important lesson. I saw the crowds"—his father, Kristaq, had been Albania's favorite sculptor, an inventive master of what could be called socialist-realist Baroque—"and I saw the respect they paid him. I saw that nothing is as valuable as leaving a good history behind you. I went to his grave and made a promise."

Tirana was a small city of two hundred and fifty thousand people until the Communist regime unravelled and hundreds of thousands of northern clansmen, from near the Kosovo border, began to descend to its outskirts. Fiftee years later, more than seven hundred thousand people live in and around the city, but the original Tirana is still small, and the original families are still there. Edi Rama comes from one of those families. The Ramas were Balkan mix, but "southern" in spirit—southern in Albania, being a code for urban and (at least in origin) Christian, closer in culture and temperament to Greece, to the south, and Italy just across the Adriatic, than to anyone in the largely Muslim north, much of it as primitive as it was when Lord Byron visited Ali Pasha. They were also part of that cautious, curious East European élite that had survived, shabbily but comfortably, during the Communist years by joining the Party and doing whatever complaining they did in private. They had considerable privilege: a roomy apartment; studio for Kristaq; the use of their old family villa, south of Vlora, where the Adriatic meets the Ionian Sea. They were educated and, to an extent, travelled. Rama's father had studied art in Leningrad. His mother, Aneta, who was one of the country's first women dentists, had

trained in Lodz. His younger brother, Olsi who, like Edi, studied at home, now lives with his own family in a Detroit suburb and is part of a research team at the Karmanos Cancer Institute

Rama was born during Albania's "Mao years," after the country broke with Russia and attached itself to China. And it may be a measure of how bleak and isolated life in Albania was then that people remembered the Russians with something close to nostalgia. For Rama, it was a drama played out at home: "My father was a Communist. For him, Communism meant studying art in Russia, it meant Mayakovsky and the spirit of that moment—it was like being completely drug-addicted. He came slowly down, making a balance between disillusion and fear. He was decent, quiet, he never had many words, but he was a hostage of the need to keep his family safe. He became more and more silent. In our family, it was always possible to argue. But the feeling was: 'What for?' "

When Rama talks about the family, he prefers to start with his father's mother, who arrived in Tirana from Durres after the Second World War. His grandmother was a Catholic (most Albanian Christians are Orthodox), and he says that, for him, she was a glimpse into a forbidden world. He remembers her during the Mao years, when religion was a constitutional offense, whispering her rosary at night in the nursery, where he and Olsi slept. "After lights-out, I would hear that low voice, making her prayers. She was my night music." He says that she planted the seeds of "an alternative way of thinking in me, an alternative to what Communist ideology meant by 'love' and 'values.' " When he was a baby, she brought a priest into the apartment and had him baptized secretly; she gave him "shelter against everything that was taught out loud."

At eighteen, Rama entered the Albanian Academy of Arts—a place where "painting stopped at Courbet." But by then he was lost in another forbidden world, a world he had discovered, as a boy, in clandestine chance encounters—a book or a journal here, a picture there, a smuggled tape, an instrument. He remembers hearing a saxophone for the first time. Saxophones were banned in Albania, which may be why the day a school friend whispered, "Want to see a saxophone?" is as memorable to him as the day he saw his first nude drawings. He says that the sound of that saxophone—a few notes, played in his friend's attic, with lookouts posted on the stairs—was "like a strange amplification of the miraculous," and started him wondering "why all these beautiful things were bad." Beautiful things were hard to find in Albania then. Rama took to visiting one of his father's old art professors who had studied in Florence in the thirties and was said to own two volumes of Impressionist prints. ("They were like pearls, like nectar," he says.) He started hanging around the National Library, staying late to help the maids clean; his pay was five minutes alone with a banned book of Georges Braque's paintings. "A spiritual sandwich," he calls it.

No one knows how Rama survived Communist Albania. His friends claim it was because he was tall—"Nobody in Albania is that tall," one of them told me—and was kept safe for the greater glory of the national basketball team, which he joined for a while in the late eighties, perhaps the only player in its history who could dunk. His brother says he survived on eloquence, intensity, and a gift for bullshit. He managed to graduate from the Arts Academy, in 1986, and even to be asked to stay on as an assistant professor. But he was also known for having the two most dangerous enthusiasms in Albania—God and art—and he was fast becoming a public figure. He started lecturing on Bauhaus principles. He embraced Expressionism. In fact, he introduced Albania to Expressionism, taking a Party commission for a forty-foot mural at a museum built to commemorate the draining of swampland for collective farms, and, with a painter named Vladimir Myrtezai, turning out "a work of Expressionism hiding in the theme of darkness" (Rama's words). "It created a lot of noise and disappointment" in the Party, he likes to say.

Rama celebrated the fall of the Berlin Wall by opening an arts conference with smuggled tapes of Joe Cocker and Prince. He was premature. Albania's Communists clung to power for two more years, and during those years Rama and his friends began to organize big open meetings, which they called Reflections, in a darkened Arts Academy auditorium where "everyone was equal." They invited old political prisoners—"the buried-alive people"—to the Academy to tell their stories. They went to political rallies where ex-Communists like Berisha, trying to invent new parties, talked endlessly about democracy but never about the past, never about the fact that Enver Hoxha had led Albania astray. According to Rama, Berisha accused them of "opening the sewers of our society," and when that happened he got on the phone to Voice of America and said, "Listen, we want to make a declaration. We are not flinging mud at the memory of Enver Hoxha. We are just starting to wash off the mud he

flung on us."
Rama says, "For me, it was as if Hoxha died at that moment. I thought, I'm a free man. I want the world." He was on his way out of a brief and unhappy marriage. (He has a son, Greg, who is nearly fifteen.) He took the money he had just made from a show in Corfu, his first outside Albania, and started travelling—to France, Germany, England, Brazil, wherever he got a grant or an invitation or a cheap ticket. And he started thinking about the cities he saw and what made them work and what made them interesting. "Rome, for instance. I thought, This is the end of history, it's where things ended, where the sun went to bed. Paris—well, there was the beautiful, transparent life of the Paris miracle, but it's there for you, nothing comes out of it. The most impressive place was London. I felt the freedom, the energy of London." He didn't know why Albania couldn't produce a great city.

"When I think about governance—abo t how easy it is—it makes me sick," Rama announced one night over dinner at his favorite seafood restaurant, about a half hour out from Tirana. TheAlbanian soccer team was eating at the next table. Some of the players had just trooped over to shake hands with Rama, and one had mentioned that the Prime Minister was offering a four-hundred-thousand-dollar bonus if they beat Ukraine in a World Cup qualifying match scheduled for the next night. (They didn't.) Rama was uneasy about the offer. He talked for a while about how well most young Albanians could do if they were simply left alone. Albania, with a population that is seventy per cent Muslim, remains, at least for now, a secular country, free from the kind of violence that ravaged Kosovo, next door. " We have no religious problem, no ethnic problem, only ourselves," Rama said, finally. "And it would be so easy to be ourselves." The problem was how.
A few days earlier, Rama had downloaded an Internet test that was going to read his "political compass." It had a horizontal axis from "left" to "right" and a vertical axis from "libertarian" to "authoritarian," and Rama had made his dot about halfway down the "left libertarian" quadrant, just to the right of Nelson Mandela and a bit more authoritarian than the Dalai Lama. He was satisfied, but he wasn't sure. He said that the experience of running Tirana had convinced him that there was "nothing left or right in the way I deal with the world," that the real divisions in Albania had less to do with politics than with honest and corrupt, peaceful and violent, and, especially, with "the hard-working people and the people who don't respect work." Right now, this is his only politics. "If I lived in Germany or France or England, no doubt I'd be totally with the left wing," he told me. "But there is a huge difference in the situation there. At the end of the day, the ideology we need to embrace is the ideology of work. Right and left are only a question of how you distribute. For us, the key is to have something to distribute."
Rama works all the time. His friend Dashi Peza—who put in a few years with him at City Hall and left, exhausted, to go into the hotel business—told me, "When I met Edi, we were boys, but he was more disciplined and devoted than a priest. I said, 'Edi, relax, try some sin!' " Edi has tried. He learned to smoke in Paris. He developed a taste for wine. But, once he was mayor, he stopped, and now even a big meal can make him feel guilty. He goes on crash diets, some of them mystifying ("Days 12-13: white cheese, French fries, boiled vegetables") but, he claims, punishing enough to make him feel "less spiritually heavy." Even his old girlfriends—he introduced one of them to his aunt as "my fourth victim"—say that they had no chance against his passion for Albania. Today, he lives with his son and with his partner of five years, a preternaturally patient young television hostess and producer named Rudina Magjistari, who, he says, understands that passion. Magjistari says, "Well, to stay with Edi, you must understand him, you have to accept him as he is. Obsessive. Preoccupied. At first it was a bit strange." Rama comes home at night and collapses on the couch, his head in Magjistari's lap, never speaking, reading the Italian papers, surfing the local news, and text-messaging half the people he knows to see what they think of the news or, more accurately, the news about him, and what he should do about it. Text messaging is his addiction: he thinks of something, and he starts tapping. "Am I pissing you off?" he asks cheerfully whenever a friend complains. "Doing nothing makes me nervous."
This year, Rama has been giving himself a crash course in economics. It's a fairly haphazard exercise, inasmuch as most of the reading list, the advice, and, often, the books themselves have been supplied by visitors from abroad. Three years ago, the United Nations honored Rama for his work in Tirana. And last year, up against mayors from places like Athens, Rome, and Mexico City, he was chosen World Mayor 2004. (A city-watch

group based in London took the poll.) Now everybody who comes to Albania wants to meet Edi Rama, and they bring books. “I’m always with a book, I’m reading about economy all the time,” Rama says. Todd Buchholz, Thomas Sowell, Hernando de Soto’s “The Other Path” and “The Mystery of Capital.” Hardly a left-wing list, but Rama, somewhat to his surprise, has become not only a law-and-order politician but an eager disciple of a group of unconventionally conservative economists—especially De Soto, whose books have convinced him that “the poor are not the problem but the solution to the problem.” De Soto comes from Peru, and it was his fairly successful theory that you could salvage the Peruvian economy by folding the poor into the propertied classes—turning squatters into owners, formalizing their titles to create a property-tax base that would open credit sources for them and turn dead capital into working capital.

This is Rama’s prescription for Tirana. He says that it fits Albania’s historical givens, the most important being that people who have lived through Communism, where everything belonged to the state, want to take back possession of their own lives—their land, their businesses, their homes. Some Tirana intellectuals call this a fetish of private property, but Rama points out that those intellectuals are not running a city with more than a quarter of a million people building illegally on its periphery. He has been constructing roads and schools and playgrounds, and laying power cables and water mains, in those outlying zones. It is part of his plan to engage the northerners living there—a snarly collection of mountaineers who tend to look more like extras from a Gypsy movie than like eager students of the mortgage system—in what he calls “turning piles of bricks into legal property.”

It’s not evident that the politicians will even let him try. Tirana’s squatters were first courted by Berisha, who, according to Rama, told them they didn’t have to buy their land, or pay for anything, or even register as residents, as long as they voted for him. Then they were courted by Nano, who had a keen interest in complicating Rama’s work—which is to say in doing whatever he could to keep Rama from succeeding him. Rama has been running out of things to offer. For one thing, the N.G.O.s are leaving, and taking their money with them. For another, Albania remains a thoroughly centralized country. The state decides how many policemen Tirana gets to patrol its streets and enforce its property-tax laws (a hundred) and how much water it deserves (twelve hours’ worth, on a good day) and whether its electricity arrives (off and on) and its schools and hospitals function (often, they don’t).

Tirana’s budget is small—about sixty-seven million dollars last year. (Baltimore, with roughly the same population, has a budget of more than two billion.) Rama raised thirty-seven million of that himself, from city licenses and service taxes. But the subsidies he used to receive from the state have dropped by half since he first took office, and he figures that this year, once he covers his costs—salaries, social services, maintenance—he will be left with only twenty-six million for his Tirana projects. His staff works mainly for love. His own salary is fifteen hundred and eighty-two dollars a month, and he rents his apartment. He and Magjistari used to get by living in two small rooms and eating at his mother’s, but four years ago a sniper fired through the kitchen window, missing Magjistari by a few feet. Eventually, they moved to a four-room walkup at the back of a closed courtyard, with a guard stationed at the gate and no window access from the street. Rama’s only perks are his Italian papers and his security detail. One Saturday when we drove to Vlora, a car with a couple of bodyguards joined us. They got out whenever we did. He never explained why.

Tirana’s City Hall sits in the middle of town at one end of a group of Italianate governmen buildings that flank the entrance to an empt piazza called Skanderbeg Square—a enormous space that once housed most of th city’s sprawling Ottoman bazaar. The bazaa was nearly as old as Tirana. It managed, at leas in part, to survive its occupiers of the pas century—the Hapsburgs, the northern chieftai King Zog, the Italians, the Germans—but i 1959 the Communists razed it. They put up th obligatory Palace of Culture you found in mos Communist capitals, and, eventually, a gloom National Historical Museum, and then the stopped. The big roads into the city stil converge on Skanderbeg Square, but there ar no trees, no benches, no children playing nothing but a flat, paved space that leaves you feeling vulnerable and exposed, which is just how Hoxha wanted you to feel in the presence of state power. “Tirana’s empty heart,” Ram calls it.

Rama restored the government buildings when he was Minister of Culture, along with an eighteenth-century mosque—the Mosque of Ethem Bey—next to City Hall, and a rare Ottoman clock tower behind it. His mission

now is to rebuild the city center, and to bring Skanderbeg Square to life by pointing the life of the center toward it. He has invited some of Europe's best architects to submit plans and to sit on juries, and has made the competition "transparent," opening the process to the public and asking his judges to explain their choices—something unheard of in Albania and, in fact, in most of Europe. More to the point, he is trying to civilize the speculators and developers who now own most of central Tirana's real estate, working openly with them, claiming whatever land he needs from them for public space—for a municipal pool, say, or a concert hall—and demanding that they use the rest according to very specific guidelines. What they get, in return, is a measure of status, a chance to look civic-minded and respectable, and maybe even to become respectable.

Right now, according to most estimates, at least a quarter of the Albanian economy is "informal," which is to say, fuelled by crime and by improvised black markets. Construction is the country's biggest legal industry and, as everywhere, the conduit of choice for most of the illegal ones—the time-honored way for getting dirty money into a safe Swiss bank. (Al Qaeda allegedly bought into Albania's construction racket in the nineties, filtering Saudi money through an Egyptian investment group and into a stake in two exceptionally ugly black Tirana office buildings.)

Rama is a realist—"a realist who dreams," he says—and he knows that his success with Tirana may depend on some of its least reputable people. Tirana's developers and contractors have astonishing power. They control the press; there are seventeen dailies in the country, and they own all but a few of them. They own most of its seventy television stations, too. And they make their own political choices. One of Rama's most ardent supporters is a contractor and businessman named Koca Kokedhima, who owns, among other things, Shekulli, the country's biggest and best newspaper. (Rama, who likes him, describes him as thinking like a fox and looking like an "old-time Russian gangster.") "Edi is a simple person, like me, a concrete person, a person who wants to build things" is how Kokedhima explains their friendship. He is proud of it, perhaps because Rama may be the first politician in his experience who doesn't expect kickbacks: "I'm not entering inside his head. I'm not opening his heart. But he has been my best relationship in all these years."

Rama makes no excuses for his belief that, if he wants to rebuild Tirana, he needs private investment in public projects—which means some sort of working partnership with the developers. He thinks he can control them. Some people are worried that the developers will end up controlling him. They say that, for all his new economic theories, Rama is an innocent among sharks. "It's like when Edi would fall in love with a woman," Dashi Peza told me. "He'd get on the phone with you for hours, explaining how intelligent she was, how passionate about people—how she was so great. Now he's in love with politics, and so everyone is great." But most of his friends think he's shrewd. Ardian Klosi, a writer and translator who organized the Reflections with him, says, "Edi knows it's not to his credit to deal with some of those businessmen, but he does it to build his roads, his city. He can speak their language when he has to. He's a real politician." One old friend has broken with him completely. Fatos Lubonja, a writer (and former political prisoner) of uncommon talent and huge resentments, rails at him on television shows, in newspaper columns, to just about anybody who will listen. "Rama, for the moment, is the focus of all the money interests in Tirana," he told me. "Why doesn't he construct through the banks, like people in Europe did?" Once, he said, "Rama's biggest illusion is that he can work his way out of the system. Here, for honest people, it's impossible to survive."

In fact, it may not matter what anyone thinks about Rama. He is thin-skinned but headstrong. "Edi is a loner, a solitary fighter, not a team player," Genc Ruli, an economist who is running for parliament on Berisha's ticket, says. "He's like the Balkans, which has lords, not leaders." Mustafa Nano, the political columnist for Shekulli, puts it this way: "I have a fear that Edi's democratic formation is a little deficient." Even his friends admit that Rama runs the city by a kind of papal seduction. (His speeches could melt a stone.) But they say that he has no choice—that it is pointless to open more of "the Tirana discussion" to Tirana until what Rama calls "habits of citizenship" are in place and laws respected. Rama himself says, "This business of my always acting alone is a big myth! Sure, I go strongly for things. I have a strong personality. You know me, I'm always talking and talking, arguing and arguing. But in the end there has to be a decision."

The master plan for Tirana—the winning design came from the French firm Architecture-Studio—calls for ten two-hundred-and-eighty-foot office and apartment buildings (skyscrapers, by local standards) to demarcate and punctuate two boulevards that run parallel to the park he plans for Skanderbeg Square. The jury liked the plan

for its drama. The urbanists liked it for its density. The developers liked it for the shopping spaces reserved for the towers' lower floors. But a lot of people claimed that it wouldn't be "European" or that it would block their views of the mosque and the clock tower and out to Mt. Dajte, or that it would destroy Tirana's "historic center"—though that center is, of course, long gone. After the vote, Rama told everybody what he told me: "Popes put up obelisks. These towers will be our obelisks. They are acupunctural!"

The jury for the first tower met in January of this year, and in February I sat in on the meeting where a new jury of architects chose the second one—a beautiful concrete-and-glazed-terra-cotta design by a group of young Belgian architects. It was muted, modest, and sensitive to what one of the Belgians nicely called "Tirana's very difficult relationship with its history." The developer who owns the land for it sat in on the meeting with me. He is an ex-bodyguard named Fidel Ylli, whom Rama has known since the days Ylli ran an illegal kiosk café that Rama frequented as a young radical and razed as mayor. Now Ylli's company controls more than an acre of central Tirana, including a piece of land near Skanderbeg Square that Rama recently claimed for the city as "green space." ("Do I look like someone who pays three million dollars for a park?" Ylli joked to a friend.) He didn't like the Belgians' tower; he wanted to build one that included a bigger shopping mall, and was made of glass and steel, materials that wouldn't require special craftsmen. The jurors listened to him politely. They tried to soothe him, saying that with the Belgian design he would be giving Tirana a major European building. He wasn't happy, but he stopped complaining when Rama raised his hand and said,"Well, gentlemen, we don't need to dance anymore."

Rama works in a vast and extremely eccentric office on the second floor of City Hall. He designed it himself. He put in marble floors with the Tirana seal in the center, and an elaborate white-and-gold coffered ceiling that he had had copied from an old Tirana hotel. The walls are covered with a blurry, blown-up sepia panorama of the old capital. Everything else is red. Red armchairs you can wheel around in. A red-stained desk. A red-stained conference table with a centerpiece platter of dried Albanian plants and flowers that a friend collected and Rama sprayed red. ("My Max Ernst," he calls it.) When Rama isn't messaging someone or writing something, he sits at his desk, feet up ("for lumbago"), and makes fantastical Magic Marker drawings on the back of discarded memos. He hasn't painted in several years, but he never stopped drawing. He does his thinking that way. Often, his only compan is a pair of large turtles, in a glass terrarium which were prescribed as a cure for asthma by a doctor in Beijing.

People who knew Rama as a young man worry that politics has isolated him. He came to City Hall as an independent on the Socialist ticket—"collecting opinions," he likes to say. But two years ago, a few weeks after his reëlection, and against the advice of many friends, he joined the Socialists, hoping to take over the leadership, or, as he puts it, "to have an independent position within the whole left-wing family." It may have been his first serious miscalculation as a politician, given that the Party blocked him: the Socialists liked his lustre, but not many of them wanted an Edi Rama cleaning up their turf. Mustafa Nano, who calls Rama "the most bizarre Socialist in the world," told me, "Edi rang. He said, 'In two hours, I'll be a Socialist. Is this right?' I said, 'What will happen if I say no?' " And Vladimir Myrtezai—the painter who worked with him on the mural—said, "Edi wants to be a protagonist, whereas I want to live my dreams in my painting. We have stayed friends, but we don't see much of each other now." Even Aneta Rama, whom I saw in Detroit when she was visiting Edi's brother, told me that he had changed, that he often seemed tired, fragile, and distracted, that he wasn't the same person who had always needed her.

Maybe not. Maybe he's protecting a world he loves from a world he hasn't had time to mend. Or maybe he has moved on. "I have always had a few people as points of reference," he told me, the night before I flew home. "Now it's these architects. My project is them. And, to be frank, maybe it's also to fulfill my own ego, to be identified with something big in the eyes of everybody. I know that this obsession I have to make a big work, this identification with this city—I know it makes problems for me with my family, my friends. But for me Tirana is a mirror, an affirmation, a confirmation of my vision, or call it my will, or my person. This is something that comes from far away, like a destiny. . . . As for the rest, I'm not off message. I'm outside."