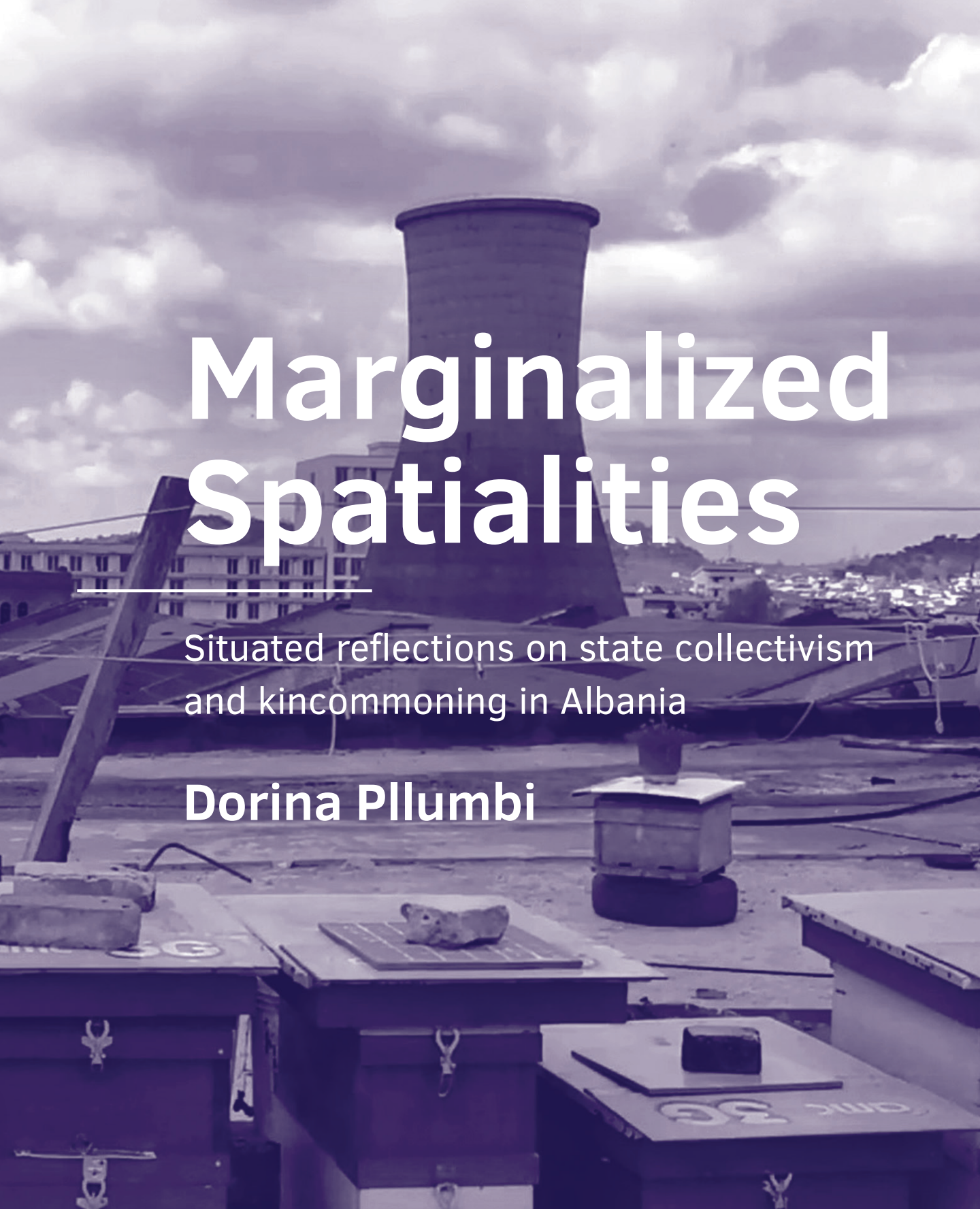


Marginalized Spatialities

Situated reflections on state collectivism and kincommoning in Albania

Dorina Pllumbi

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Situated reflections on state collectivism and kincommoning in Albania

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by

Dorina PLLUMBI

TOC

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Dedication

To those who trusted me,
to walk among them, not behind, not ahead,
but within the rhythms of our paths collectively …

Prologue

Insiders and Outsiders

We couldn't circulate freely, let alone mingle with Albanians. On the magnificent beach of Durrës, our little group of eight was ordered to stay within a well-defined zone in front of the Hotel Adriatik, reserved for foreigners. The Sigurimi, equivalent to KGB and the Stasi, was watching. We were considered vectors of Western corruption and would stay in our bubble. The real country was on another stage to which we had no access.

[…] We saw nothing of the Albania of 1975 but perhaps no more or less than summer visitors today, thousands who flock to the beaches on the Adriatic. The country is now a top holiday spot in the Balkans, while since 1989 its inhabitants have fled in droves, migrants shunted from one end of Europe to another, drowned by the image of happiness that we, at some past time, despite our distance from the people, or maybe because of it, made them want.

Excerpt from the film Les années Super-8 [The Super 8 Years], by Annie Ernaux and David Ernaux-Briot[1]

As children of the late 1980s and 1990s, we also had just a taste of the world known as Communist Albania, which we were born into. Not because we were shielded from it like Annie Ernaux and her peers, the foreign visitors at Hotel Adriatik, but because it soon turned from the seemingly peaceful home into an unraveling world. We played with makeshift toys like *karroca me kuzhinjeta* (a do-it-yourself wooden sitting skateboard) and made dolls with leftover fabric pieces from tailor shops in the neighborhood; our parents did not have to arrange playdates; the neighborhood was safe under the watch of many eyes. We gained the proud status of *Yllka* (little Stars) or *Pioner* (Pioneer) in kindergarten and elementary school, but then it all changed in the blink of an eye.

1 *Les Années Super-8*, directed by Annie Ernaux and David Ernaux-Briot, with Blanche Madeleine Dumenil Duchesne et al. (Les Films Pelléas, Arte France Cinéma, Centre national du cinéma et de l'image animée (CNC), 2022), 1h3m.

In my family, we were convinced that our living conditions were much better than those of others during communism. That is what we were told, or maybe it was true. I later discovered it was a common story told in many families to keep the spirits up, consoled by the thought of how it could have been worse. I remember our home being the venue for extended kin gatherings. My grandmother was living with us, and my uncles and aunts were always coming to see her together with cousins with whom I was so happy to play. Later on, discussions about inheritance became more and more present and started to crack the harmonious relations of the socialist times when property had no meaning whatsoever. We grew up in the gaps between what our parents had lost and what we were supposed to gain. Between promises of an imagined future and a past that no one wanted to talk about.

I was old enough to understand that people were leaving in masses. The first wave had gone in an exodus in 1991, followed by more in the crazy year of 1997, when chaos gripped the streets.[2] Although still hard to penetrate, the borders were not hermetic anymore, and the West, Europe, represented the possibility of Elsewhere.[3] The Elsewhere was never a fixed place. It was a direction, a pull, a promise passed around in stories told in schoolyards, playgrounds, or family gatherings, where people voiced the dream of a different kind of life. It was in the stories of families who had crossed the sea to Italy on rubber boats, in the pictures sent from cousins who had settled in Germany. Elsewhere meant escape, meant opportunity. It was a place where things worked, where the streets were clean, where hard work meant a better life. But it was also a place of uncertainty, risk, and never fully belonging.

---

2 Albania's early years of the so-called transition were subject to reforms guided by the IMF (International Monetary Fund) and the World Bank, which privatized public assets and established a liberal market economy. Although these reforms were considered successful, the emergence of fraudulent Ponzi schemes, as described by Smoki Musaraj, ultimately destabilized the economy. These schemes attracted deposits from new investors to pay older ones, leading to their inevitable collapse (Musaraj 2020, p. 163). Promising returns of up to 30%, they appeared legitimate due to heavy advertising. Their collapse sparked widespread anger as many lost their savings, resulting in chaos and a significant loss of state control. The dynamics of the dramatic year 1997, which almost precipitated a civil war, are described in several memoirs of Albanian and foreign authors who lived in the country during that period. See for example Lubonja, Fatos, *Nëntëdhjeteshtata: Apokalispi i Rremë.* Marin Barleti, 2010; Zogaj, Preç, *Uncivil War (Luftë Jocivile).* Tirana: Dita, 1998; Shyti, Xhovani, *Ditët e frikshme të vitit '97.* Tiranë: Belina H, 2011; Abrahams, Fred, *Modern Albania: From Dictatorship to Democracy in Europe.* New York: New York University Press, 2015. As well as scholarly works like Musaraj, Smoki. *Tales from Albarado: Ponzi Logics of Accumulation in Postsocialist Albania.* Cornell University Press, 2020.

3 Smoki Musaraj, "Alternative Publics: Reflections on Marginal Collective Practices in Communist Albania," in *Albania: Family, Society and Culture in the 20th Century*, Studies on South East Europe, vol. 9 (Lit, 2012).

For Marco Polo in Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, the "Elsewhere is a negative mirror," where we only recognize what we lack by imagining what exists beyond our reach.[4] But our imagination in Albania was not the fantasy of travelers and explorers like Marco Polo with their Orientalizing angle, as in Calvino's writings. It was shaped by absence, by the restrictions on movement, by the perception of being left behind. This Europe, the promised elsewhere, was as much a construction of our longing as it was a real place.

I remember my father announcing at home that we'd go too, and that he had arranged everything with a friend in the Port of Shëngjin. As a kid, I remember feeling excited to take an adventurous journey, just as some fellow Albanians on TV gave interviews upon their arrival on the other side of the Adriatic, tired but smiling, speaking Italian with the Albanian accent learned from the Italian TV channels. Some of my classmates, including my best friend, had already arrived, and I kept dreaming of playing with her again. That journey never happened. The image of the overcrowded ships shocked my father. He never had the courage to put us in one of those. He loved our little town, where he knew everyone and where everyone knew him. They had gone through a lot together.

Growing up in Albania, we saw how departure became the measure of possibility. Those who left turned into stories. "Adi is in Milan now," someone would say, or "Miranda is working in Greece." Those who stayed behind carried on with their lives, though keeping that better place in their minds. The remittance money arriving from emigrants was tangible, material evidence of a better life in the elsewhere. Success stories were celebrated and repeated as a necessary fuel for the collective imagination to keep going with everyday struggles—proof that one day, Albania, too, could be just like Europe. After all, the students protesting for the end of the communist regime were chanting, "We want Albania like Europe!

While success stories of those who left were paraded on the surface of the repertoire of stories from the promised land, with time, we started hearing of darker shades. For teenagers, and especially for girls, fear took shape in tales of young women trafficked into prostitution in Italy, in whispers of Albanian mafia networks operating in the shadows—as if mafia and crime itself bear an ethnicity after all.[5] These cautionary tales became part of our collective alertness, an awareness that dictated behavior and choices, especially over female bodies. A vigilance that did not belong to us alone, but extended to our families and communities, an omnipresent tension that blurred the line between protection and control.

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4 Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), 29.

5 Elvira Dones, *Yjet nuk vishen kështu* (*Stars don't dress up like that*), translated from Albanian by Robert Elsie and included in *Balkan Beauty, Balkan Blood: Modern Albanian Short Stories* http://www.elviradones.com/english/balkan_beauty/

Meanwhile, the rhythm of life became faster. Cities changed, buildings changed, the way we spoke about ourselves and others changed. We learned Italian, English, German, or French. We grew up watching satellite TV, wearing second-hand clothing with foreign labels tracing the fragments of worlds we might or might not ever touch. The city streets, the squares, and even the beaches were now dotted with kiosks selling Western-brand products, while people worked for under-the-table wages in small businesses owned by Albanians who had made it within the country or abroad, or foreign investors who sought cheap labor. Everything was free now, they said.[6] However, in 2010, two decades after the big political rupture of 1991, the long lines in the embassies and the bureaucracy of getting visas were lifted. We were no longer prisoners of our own land; we carried its weight wherever we went, as insiders and outsiders all at once.

But elsewhere was not only across the sea. For many, Tirana, the capital, became its own kind of promised land, a local elsewhere that attracted people from villages and small towns, offering the illusion of modernity, upward mobility, and escape from the limitations of provincial life. My parents found that to be a doable leap, which certainly came with its own hardship. The city grew wildly, filled with the hopeful and desperate, with unfinished homes and grand ambitions, mirroring the movements that defined us.

Our parents never spoke of collectivity as a cool thing, nor did they frame it as an ideology to uphold. They were tired of that rhetoric, although it had been constituent of their entire world. Considered to be the generation of the transition, we also never considered it to be an option to believe in. Although amongst our parents' stories there was occasionally nostalgia for their induced collective youth, collectivity was never presented to us as a concrete and explicit value to aspire to. On the contrary, we were pushed to walk free from the burden of the collective, as if the dark cloud was finally gone. They actively discouraged us from participating in the political life of the country. They did not believe in protests as collective action. Yet, in practice, we witnessed time and again how they navigated life through deeply relational means for sustenance, relying on relations of kinship, friendship, and trust to overcome difficult situations. Without ever articulating it as such, they practiced various forms of fragmented collectivities, relying on social bonds as a means of survival and advancement, revealing an embedded culture of mutual aid that existed beneath the surface of individual aspirations.[7]

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6 Lea Ypi, *Free: Coming of Age at the End of History* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2023).

7 Peter Kropotkin, in *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (1902), challenges Social Darwinism by arguing that cooperation, rather than competition, is a key driver of evolution. Drawing on examples from the animal and human worlds, he shows how mutual aid enhances survival and social stability. See Pëtr Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid* (1902), https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/petr-kropotkin-mutual-aid-a-factor-of-evolution.

The practice of commoning, of making do together in uncertain times, persisted in ways both visible and invisible. When formal institutions failed or were simply absent, alternative support systems were in place. There were no banks offering loans with structured repayment plans, but there was always a cousin, an uncle, or a family friend with a little extra money who could lend a hand in times of need. We later saw in the dreadful year of 1997 how this became a terrain for abuse by manipulators of the pyramid schemes that, along with politicians and policy makers, manipulated an entire population, resulting in yet another layer of disbelief in the state and the societal future.[8]

With mixed feelings and after years of hearing my parents say that leaving was not a solution, I left Albania, or at least that is what I told myself. In Albania, those who leave are expected to move forward, to look ahead, and not linger on what they have left behind. This way, you have higher chances of becoming the success story that keeps feeding into the imaginary Elsewhere, pointing mostly westward. And yet, from the day I left, in a continuous process of subjectification,[9] I found myself in a continuous move between inside and outside, going back and forth between the constructed center of the world and my own Albania, which kept getting smaller and smaller but would attract me even stronger and never fully let me go.

8 Fatos Lubonja, *Nëntëdhjeteshtata: Apokalispi i Kremë* (Marin Barleti, 2010); Smoki Musaraj, "Pyramid Firms and Value Transformation in Postsocialist Albania," *Ethnologie Française* Vol. 47, no. 2 (2017): 321–30, https://doi.org/10.3917/ethn.172.0321; Smoki Musaraj, *Tales from Albarado: Ponzi Logics of Accumulation in Postsocialist Albania* (Cornell University Press, 2020), https://www.cornellpress.cornell.edu/book/9781501750342/tales-from-albarado/.

9 The process of subjectification is extensively elaborated in the work of philosophers like Deleuze and Guattari, Foucault, Buttler, and Rancier.

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Summary

Over the past three decades, the study of the commons has received renewed attention across various research fields. This increased interest has influenced reflections on the spatial manifestation of commons, both those that exist and those that are newly created. As a result, a range of concepts, ideas, and methods have emerged to examine commoning from different disciplinary perspectives. However, although discussions about the commons are present in the architectural field, the material and spatial components in commoning practices remain underexplored.

In my doctoral study, I aim to contribute to the overall theory of the commons, particularly from the standpoint of the Albanian context. I explore the spatial politics of commoning practices in a cross-temporal fashion, across subsequent political regimes Albania went through after the Second World War, including state socialism, the anarchic aftermath, and the currently consolidating neoliberal regime. I specifically highlight the accelerated agency of commoning practices and their material and spatial manifestation in the aftermath of the collapse of the state socialist regime, during a period when the state was almost absent and major demographic shifts occurred. I challenge the dominant narrative that society shifted towards individualism after the collapse of state socialism, thereby abandoning and even dismissing any form of collective activity as a bygone practice related only to the ideology of state collectivism. Instead, I delineate the difference between state collectivism as a centralized and ideologized form of collectivity, and the minor-key collective practices unfolding as self-organized and fugitive forms of commoning. These last practices, I argue, significantly influenced the widespread phenomenon of urbanization across the Albanian territory in the post-1990s.

This study, therefore, is a threefold epistemological and methodological intervention in the study of Albanian collectivities and unfolds in the intersection of commons theories and kinship studies. Epistemologically, with the help of the theory of the commons, the study aims to contribute to understanding historical and contemporary dynamics in Albanian society, and possibly to similar geo-political contexts, by taking a first step towards recognizing other forms of commons and commoning whose relevance and agency have shrunk or expanded amid rough political changes. It demonstrates how these minor, unnoticed, and often professionally stigmatized collectivities have always remained present, persistent, and politically relevant in modern Albania. Conversely, from the Albanian standpoint,

the theory of the commons is extended to include reflection on the relational dimension of commoning and its material expression in space. This extended contribution focuses on the role of practical kin-making in commoning practices, an aspect that has been overlooked in the theory of the commons.

By questioning where the commons are and how they operate in Albanian society, I propose another definition of the commons that recognizes the role of kin-making in the self-organized practices of commoning. And the other way around, by questioning where the missing discussions on kin-relationality in the theory of the commons are, I empirically ground the theory of the commons within the specific Albanian context, while building a critique of the deterministic lenses of emancipation that come from the state, the researcher or the activist, which creates a big gap between collective activities of inhabitants and the authorities of power and knowledge.

The study reveals a variety of collectivities, which I observed and engaged with in three places I have studied: the Former Stalin Textile Factory, known as Kombinat, the Movement for the Saving of the National Theater, both in Tirana, and the city of Kamza. In these places, collectivities are neither residual nor utopian, emerging across shifting political regimes, complicating dominant theories that position the commons strictly outside the state and the market. The research reflects on the concepts of state collectivism and de-commoning, showing how both state socialism and neoliberal governance have captured, undermined, attacked, and aimed at erasing collective agency, albeit through distinct ideological and material mechanisms. Additionally, the study introduces the concept of kincommoning to describe relational forms of commoning that are rooted in practical kin-making, spatial proximity, and reciprocity. These forms of commoning function as vital social infrastructures, particularly in situations of institutional neglect and political instability.

Methodologically, the study is transdisciplinary, as it engages with academic and situated non-academic knowledge. It develops mainly at the intersection of the fields of architecture/urbanism and anthropology, but also draws on insights from critical, political, feminist, and post and decolonial theories. Since the study stems from the architectural discipline, which is more committed to a material approach to space, the focal point of exploration is the nexus between various collective practices and their material and spatial manifestations. The study is conducted in an exploratory fashion, employing a multimodal and reflexive methodological approach drawing on research-creation. It combines long-term ethnographic fieldwork, spatial observation (drawings, photography, spatial surveys), and the co-production of documentary films. These methods are complemented by collective discussions, film screenings, media engagements, and reflexive writing.

The dissertation contributes to a more grounded and plural theory of the city as a commons by foregrounding kin-based relational practices as central, rather than exceptional, to the concept of commoning. It challenges Eurocentric and emancipatory narratives that tend to marginalize kinship, viewing it either as pre-modern or politically conservative. Instead, it demonstrates the ongoing relevance of kin-making in shaping collective life and spatial production. The concept of kincommoning, developed in this study, has significant implications for urban theory, architecture, and planning, as it provides a framework to recognize non-institutionalized forms of collective organization. More broadly, the study suggests that marginalized and peripheralized urban contexts, such as those studied for this work in Albania, should not be seen merely as empirical case studies but as places of valuable and generative theoretical and situated practical knowledge.

Samenvatting

In de afgelopen drie decennia heeft de studie van de ***commons*** hernieuwde aandacht gekregen in verschillende onderzoeksgebieden. Deze toegenomen interesse heeft geresulteerd in reflecties op de ruimtelijke manifestatie van zowel bestaande als nieuw gecreëerde *commons*. Als gevolg hiervan zijn er een reeks concepten, ideeën en methoden ontstaan om *commons* vanuit verschillende disciplinaire perspectieven te onderzoeken. Hoewel discussies over de *commons* aanwezig zijn in het architecturale veld, blijven de materiële en ruimtelijke componenten van commoning-praktijken onderbelicht.

In mijn promotieonderzoek wil ik bijdragen aan de algemene theorie van de *commons*, met name vanuit het perspectief van de Albanese context. Ik onderzoek de ruimtelijke politiek van *commoning*-praktijken op wijze die verschillende tijdsperiodes beslaat, in relatie tot opeenvolgende politieke regimes die Albanië doormaakte na de Tweede Wereldoorlog, waaronder het staatssocialisme, de anarchistische nasleep en het huidige consoliderende neoliberale regime. Ik belicht in het bijzonder de versnelde werking van *commoning*-praktijken en hun materiële en ruimtelijke manifestatie in de nasleep van de ineenstorting van het staatssocialistische regime. In die periode was de staat vrijwel afwezig en vonden grote demografische verschuivingen plaats. Ik betwist het dominante narratief dat de samenleving na de ineenstorting van het staatssocialisme naar individualisme verschoof, waardoor elke vorm van collectieve activiteit werd opgegeven en zelfs afgedaan als een achterhaalde praktijk die uitsluitend verband hield met de ideologie van het staatscollectivisme. In plaats daarvan breng ik het onderscheid in kaart tussen staatscollectivisme als een gecentraliseerde en geïdeologiseerde vorm van collectiviteit, en de ingetogen collectieve praktijken die zich ontvouwen als zelfgeorganiseerde en vluchtige vormen van *commoning*. Deze laatste praktijken, zo betoog ik, hebben zeker hun invloed gehad op het wijdverspreide verschijnsel van verstedelijking binnen het Albanese grondgebied in de periode na 1990.

Deze studie is derhalve een drievoudige epistemologische en methodologische bijdrage aan de studie van collectiviteit in Albanië, en ontvouwt zich op het snijvlak van de *commons*-theorie en verwantschapsstudies. Epistemologisch beoogt de studie, met behulp van de theorie van de *commons*, bij te dragen aan het begrip van historische en hedendaagse dynamieken in de Albanese samenleving, en mogelijk ook in vergelijkbare geopolitieke contexten, door een eerste stap te zetten in de

richting van het erkennen van andere vormen van *commons* en *commoning* waarvan de relevantie en werking zijn afgenomen of juist vergroot te midden van ingrijpende politieke veranderingen. De studie toont aan hoe deze kleine, onopgemerkte en binnen de wetenschap dikwijls gestigmatiseerde collectiviteiten altijd aanwezig, persistent en politiek relevant zijn gebleven in het moderne Albanië. Omgekeerd wordt vanuit het Albanese perspectief de theorie van de *commons* uitgebreid met een reflectie op de relationele dimensie van commoning en de materiële uitdrukking ervan in de ruimte. Deze bijdrage verbreedt zich daarom naar op de rol van het aangaan van praktische verwantschapsrelaties in *commoning*-praktijken, een aspect dat in de theorie van de *commons* over het hoofd is gezien.

Door te bevragen waar de *commons* zich bevinden en hoe zij functioneren in de Albanese samenleving, stel ik een andere definitie van de *commons* voor die de rol van verwantschaprelaties in de zelfgeorganiseerde praktijken van *commoning* erkent. En omgekeerd, door kritisch te bevragen waar de discussies over verwantschapsrelaties in de theorie van de *commons* ontbreken, veranker ik de theorie van de *commons* empirisch binnen de specifieke Albanese context. Tegelijkertijd bouw ik een kritiek op ten aanzien van de deterministische visies op emancipatie die afkomstig zijn van de staat, de onderzoeker of de activist, en die een grote kloof creëeren tussen de collectieve activiteiten van bewoners en de autoriteiten van macht en kennis.

De studie brengt een verscheidenheid aan collectiviteiten aan het licht, die ik heb waargenomen en waarmee ik mij heb beziggehouden op drie plaatsen die ik heb onderzocht: de voormalige Stalin Textielfabriek, bekend als Kombinat, de Beweging voor het Behoud van het Nationaal Theater, beide in Tirana, en de stad Kamza. Op deze plaatsen zijn collectiviteiten noch residueel noch utopisch zijn, die opkomen te midden van verschuivende politieke regimes, en die dominante theorieën compliceren die de *commons* strikt buiten de staat en de markt plaatsen. Het onderzoek reflecteert op de concepten van staatscollectivisme en *de-commoning*, en toont aan hoe zowel het staatssocialisme als het neoliberale bestuur de collectieve werking hebben beperkt, ondermijnd, aangevallen en uitgewist, zij het via verschillende ideologische en materiële mechanismen. Daarnaast introduceert de studie het concept *kincommoning* om relationele vormen van *commoning* te beschrijven die geworteld zijn in het ontwikkelen van praktische verwantschaprelaties, ruimtelijke nabijheid en wederkerigheid. Deze vormen van commoning functioneren als vitale sociale infrastructuren, met name in situaties van institutionele verwaarlozing en politieke instabiliteit.

Methodologisch is de studie transdisciplinair, omdat zij zowel academische als gesitueerde niet-academische kennis betrekt. Ze ontwikkelt zich voornamelijk op het snijvlak van de vakgebieden architectuur, stedenbouwkunde en antropologie, maar put ook uit inzichten uit kritische, politieke, feministische en post en dekoloniale theorieën. Omdat de studie voortkomt uit de architecturale discipline, die meer gericht is op een materiële benadering van ruimte, is het centrale onderzoeksgebied de verwevenheid tussen diverse collectieve praktijken en hun materiële en ruimtelijke manifestaties. De studie wordt uitgevoerd op een verkennende wijze. Hierbij heb ik gebruik gemaakt van een multimodale en reflexieve methodologische aanpak gebaseerd op onderzoek-creatie. Ik combineer langdurig etnografisch veldwerk, ruimtelijke observatie (tekeningen, fotografie, ruimtelijke opnames) en de co-productie van documentaire films. Deze methoden worden aangevuld met collectieve discussies, filmvertoningen, media-engagementen en reflexief schrijven.

Het proefschrift draagt bij aan een meer gefundeerde en plurale theorie van de stad als *commons* door op verwantschap gebaseerde relationele praktijken centraal te stellen, in plaats van ze als uitzonderlijk te beschouwen, binnen het concept van commoning. Het daagt Eurocentrische en emancipatoire narratieven uit die de neiging hebben verwantschap te marginaliseren, door het te beschouwen als pre-modern of politiek conservatief. In plaats daarvan toont het de voortdurende relevantie aan van verwantschap-maken bij het vormgeven van het collectieve leven en de ruimtelijke productie. Het concept van *kincommoning*, ontwikkeld in deze studie, heeft belangrijke implicaties voor de stedelijke theorie, architectuur en planning, omdat het een kader biedt om niet-geïnstitutionaliseerde vormen van collectieve organisatie te herkennen. In bredere zin suggereert de studie dat gemarginaliseerde en als perifeer beschouwde stedelijke contexten, zoals die welke voor dit werk in Albanië zijn bestudeerd, niet louter als empirische casestudies moeten worden beschouwd, maar als plekken van waardevolle en generatieve theoretische en gesitueerde praktische kennis.

PART 1

Introduction

1 Nuanced Collectivities and Their Spatial Politics

I began this journey with a curious exploration of the meaning of the collective as a broad concept in Albanian society. Therefore, this work was prompted by the challenging endeavor of unpacking the role of the collective in Albanian society across several political regimes following World War II. It stems from the unease of a reductive understanding of Albania as yet another post-socialist country, where, with the fall of state socialism, the notion of the collective is superseded by individualism.

This unease was related to the assumption that the collective in so-called post-socialist countries can only be discussed in either nostalgic or repudiatory terms, as an ambiguous reality of previous times. My work aims to expand it further by reflecting on a *plurality of collectivities*, operationalized in both minor and major keys, as they coexisted, intersected, and often contested one another. The work nuances the understanding of collectivities and their spatial politics, including the way they have manifested in spatial and material terms, such as capturing, controlling, or democratizing forces. Therefore, in this dissertation, I offer a situated reflection on how both powerful and marginalized actors have mobilized these collectivities as forms of agency in the production of space. The focus narrows down to the particular interest in the spatial and material manifestations of minor collectivities, which are understood in this dissertation through the lens of commons theory.

1.1 The theory of the commons and architectural discourse

The theory of the commons has been instrumental in guiding my understanding of the various registers in which collectivities operate. Due to Albania's historical experience of totalitarianism, these registers are often conflated within the dominant understanding of the collective as a totalizing force in Albanian society. In this work, I engage with the evolving and expanding theory of the common(s), offering a nuanced perspective on the spatial and material manifestations of the commons and their minor politics of everyday life. The concept of the commons has played a crucial role in shaping my understanding of the city as a resource, of the capitalist and neoliberal logics that seek to appropriate it, and the alternative ways in which collectives resist such logics. Engaging with extended debates on the commons has allowed me not only to theorize the commons from an Albanian perspective but also to undertake a cross-temporal historical revisiting of the experience of collectivism in Albania, attentive to the spatial and material politics embedded in the everyday practices of commoning.

The concept of the common(s), rooted in the rich and longstanding tradition of shared resources, customary knowledge, and communal practices, has gained significant attention over the past decades across various theoretical disciplines and practical endeavors. The concept has been reconsidered as a subversive and experimental lens within a radical historiography, as well as a way to navigate the uncertainties of our current global societal landscape, while also exploring alternative paths toward the future.[1] This revival of the notion of the commons centers it as a promising paradigm for reorganizing societies within and beyond the state and the market. While 'beyond the state and the market' sounds like a utopian phrase, in Albania, there is a lived experience of a period after the fall of state socialism, when the state was almost absent and when the market was not the dominant driving force of the economy. This did not happen in the sense of overcoming capitalism, as intended or aspired to by some theories of the commons. Still, there are potential lessons to be learned through careful observation of how the commons become coping mechanisms amid these systemic cracks, and, particularly in the interest of this dissertation, how they manifest materially and spatially.

1 For example, Charlotte Hess has made one of the first attempts to map the variety of commons and the way new commons have been emerging in various domains. Charlotte Hess, "Mapping the New Commons," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2008.

Although much older, the discourse on the commons received its most recent boost, influenced by the 2008 financial crisis, which started in the West but spread globally. Still, the roots of the commons discourse can be found in previous pivotal moments when practices alternative to capitalism, aiming at autonomy from the market, emerged and re-emerged, becoming more pronounced in the western region of Europe during the oil crisis of the 1970s. A known example is the 1980s squatters' movement against the commodification of the real estate market, which extended into the 1990s and 2000s. The awarding of the Nobel Prize to Elinor Ostrom for her work on 'Governing the Commons' significantly increased attention to the concept of the commons.[2] The discussion has become timely in various disciplines of knowledge, elaborated and debated within a broad academic range, with several currents of theorization and experimentation with the concept currently being recognized as topical.

In short, the theory of the commons is shaped by two main strands: the new institutionalist approach, referred to as the Ostromian strand, focused on small-scale, self-governed institutions with limited political ambition; and the radical political approach, which envisions the commons as a force capable of driving ontological change toward a post-capitalist order.[3] While distinct in their political ambitions and operationality, these strands often intersect, influencing and expanding upon each other through engagements with feminist, critical race, and decolonial thought.[4]

The radical political strand foregrounded the concept of *commoning*, shifting attention toward the action and, therefore, the practice of constructing the commons. Rather than viewing the commons solely as resources to be preserved through self-governance, as considered by the Ostromian strand, the historian Peter Linebaugh goes further, arguing for attention to commoning as a processual, relational, and ongoing social practice.[5] Similarly, on the feminist side, Silvia Federici has been central in linking commoning to everyday social reproduction, care, and collective infrastructures.[6]

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2 Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*, The Political Economy of Institutions and Decisions (Cambridge University Press, 1990).

3 George Caffentzis and Silvia Federici, "Commons against and beyond Capitalism," *Community Development Journal* 49, no. SUPPL.1 (2014): 92–105, https://doi.org/10.1093/cdj/bsu006.

4 The theory of the common(s) with its various strands and currents is more extensively discussed in Part 2.1 of this thesis.

5 Peter Linebaugh, *The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberties and Commons for All* (University of California Press, 2008); Peter Linebaugh, *Stop, Thief!: The Commons, Enclosures, and Resistance* (PM Press, 2014).

6 Silvia Federici, "Feminism and the Politics of the Commons," in *Uses of a WorldWind, Movement, Movements, and Contemporary Radical Currents in the United States*, ed. Craig Hughes et al. (AK Press, 2010); Silvia Federici, *Re-Enchanting the World. Feminism and the Politics of the Commons.* (PM Press, 2019).

For the political economist Massimo De Angelis, resonating with Linebaugh, the definition of the commons, besides having the two elements of the resources and the communities of commoners that manage these resources, "the third and most important element in terms of conceptualizing the commons is the verb 'to common' – the social process that creates and reproduces the commons."[7] Through this shift from noun to verb, these authors highlight the active, collective labor involved in maintaining and constructing shared resources, not as something completely new, but drawing on a revival of centuries-old material practices of commoning.

This logic is transcribed over the discussion and practice of the urban commons in an ambivalent way, highlighting both the potential of the concept as well as the risks for the capture and enclosure of the commons in the city by the capitalist processes of urbanization.[8] The enclosure of the commons refers to the historical process by which shared lands or resources, traditionally accessible to all members of a community, were taken out of collective use and placed under private ownership or state control.[9] The idea of the urban commons has been influential in developing alternative understandings of the city as commons, contrasting with the mainstream view of the city as a financial engine, a commodity in itself. Urban commons is a concept that recognizes the right of communities to access, use, and produce their own space in the city. The discourse on urban commons is influenced, most notably, by the work of the French Marxist philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre and his successors. Lefebvre himself didn't use the term *commons*, but his notion of the *right to the city* and his emphasis on urban space as collectively produced have been foundational to the later development of the idea of the urban commons.

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7 An Architektur, "On the Commons: A Public Interview with Massimo De Angelis and Stavros Stavrides," August 2010, https://www.e-flux.com/journal/17/67351/on-the-commons-a-public-interview-with-massimo-de-angelis-and-stavros-stavrides/.

8 Theresa Enright and Ugo Rossi, "Ambivalence of the Urban Commons," in *The Routledge Handbook on Spaces of Urban Politics* (Routledge, 2019).

9 Most famously in England between the 16th and 19th centuries, as explained by Peter Linebaugh, common pastures, forests, and fields that peasants relied on for grazing animals, collecting wood, or growing crops were fenced off, enclosed, and turned into private property, usually for more profitable agricultural production, as explained by Peter Linebaugh in his work *Stop, Thief!: The Commons, Enclosures, and Resistance* (PM Press, 2014). Although not often mentioned in the vast body of commons theory, except for Dardot and Laval, this is a similar process conducted by state-socialist regimes following the Stalinist example, where the state enclosed the commons through a process of collectivization. As is shown in this dissertation, this happened in Albania after World War II with the installation of the Hoxhaist regime. In both cases, be it for the sake of capitalism or the state, the process displaced many rural people, forcing them to migrate to cities and become wage laborers, otherwise referred to in Marx as the *proletariat*. See also Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *Common: On Revolution in the 21st Century* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019). Beyond land, the idea of enclosure has been expanded by scholars and activists to describe contemporary processes in which shared goods, such as knowledge, digital resources, or even urban spaces, are privatized and commodified, or otherwise removed from collective access.

According to Lefebvre, "groups, classes or fractions cannot constitute themselves, or recognize one another, as 'subjects' unless they generate (or produce) a space."[10] For David Harvey, this right to the city is a collective right to be exercised as "a collective power over the processes of urbanization," as a process of claiming "the freedom to make and remake ourselves and our cities."[11] He proposes this way to activate the "rebel city" that, in Marxist terms, is the cradle for "urban revolution" where the surplus created in the city is not captured by capitalism but is enjoyed by the residents who collectively made this surplus.[12]

In the field of architecture (in its broader understanding as a field, including urban design, planning and urban studies), the discussion about urban commons has also attracted growing attention, although it still stands in the margin of architectural practice and knowledge.[13] In the contemporary re-take of the concept, the commons in the city are reflected in small urban laboratories in the making, as minor spatialities in a world of human and material agents. However, while experimenting with the commons is a broad and recognizable phenomenon in the Western contemporary city, architecture and urban planning as disciplines are challenged to gain an understanding of their past and present role in the way commoning has been enclosed or locked, as well as in shaping a new future mode of producing urban space. Tom Avermaete, in his theoretical work on "constructing the commons," identifies three angles of reading the agency of commons in the city as "res communis" (common-pool resources), "lex communis" (referring to "common codes" and knowledge of "the discipline of architecture as a common place"), and "praxis communis" (social-spatial practices of commoning, including "rituals, pleasures, and politics of cooperation"). He argues that it is essential to examine the city's historiography through the concept of the commons, while also developing a new theory of urban architecture.[14]

10 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Basil Blackwell, 1991), 416.

11 David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (Verso, 2012), 40:4.

12 Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*, vol. 40.

13 See e.g. Tom Avermaete, "Death of the Author, Center, and Meta-Theory: Emerging Planning Histories and Expanding Methods of the Early 21st Century Death of the Author," in *The Routledge Handbook of Planning History*, ed. Carola Hein (Taylor & Francis Group, 2017); Tom Avermaete, "Constructing the Commons: Towards Another Architectural Theory of the City?," in *The New Urban Condition: Criticism and Theory from Architecture and Urbanism*, 1st ed., ed. Leandro Medrano et al. (Routledge, 2021); Doina Petrescu and Kim Trogal, eds., *The Social (Re)Production of Architecture: Politics, Economies and Actions in Contemporary Practice* (Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2017); Doina Petrescu and Constantin Petcou, "The Role of Architects in Initiating, Sustaining and Defending Urban Commons in Mass Housing Estates: R-Urban in Grand Ensembles," *Journal of Architecture* 28, no. 1 (2023): 169–81, https://doi.org/10.1080/13602365.2023.2183619; Stavros Stavrides, *Common Space: The City as Commons* (Zen Books, 2016).

14 Avermaete, "Constructing the Commons: Towards Another Architectural Theory of the City?"

The discourse on urban commons has further intersected with feminist urban theories, and the urban commons have explicitly or implicitly been explored through a feminist perspective, connecting questions of gender, care, and collective urban life with issues of access and participation. Central here is the recognition that practices of care and social reproduction, often unnoticed yet vital to sustaining households and community life, form a crucial dimension of commoning in both rural and urban contexts.[15] The emphasis on care as a relational and ethical practice among human-non-human ontologies has been shaped around discussions on commons.[16] Within architectural and urban debates, feminist engagements with the commons have emphasized how participatory and collective practices can reconfigure urban environments as sites of mutual support and everyday relationality. For example, Doina Petrescu and Constantin Petcou's work foregrounds feminist politics of care and relationality while experimenting with alternative ways of immersing the architectural practice within the practice of commoning. This engagement with the urban commons discourses includes a substantial critique of the role played by the profession of architecture, while recognizing the potentialities for engagement through urban commons.[17]

The previously mentioned concern on the enclosure of the commons has influenced a growing number of critical historians and theorists of urban commons reflecting on the loss of commons; some see it as a side effect of further professionalization of all the sectors of life in late capitalism, and some more radical thinkers see the extinction of the commons as part of a project of de-commoning based on capitalism and the market economy.[18] This critique maintains that professionalism in planning and design, in Marxist terms, has operated as a mechanism against the commons.[19] Furthermore, their critique of the enclosure of the commons highlights how this process is continuous, and the process of primitive accumulation and enclosure of the commons did not happen only in the first stage of capitalism, as Marx argued. Especially with globalization, it manifests as an amplified and "permanent process of primitive accumulation." As a follow-up to Marx's idea of "primitive accumulation," Harvey explains how this process is not only related to the initial stage of capitalism but is inherent in it.

15 Federici, *Re-Enchanting the World. Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*., 140.

16 Brittany Utting, ed., *Architectures of Care: From the Intimate to the Common*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2024).

17 Petrescu and Petcou, "The Role of Architects in Initiating, Sustaining and Defending Urban Commons in Mass Housing Estates: R-Urban in Grand Ensembles."

18 Álvaro Sevilla-Buitrago, *Against the Commons: A Radical History of Urban Planning* (University of Minnesota Press, 2022).

19 Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*, vol. 40; Sevilla-Buitrago, *Against the Commons: A Radical History of Urban Planning.*

He uses the concept of "accumulation by dispossession" to explain the continuous process of the drive of capital to financialize and commodify the city, while making spaces and groups an exclusionary privilege of those who have the financial means.[20] However, the commons cannot simply be lost; they constantly reconfigure themselves in new ways.[21]

The theory of the commons resonates with debates within the architectural field on the death of the author and the recognition of a shared authorship, as well as the democratization of the way architecture is produced, re-considering the relationship of the architecture of the common people as a subject to be discussed and validated.[22] Discussions on the role of the professional architect and the possibilities of an architecture of participation have been constantly reframed under the broader umbrella of the concept of the commons and commoning practices.[23] Moreover, the proliferation of the theory of the commons in the fields of urbanism and architecture shifts the discourse beyond the conventional one on participation, in which the architect is positioned as a project manager who merely creates space for communities to engage, often resulting in what has been criticized as "participatory washing." The long-standing condition of the dominant architectural discourse continues to have a lasting effect, alienating and excluding the architecture of common people from its canon, in the tradition of a polarized dichotomy between professionalism and self-building or craftsmanship.[24]

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20 David Harvey, *The New Imperialism*, Clarendon Lectures in Geography and Environmental Studies (Oxford University Press, 2005).

21 Massimo De Angelis, *Omnia Sunt Communia: On the Commons and the Transformation to Postcapitalism*, In Common (Zed Books, 2017); Federici, *Re-Enchanting the World. Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*.; Stavrides, *Common Space: The City as Commons*.

22 Avermaete, "Death of the Author, Center, and Meta-Theory: Emerging Planning Histories and Expanding Methods of the Early 21st Century Death of the Author."

23 See, for example, Avermaete, "Death of the Author, Center, and Meta-Theory: Emerging Planning Histories and Expanding Methods of the Early 21st Century Death of the Author"; Avermaete, "Constructing the Commons: Towards Another Architectural Theory of the City?"; Ioanni Delsante and Alessandro Zambelli, "Architectural Agency and the Commons," *Journal of Architecture* 28, no. 1 (2023): 1–6; Klaske Havik and Dorina Pllumbi, "Urban Commoning and Architectural Situated Knowledge: The Architects' Role in the Transformation of the NDSM Ship Wharf, Amsterdam," *Architecture and Culture* 8, no. 2 (2020): 1–20, https://doi.org/10.1080/20507828.2020.1766305; Sohn Heidi et al., eds., "Commoning as Differentiated Publicness: Emerging Concepts of the Urban and Other Material Realities," *Footprint 16 Delft Architecture Theory Journal* 9, no. 1 (2015); Peter Blundell Jones et al., eds., *Architecture and Participation* (Spon Press Taylor & Francis Group, 2005); Maroš Krivý and Tahl Kaminer, eds., "The Participatory Turn in Urbanism," *Footprint 13 Delft Architecture Theory Journal* 7, no. 2 (2013): 1–173; Stavros Stavrides, "Common Space Creation: Can Architecture Help? (Towards a Provisional Manifesto)," *Journal of Architecture* 28, no. 1 (2023): 154–68; Louis Volont et al., eds., *The Rise of the Common City* (ASP Academic & Scientific Publishers, 2022); Pier Vittorio Aureli et al., "Promised Land: Housing from Commodification to Cooperation," *E-Flux Architecture*, December 2019.

24 Eric Crevels, "Epistemologies of Making: A Theory of Craftsmanship for Architecture" (Delft University of Technology, 2024), https://pure.tudelft.nl/ws/portalfiles/portal/225387053/9789463669627-WEB.pdf.

The field of architecture has long occupied a paradoxical position, simultaneously serving as a benevolent force and a complicit agent in shaping the built environment. It has contributed to both construction and destruction, to organizing and controlling, as well as homogenizing, sanitizing, and erasing urban spaces. Architecture has been instrumental in granting privileges to some while marginalizing others. Although these contradictions have not been central to the theorization, practice, and pedagogy of architecture, there have been continuous attempts to address them. In the post–World War II era, postcolonial and human rights movements catalyzed efforts to critically rethink architectural education, aiming for more radical pedagogies.[25] More recently, a decolonial turn has informed what is now referred to as the "Global South turn" in architectural and urban pedagogy, echoing broader disciplinary shifts.[26] The growing interest in the commons reflects this ongoing search for alternatives to dominant capitalist and imperialist approaches to architecture, as well as an effort to recognize the variety of spatial practices within the city, where space is collectively generated rather than passively received.

In relation to these debates, my work does not claim to resolve the paradoxes inherent in the field of architecture. Instead, by engaging with the theory of urban commons, it seeks to contribute to the discourse on power dynamics in the production of urban space, aiming to reverse or nuance these dynamics. As highlighted earlier, this dissertation is situated in Albania, an understudied geography that has recently gained attention in the global architectural market.[27]

25 Beatriz Colomina et al., eds., *Radical Pedagogies* (MIT Press, 2022).

26 Harriet Harriss et al., eds., *The Routledge Companion to Architectural Pedagogies of the Global South*, 1 online resource, Routledge Companions (Routledge, 2023).

27 Renowned architects are now developing projects in the country, often framed in touristic and architectural media as the "latest discovery." While this *othering* language is familiar and can be traced back to all sorts of historically Orientalizing tropes, it remains uncomfortable for some of us, though we observe the developments with curiosity and try to engage with them critically. Barbara Halla, "Inorganic City: A Living Autopsy of Tirana," *Dis(-)Appearing Cities or: How I Learned to Stop Walking and Love the Empire*, January 16, 2025, https://www.full-stop.net/2025/03/27/features/barbarahalla/inorganic-city-a-living-autopsy-of-tirana/; Dorina Pllumbi, "Outrage: The Unwilding of the Pyramid of Tirana," *Architectural Review*, May 19, 2021, https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/outrage/outrage-the-unwilding-of-the-pyramid-of-tirana; Dorina Pllumbi, "Is Tirana's Rapid Transformation Progress or Erasure?," *Kosovo 2.0*, July 14, 2022, https://kosovotwopointzero.com/en/is-tiranas-rapid-transformation-progress-or-erasure/; Dorina Pllumbi, "Urban Façades, Political Shades: Tirana's Nationalistic Turn in Architecture and Its Subtexts," *Art Studies* 22 (2023): 53–109; Vincent W. J. van Gerven Oei, *Rënia e së ardhmes* (Pika pa sipërfaqe, 2023).

As the latest discovered territory for capitalist enthusiasts to anchor their imperative of eternal growth, propagated as progress, we witness intensified architectural projects currently unfolding in construction financial bubbles.[28] Although my work in this dissertation does not directly engage with the most recent star-architectures constructed in the Albanian context, it inevitably intersects with them by reflecting on how they contribute to a saturated field of power dynamics that shrinks the agency of the commons. This is evident very clearly in the struggles of the commons in the places I have studied for this work, where recent star architecture functions as a de-commoning drive, both discursively and materially, erasing entire areas that had been created through commoning practices, as well as replacing buildings that had earlier inspired collective resistance against demolition.

In this way, my work aims to join the questioning of neutrality as claimed by both architects and the architectural field of knowledge in reproducing and sustaining systems of power, including the shifting alliances between state and market forces. Despite claims to creative autonomy, architecture often operates within what might be called capitalist bubbles, spaces where this claimed autonomy is, in fact, illusory.[29] The discipline's difficulty in meaningfully engaging with and incorporating practices of commoning is closely tied to debates about autonomy in the production of space and the built environment. It relates to the ways in which architects, with their presence or absence, have become dependent on, and often instrumentalized by, dominant power structures. The theory of the commons, particularly that of urban commons, is essential in addressing the need to diversify and pluriversalize the architectural discourse and praxis. It offers an alternative way to think about how the discipline can culturally engage with society, including grassroots groups that are most actively involved in shaping the urban environment.

28 Marxist thinkers argue that capitalism needs to constantly expand into new, non-capitalist areas to sustain itself, implying that endless growth is a structural necessity. For example, David Harvey addresses capitalism's growth imperative in *The Enigma of Capital* (2010), where he argues that capitalism must find profitable outlets for surplus capital, which demands continuous expansion and leads to crises when it fails to do so. However, rather than analyzing growth as an internal necessity of capitalism (as Marxists do), postcolonial and decolonial thinkers often extend the horizon to expose who pays the price for that growth, and how it is justified through discourses of development, modernity, and civilization. They construct a postcolonial critique of the eternal growth imperative in relation to the Western model of progress, challenging the Enlightenment ideal of linear, universal development that underpins growth-oriented capitalism.

29 See, e.g., Pier Vittorio Aureli, *The Project of Autonomy Politics and Architecture Within and Against Capitalism* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2008); Nishat Awan et al., *Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture* (Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2011); N. J. Habraken, *Palladio's Children*, 0 ed., ed. Jonathan Teicher (Taylor & Francis, 2007); Tom Avermaete et al., *Architectural Positions: Architecture, Modernity and the Public Sphere* (Sun Publishers, 2009); Jeremy Till, *Architecture Depends* (The MIT Press, 2009).

It raises questions about the systems of authorship, ownership, and control within which architectural practice is embedded and operates.[30]

My work highlights the capacity of people to produce space autonomously, outside the frameworks of the state and professional expertise. It emphasizes how commoning practices can assert spatial claims within the city, even as these claims have historically been, and continue to be, captured, undermined, or erased by state and market-dominant interventions. It problematizes architecture's role in diminishing the agency of ordinary people in collectively shaping the spaces they inhabit, a phenomenon that is certainly not new. However, this dynamic becomes especially evident when observed across time in the specific histories and practices of collectivities in the Albanian context, while also resonating globally amid the intensifying processes of urbanization.

30 In this dissertation, I am not attempting to relate my work to the well-established debate in the field of architecture over the role of the architect and their autonomy and heteronomy. Instead, mine is a discussion of autonomy in the production of public space, with or without the architects' contribution. These are two separate debates that stem from different roots. The debate about architecture's autonomy is a disciplinary question discussing whether architecture can be self-referential, whether it can develop its own language and internal logic independent of social, political, or economic forces. This debate evolved through the various political positions taken by renowned figures such as Manfredo Tafuri, Aldo Rossi, Peter Eisenman, Pier Vittorio Aureli, and Martino Tattara. In my thesis, therefore, I am referring primarily to an understanding of *collective autonomy* as an agent in the production of space, as rooted in Henri Lefebvre's production of space, later developed in debates about commons, social movements, anarchist/autonomist thought (e.g. Hardt & Negri, De Angelis, Federici). Autonomy hereby refers primarily to the autonomy as a practice of self-organization and self-determination in space-making, often outside or against state and market logics.

1.2 Beyond Teleologies of Progress and Emancipation

While the experimentation with the concept and practice of commoning has gained extended interest in city making, some of these commons' spaces remain utopian or tied to a moment of state or market crisis. And particularly during the economic recovery after the crisis, the knowledge gained does not enter mainstream architectural practice. This relates to Silvia Federici's warning critique, which suggests that collective energies "may function as the safety valve with which a capitalist system in crisis tries to diffuse the tensions its policies inevitably generate."[31]

In the dynamics of emerging commons in discourse and in architectural practice, architects have been able to position themselves in a broad spectrum of roles.[32] Architects have been involved in these commoning practices while shifting their professional roles and practices to engage with particular communities in these commoning endeavors.[33] However, they sometimes find themselves compelled to take on binary approaches as activists, abandoning conventional architectural practices, or risk becoming alienated from the spaces of commoning altogether due to the rigidity and ossification of the commercial professional practice of architecture. At times, the engagement of professionals and researchers in the field of architecture and urbanism contributes to the institutionalization of commoning initiatives, turning the commons into yet another third category of space in the city alongside the public and the private, while "not challenging the regulatory regimes of governance."[34] Ironically, the very success of initiatives such as CPRs in Barcelona or Localism Acts in the UK can lead to their loss of political autonomy to spatially produce the city, as the original creators and participants are often displaced, leaving their efforts co-opted or transformed beyond recognition.

31 Federici, *Re-Enchanting the World. Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*., 6.

32 Doina Petrescu et al., "Co-Producing Commons-Based Resilience: Lessons from R-Urban," *Building Research and Information* 44, no. 7 (2016): 717–36, https://doi.org/10.1080/09613218.2016.1214891; Petrescu and Trogal, *The Social (Re)Production of Architecture: Politics, Economies and Actions in Contemporary Practice*; Awan et al., *Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture*; Havik and Pllumbi, "Urban Commoning and Architectural Situated Knowledge: The Architects' Role in the Transformation of the NDSM Ship Wharf, Amsterdam."

33 Havik and Pllumbi, "Urban Commoning and Architectural Situated Knowledge: The Architects' Role in the Transformation of the NDSM Ship Wharf, Amsterdam"; Klaske Havik, "Strength & Vulnerability, Creative Industrial Sites in the Netherlands," *MAJA Architectural Review*, nos. 2–3 (2005).

34 Volont et al., *The Rise of the Common City*.

Within the ambivalent status of common spaces, this can be seen as a loss or an acceptance of the defeatist conclusion that commons cannot be autonomous spaces that propel society beyond capitalism.[35]

Spaces resulting from commoning practices have been configured in various forms, such as urban gardening, cultural and artistic incubators, squats, social centers, and more ambitious experiments in housing cooperatives and collective living.[36] These spaces, often located in contained pockets within late capitalist Western cities, hold symbolic significance as sites that challenge the state and market's excessive control of urban territories, as liberated zones, as in the application of *vrijplaats* (literally free place), often used in Dutch cities to refer to places that function to some extent 'outside of the system.' The word is often used for spaces that are a combination of squatted and artistic spaces.[37] Framed as operating as *prefigurative politics*, a concept coined by Breiners, these types of commons are essential in bringing forth, claiming, and reinforcing an aspiration for an upcoming societal ontology based on the concept of the commons, collectivity, and communalism.[38] They perform in cities in the stage of late capitalism, mainly in the Western world, as spatialities of anarchic or utopian forms that make important statements to bring forward the idea of the commons and feed a future imagination.[39] However, while the politics of the communities that inhabit these spaces function as conceptual and inspirational, sometimes they succumb to commodification for survival, or become exclusive enclaves within gentrifying neighborhoods, catering mainly to those who can afford to access them financially, yet still evoking and feeding us a bohemian spirit within a late capitalist reality. They primarily remain a domain of middle-class left-oriented groups that enjoy engaging in political imagination as an escape from everyday operational constraints within the neoliberal regime. On these limitations, Massimo De Angelis describes the middle class in capitalism "as a stratified field of subjectivity [being caught] within the planetary

35 Enright and Rossi, "Ambivalence of the Urban Commons."

36 Anne Kockelkorn et al., *Cooperative Conditions: A Primer on Architecture, Finance and Regulation in Zurich* (gta Verlag, 2025).

37 Havik and Pllumbi, "Urban Commoning and Architectural Situated Knowledge: The Architects' Role in the Transformation of the NDSM Ship Wharf, Amsterdam."

38 *Prefigurative politics* is a concept coined by the British New Left sociologist Wini Breines in 1980 "to designate an essentially antiorganizational politics characteristic of the movement, as well as of parts of new left leadership; it may be recognized in counterinstitutions, demonstrations, and the attempt to embody personal and antihierarchical values in politics." Wini Breines, "Community and Organization: The New Left and Michels' 'Iron Law,'" *Social Problems* 27, no. 4 (1980): 421.

39 Louwrens Botha et al., *Prefiguring the Caring City: Everyday Practices and Postcapitalist Possibility in Neighborhood Living Rooms | Article | Urban Planning*, August 6, 2025; Breines, "Community and Organization"; Ana Méndez de Andés Aldama, "Becoming-Common of the Public. Municipalist Lessons on Urban Commoning as Alter-Planning" (Doctor of Philosophy, University of Sheffield, 2024).

wage hierarchy." Positioned at a distance from both the working class and the upper classes, the middle class is, in his view, unable to drive fundamental transformations beyond the capitalist system that governs their very "livelihood reproduction."[40]

The enactment of such spatial practices, along with their associated aesthetics, albeit sometimes superficially and formally, has been transferred to other contexts, such as the Balkans, where the state-market configuration differs substantially.[41] As far-fetched as this may sound, not only are the prestigious shiny star architecture projects being imported to the margins of Europe, to mimic Western models, as we have seen recently in Albania, but even creative class types of projects are sometimes transferred, even appropriating the language of commoning practice, while gentrifying the real contextual commons that already exist. While these spaces serve as valuable examples of commoning practices, albeit with the aforementioned limitations, in the Balkans, they reproduce the pitfall of becoming exclusionary. This highlights the discrepancy between the substantial ontological shift aspired to by commons theory and the practical examples of the observed hipsterized spaces.[42]

Drawing on the Albanian context, I allow myself to raise doubts about this very idea of constructing the commons, often materialized as what could be considered 'designing of the informal,' while displacing the authentic ways people self-organize in their communities. Particularly when experimented with and reproduced superficially, this very idea of constructing the commons will continue to remain an oxymoron within the paradox of architectural practice. This is because it dwells in the heart of the contradictions of intervening in space by design on the one hand, and the ambition and aspiration of the theory of the commons for self-organization on the other. This lingering condition is at the core of the dilemma of how much professionalized architectural knowledge can contribute or should be kept at bay from these spaces and self-organized structures. Questioning the involvement of design and its ability to ensure understanding and respect for existing commons is a systemic issue that aims to define the limits of the scope of architectural practice within its field. This tension lies at the core of architecture's inherent contradictions: the impulse to intervene in space through design versus the more reflexive, emergent nature of commoning as theorized.

40 Massimo De Angelis, "The Production of Commons and the 'Explosion' of the Middle Class," *Antipode* 42, no. 4 (2010): 954–77.

41 Iva Čukić and Jovana Timotijević, *Spaces of Commoning: Urban Commons in the Ex-YU Region* (Belgrade, 2020).

42 Pnina Avidar et al., eds., *OASE 73: Gentrification* (nai010 publishers, 2007); Besa Luci, *Other Talking Points | #EP5 - Gentrification, A Conversation with Dorina Pllumbi and Iva Čukić*, episode 5, Other Talking Points, January 13, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Aql6nupSeNk.

For this work, I therefore take a reverse approach to what has been experimented with so far in the field of architecture and urbanism. I engage with the theory of the commons in a distinct capacity, which, together with the Albanian reality of deep political transformations, compelled me to look for examples of commoning that are more grounded and entangled with life. The Albanian experience of collectivities, with variations in positions of power and agency, offers a way to learn through lived experience beyond the conventional or experimental framings of the relationship among space, community, and architecture's role in shaping collective life. Professional architects have been mostly absent or peripheral in the commoning practices discussed in this dissertation. This meant being on the edge of the field of architecture and even going beyond it by crossing over into anthropology.

Through empirical engagement with marginalized urban geographies in Albania, I observe, transversally across political temporalities, commoning practices of construction, care, and resistance that are at times vocal but more often unnoticed and undeclared. These practices emerge as vital mechanisms through which individuals and communities build their lives from the ground up, often within extended kinship networks. These manifest materially and spatially as ways for them to collectively assert their right to the city or resist the erasure of a meaningful architectural landmark. The grounded significance of these practices, especially during times of state absence, is profound. The roles of kin-making and spatial proximity become especially pronounced. Recognizing the relational dynamics anchored in kinship was a pivotal moment for me in understanding the particular character of these commons.

1.2.1 Transversal tracing across temporalities of deep transformations

In Albanian society, sharp and drastic political shifts have significantly influenced the agency and existence of the commons. On several occasions in history, de-commoning has occurred, and it is currently happening at a rapid pace as the country encounters neoliberalism. My work offers a non-exhaustive yet comprehensive cross-temporal reflection on the transformation of collective agency and its spatial organization in Albania, as the society shifted from state socialism to neoliberalism. It particularly focuses on the spatial, material, relational, and political implications of these shifts during the anarchic interregnum between the two regimes, when the state collapsed and was almost entirely absent.

Albanian society is widely regarded as having succumbed to capitalism following a difficult five-decade experience with one-party-state totalitarianism and an arduous shift to a market economy. I problematize this reductionist view of Albanian society that disregards the presence of collective practices during the post-1990s period, despite their fragmentation. This fragmentation of the collective sphere is understandable and arguably even beneficial following the experience with the totalizing state collectivism.

For the sake of clarity, I have identified three broad timeframes of political conditions in Albania as milestone moments that carry both ruptures and continuities. This work utilizes chronological time to guide navigation through the stories and phenomena discussed. However, the research is not conducted for the sake of a chronological reconstruction of events. Instead, emphasis is placed on the microcosms of the places of study, discussed in this work across three chapters in Part 3. Although the timeline is used as a guide for shifting from one period to the other, it does not imply that these periods are self-contained and that the end of one necessarily marks the beginning of the other. I look into the role that commoning practices played during and across these periods; therefore, I conducted this research through the lens of situatedness and the exploration of transversal temporalities. By immersing in the places of study and revising them throughout temporalities that appear to overlap or extend, this approach questions and problematizes the notion of transition and progress as teleological and Eurocentric concepts, which assume that societies follow a single, evolutionary, and universal path. This assumption often positions post-socialist contexts, such as Albania, as 'behind' a predetermined trajectory of development, something resonating with the backwardness stereotype inherited as a trope of Balkanism.[43] I therefore problematize the linear understanding of temporality and historical time, resonating with the critique of the coloniality of time, which relates to the understanding of some geographies as lagging behind and in need of catching up [44].

Firstly, I delve into the Albanian experience of state socialism (1946-1991) - otherwise known as the Hoxhaist regime - through a combination of (official and mostly family) archival material, fieldwork, and discourse analysis that traverses all three places of study, although not equally influential.[45]

43 A more extended discussion on the discourse about behindness and backwardness is offered in the Introduction of Part 3 of this dissertation.

44 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Repr (Routledge, 2003); Walter Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*, On Decoloniality (Duke University Press, 2018).

45 Enver Hoxha was the supreme leader, dictator, and central figure of state socialism in Albania. The Hoxhaist regime is named after him.

I therefore reflect on how, during these years, collectivity became the main ideological tool used by the state-socialist regime to create a superstructure of control. This state apparatus enforced a collective living arrangement, utilizing collectivity to install and maintain regimes of surveillance and regulate even the most intimate relationships between individuals, extending to everyday, mundane living practices. The installation of the socialist regime marked a significant shift in Albanian society, a pivotal moment for the emergence of the proletariat class in a predominantly peasant society, similar to what occurred in other Eastern Bloc countries following the Soviet Union's example. This comes across extensively in my study on Kombinat (Chapter 5). State collectivism was imposed through state-controlled collective mechanisms, including housing, state cooperatives, and state ownership of land and infrastructure. State collectivism, therefore, while being coercive and ideologically driven, nonetheless produced a material and symbolic infrastructure for shared life. During this time, however, there were active campaigns against customary laws, in which the state intervened to regulate self-organization in villages (considered backward and in need of emancipation), and even in the tribes of the northeast, recognized as the most autonomous and self-regulated social groups. There was a declared fight against tradition in the name of building socialism, overcoming backwardness, and advancing emancipation and progress.[46]

Following two decades of its rule and consolidation, the regime geopolitically distanced itself not only from Western Imperialism, but also from Eastern Revisionist-Imperialism, including the Soviet Union, with which it severed all ties in 1961. After a brief alliance with the People's Republic of China, Albania ended up in an almost entirely autarchic condition during the last decade of its state socialist regime. Starting from 1978, the country turned inwards, and the politics of the regime shifted from international socialism to socialist nationalism.[47] This ambition for self-reliance was a distinct characteristic of the Albanian regime compared to other similar regimes in the Eastern Bloc.

46 Elidor Mëhilli, *From Stalin to Mao: Albania and the Socialist World* (Cornell University, 2017), https://doi.org/10.1080/13507486.2020.1731141; Ylber Marku, "Communist Relations in Crisis: The End of Soviet-Albanian Relations, and the Sino-Soviet Split, 1960–1961," *The International History Review* 42, no. 4 (2020): 813–32, https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2019.1620825; Ylber Marku, "Socialism in Action: Albania's Ideological and Cultural Revolution and the Lessons from History," *Art Studies* 21 (2022): 39–87; Artan R. Hoxha, *Communism, Atheism, and the Orthodox Church of Albania: Cooperation, Survival, and Suppression, 1945–1967*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2022), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003207726.

47 Following the Soviet attack on Czechoslovakia in 1968, Albania and Romania shared a common fear of being forced into colonialist relationships with the major political and economic powers of the Eastern blocs. Fearing the risk of losing state sovereignty, this was a pivotal historical moment when Albania decided to withdraw from the Warsaw Treaty and turn into an autarchy. Thus, its leaders declared Albania's ambition to become the *beacon of socialism* based on its own means.

Employing the theory of the commons to review this period challenges dominant historical narratives of collectivity being empowered and equalized, as it was implemented as a statist communist ideology. By questioning this assumption, I reflect on how the Hoxhaist state-socialist regime, through the application of *state collectivism*, executed a process of *de-commoning* that eroded the social and cultural fabric while imposing ideological agendas of modernity within the frame of a Stalinist regime. This approach sheds light on the dual nature of the de-commoning campaigns, which, while attracting enthusiastic support to uplift the national spirit, also brutally intervened in the inherited cultural customs, which I recognize as caring features of the inherited customary commons. These commons were treated ambiguously. On the one hand, they were considered 'backward waste' that society had to get rid of by constructing a new socialist awareness and fabricating a 'new socialist [hu]man.' On the other hand, and especially during the last nationalistic period (1978–1991), tradition was paradoxically reconsidered as the cradle of Albanian culture. Ethnographers were instructed to document and highlight historiographic aspects that could be instrumentalized by the socialist-nationalist regime to build and maintain its propaganda.[48] Along with the ethnographers, architects were involved in researching and designing projects that incorporated traditional Albanian architecture. The use of traditional elements was instructed by the leadership, including Enver Hoxha himself, in his speeches and writings, to incorporate these elements into the newly constructed architecture of the time. Tradition, therefore, was simultaneously fought and fetishized.

As a second temporal phase, I focus on the period from 1991 to 2013, which follows the collapse of state socialism, characterized by the dissolution of the totalitarian forces and the collapse of the state apparatus. With the fall of the state socialist regime in 1991, everything had to be redefined: the role of the state, the individual, and the collectives. The population was free to move, and agencies were unleashed, especially during the anarchic year of 1997.[49]

The transition from state socialism to a more liberal regime was relatively smooth, compared to some bloody transitions in other Eastern European countries. After five decades of monist rule in a one-party state, the regime leaders, led by Ramiz Alia (the successor to Enver Hoxha after his death in 1985), understood that it was

48 Nebi Bardhoshi, *Antropologjia e Kanunit* (Pika pa Siperfaqe, 2016); Nebi Bardhoshi, "Ethnographic Temporality and the Ethnography of Time: On Political Economy of Anthropology and the State," paper presented at Practices, Materiality, Places and Temporality. New Approaches in Albanian Studies, Tirana, 2018.

49 Musaraj, *Tales from Albarado: Ponzi Logics of Accumulation in Postsocialist Albania* (Cornell University Press, 2020).

time to open the country and accept political pluralism, following the realization that the Iron Curtain had fallen. In 1992, the anti-communist Democratic Party came to power with its leader, Sali Berisha. During the first years of the so-called transition, Albania was subject to the reforms often referred to as 'shock therapy.' This was marked by the privatization of the inherited housing stock, state-owned factories, land, and public infrastructure, under the guidance and policies promoted by institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), as applied in other postrevolutionary countries in Latin America, such as Chile and Argentina. These rapid reforms went relatively smoothly and were considered a success for the Albanian economy. However, the fraudulent pyramid Ponzi schemes then began to operate within a milieu of unregulated capitalism. The phenomenon was so widespread that by 1996, approximately two-thirds of Albanians had invested in these pyramid schemes, including many who sold their homes or livestock, or took out loans to participate in what was advertised as a fast and easy way to make money and escape poverty. These schemes promised extraordinary monthly returns (up to 30%). They were seen as legitimate by many, as they occupied all the major media platforms with advertisements, appearing as investment funds and sometimes as foundations. The phenomenon became ubiquitous for several reasons related to Albania's economic context, the state's role in encouraging it, as well as the blind eye of international institutions (the IMF and the World Bank), which were too late in issuing warning signals to the Albanian government to shut down the schemes. The inevitable collapse of these schemes inflamed the anger of an entire population that had lost their savings and investments in these firms. The country descended into anarchy, with groups breaking into weapons warehouses found all over the overly militarized Albanian territory. With groups brandishing weapons and the state having lost control over entire territories, the country almost headed towards a civil war, which luckily was avoided through political technicalities.[50]

Several migratory waves characterized the demographic changes during this period, in the form of exodus both outside and within the country, from remote areas to more central regions.[51] In Albania, it is commonly agreed that during the period between the two regimes (state socialism and the current neoliberal one), individualism and private interest drove people's behavior, often at the expense of the collective societal dimension.

50 Musaraj, *Tales from Albarado: Ponzi Logics of Accumulation in Postsocialist Albania* (Cornell University Press, 2020).

51 The role of Sali Berisha, the anti-Communist leader of northern origin who took power after the regime change, aimed at capitalizing on the internal migration of the population from remote areas of the North for electoral gain. Using population movement was not a new practice, as it was also done during the Hoxhaist regime, which had greater support in the southern region. These dynamics, which highlight the disparity in how the state treated the populations of northern and southern Albania, are further explored in Part 3 of this dissertation.

The drive towards privatization and individualism immediately after the fall of the regime created a general perception of a total lack of collective initiatives as a characteristic of this period, including in city-making. In this dissertation, I argue the opposite by delineating the difference between state collectivism used by the state socialist regime as an ideological tool, and the beyond-state commoning practices that manifested with its fall. These commoning practices addressed immediate survival needs and included construction practices within and close by cities as a means to materialize newly created areas by the entire population migrating from remote regions. On the one hand, in the previous regime, the ideological tool of collectivity was used by the state in a top-down manner and as a major key concept. On the other hand, after that was gone, a revival of the commons was activated as a minor key concept. The two were certainly not mutually exclusive, but their influence shifted.

These processes, of course, were not merely administrative or economic. They were eminently spatial and material in nature. The state-driven collective was indeed dismantled. This dismantling was manifested through rage and anti-collectivist sentiment, sometimes in the form of looting or the destruction of spaces representing it. Yet, these same spaces somehow became accessible resources for reclaiming the commons. This reclamation was facilitated through access to material and spatial resources, such as abandoned buildings and land, as well as the rediscovery of communal practices and customary rules and regulations. All these resources, practices, and inherited rules and regulations played a fundamental role as mechanisms for coping with profound societal transformations. These material and immaterial resources were operationalized to create alternative spaces, which allowed individuals and minor collectivities to assert their right to the city. These reclaimed spaces were superficially perceived as places where individualism prevailed, which is also often the case, but mainly driven by state policies of privatization. While I do not necessarily dismiss the argument on individualism, I argue that entangled with the individualistic drive was also a collective one, in the form of fragmented minor collectivities, which have been overlooked. It is precisely that collective dimension that I highlight and bring forth in this dissertation. This is another form of collectivity, which does not suppress the individual but recognizes it, makes room for it, sometimes harmoniously and sometimes in conflicting ways.

Thirdly, in terms of time periods, my research reflects on the present situation (2013-present), during which de-commoning processes are once again actively projected onto the spatial reality of Albanian cities, this time with the return of the state in its neoliberal form. Currently, greed and profit-driven motives limit the collective's capacity to reinvent itself. Through this research, I aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of the interplay between historical legacies and contemporary challenges, urging a reevaluation of approaches to urban development that currently violently intervene in the urban territories. Processes of de-commoning have been

driven by both state and market forces, acting either in opposition to or in alliance with one another. Under state socialism, the state often positioned itself as an antagonist or appropriator of market logics while still enclosing commons through centralization. In contrast, in the current neoliberal order, the state and the market operate in alliance to dispossess and commodify shared resources. The current situation resonates fully with the critique of the neoliberal system that is emphasized in the most recent political theories of the commons.

In my work, the framework of the plurality of collectivities, and particularly the role of commoning practices in the production of space, serves as a cross-temporal epistemic device used to gain a new, nuanced understanding of Albanian urban history after World War II. This transversal approach allows me to pursue the ambition of extending the theorizing of the commons from the Albanian perspective, and beyond. As utilized in this dissertation, this transversality opens generative possibilities for understanding and rethinking urban transformation. It foregrounds everyday social-spatial practices, relational forms of organization, and the tensions between state, market, and community. While not aiming to provide an exhaustive account, this framework offers a productive lens through which to explore how commoning contributes to shaping urban life, constituting collective groups and the agency of such space in constructing relational commonalities.

1.2.2 The margins and the marginalized as radical places of study

As explained, this research engages with forms of social-spatial and political collective agencies as they unfold across temporalities, sometimes resonating as cultural continuities (as in the case of the revival of commons) and at other times clashing contradictions (as in the case of state collectivism conflicting with the commons). The study is grounded in three places of commoning: two situated in Tirana and one in the nearby city of Kamza. The practices that unfold in these places stand out for their spatial and material capacities of commoning, which, at various historical moments, challenged the authority of the state and the power of capital in claiming to shape, self-govern, and sometimes control their territory. Whether situated in peripheral zones or at the heart of the city, the collectives inhabiting all three places have experienced marginalization due to their collective agency. Yet, drawing on bell hooks' notion of *radical openness*, I argue that these places embody potential for resistance and generative imagination, where alternative forms of spatial production are not only possible but actively unfolded as life practices embodying a minor key spatial politics.[52]

52 bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Pluto Press, 2000).

In Tirana, I engage with two places where features of collectivity have been exceptionally important: Kombinat and the National Theater. Kombinat is a peripheral neighborhood that originated as an industrial textile complex through a Soviet-supported project in 1951, at the start of the state socialist regime in Albania. While exploring its historical heritage and lived experience under state socialism, I mainly examine how, during the collapse of industry in the 1990s in the anarchic so-called post-socialist era, abandoned industrial buildings were squatted and repurposed by migrant families. As a second place of study in Tirana, I reflect on the Movement for the Saving of the National Theater, a building constructed in 1938 and put to work during the Italian occupation. From that time, it had been adapted to several functions, and after World War II in 1945, it was turned into the People's Theater and then the National Theater. Before its brutal demolition in the early morning of May 17, 2020, a movement to preserve the building emerged, comprising a multitude of various political agencies within the Albanian cultural and intellectual scene.[53] The recent demolition of both the National Theater and the repurposed former industrial buildings of Kombinat, carried out without regard for their embedded collective significance, exemplifies the de-commoning actions that accompany the consolidation of a neoliberal regime with authoritarian tendencies. These violent spatial interventions materialize the suppression of commoning practices and reflect a broader strategy of urban control and dispossession.

Thirdly, my study engages with the city of Kamza, which was co-created in the last three decades by migrants mainly moving from the Northeast of Albania during the demographic shift that followed the collapse of state socialism in 1991. In Kamza, I study how the terrain has become a territory for the revival and reinterpretation of customary forms of migratory urban formations in a new urban setting adjacent to Tirana, the capital city. Although the dominant narrative is that Kamza was created illegally through the occupation of land by newcomers, in my research, guided by the theory of the commons, I explore the possibility of a counter-narrative. Through ethnographic exploration, I observed how commoning practices of construction, care, and resistance emerged as the core mechanisms of city construction, with kin-making and proximity also playing a crucial role.

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53 Hardt and Negri elaborate on the concept of the multitude in their extensive work and trilogy: *Empire* (2000), *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (2004), and *Commonwealth* (2009). Inspired by the concept of *multitudo* as collective power by Spinoza, they provide a way of thinking about political subjectivity that is different from homogenizing concepts used so far, like "the people," "the proletariat," or "the masses." Therefore, the multitude is not a unified, singular political body or a fragmented mass. Instead, it is a plural, diverse, and cooperative body that is capable of operating without converging into any one thing. This is where Hardt and Negri anchor their concept of *the common* (in singular) as a resistance to the empire. For a broader discussion and the various strands of the development of the concepts of the common, the commons, and commoning, see Part 2 of this dissertation.

Despite its proximity to Tirana, Kamza has been frequently portrayed as *the other* reality, facing stigmatization, neglect, and an uneven distribution of services.[54] In urban studies, the process of othering plays a crucial role in shaping how space, communities, and practices are represented and governed. Kamza, a city created by internal migrant communities, composed mostly of working-class families, has been given the identity of the informal and illegal city by the centrality of power that is Tirana.[55] It has often been framed as out of place or an obstacle to urban progress. The rhetoric of informality can function as a form of othering, where informal housing or collective practices are often portrayed as deviant, chaotic, or dangerous in contrast to the imagined orderliness of the formal city.[56] This discursive positioning of social-spatial hierarchies legitimizes state interventions ranging from demolition and redevelopment to securitization and displacement. It made the inhabitants of Kamza subject to electoral capitalization by political parties of the broad political spectrum.[57]

Within the framework of the commons, othering can be seen as both a barrier to recognition and a lack of the capacity to read and understand these places. Processes of urbanization here are dismissed as illegitimate precisely because they emerge from groups positioned as 'other' to the normative citizen or urban subject. In the relationship between Tirana and Kamza, these socio-spatial hierarchies, spanning a distance of just seven kilometers, reveal structural inequalities. They are essential for raising questions about who has the right to the city and how urban futures are imagined and contested. Material practices of construction and resistance as commoning practices are considered in this dissertation as tacit politics of everyday life, as ways for inhabitants to assert their connection to their own city and community, while being a political centrality on its own, not as an extension of the centrality of power that is embedded in the political, economic, and cultural elite of Tirana.

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54 *Othering* refers to the social and discursive process by which a dominant group constructs another group or subject as fundamentally different, alien, and often inferior, in ways that reinforce unequal power relations. This practice of differentiation sustains hierarchies of identity, belonging, and access to resources. Edward Said (1978) coined the term Orientalism and famously analyzed how "the Orient" was constituted as the Other of the West, a discursive strategy that legitimized colonial domination. Similarly, Maria Todorova coined the term Balkanism to point out how the peoples of the Balkans were framed as "the Other Europe." Simone de Beauvoir (1949) described women as "the Other" of man, constituted in relation to a male norm that claims universality. Later postcolonial and feminist theorists, such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1985), further emphasized how othering is tied to representation and the silencing of subaltern voices. In this sense, othering is a constitutive mechanism of modernity, through which identities are formed relationally while also embedding dynamics of exclusion, marginalization, and exploitation.

55 Diana Malaj, "Uncannying Kamza: The Construction of a Disavowed City," in *(Hidden) Narratives of Spatial Resistance*, ed. Elina Alatalo et al., Writingplace Series (NAi Publishers, 2026).

56 Ananya Roy, "Urban Informality: Toward an Epistemology of Planning," *Journal of the American Planning Associarion* 71, no. 2 (2005): 147–58.

57 Nebi Bardhoshi, "Shteti Qe i Druhem," Qendra Rinore ATA Kamez, 2017.

Kombinat and Kamza share a commonality in accommodating the demographic shifts of the post-1990s era. It is essential to note that, as a limitation of this study, the focus is primarily on migrants, mainly from the Northeast of Albania, within the two areas of Kamza and Kombinat. This was not a deliberate choice, but rather a condition predominantly encountered during the fieldwork. With their relocation near the capital city in the 1990s, these migrant communities have maintained a degree of autonomy in the unfolding practices of commoning as part of the production of space. As maintained by other anthropological work previously done in the arrival area of Kamza, observations show that the customary oral rules and regulations on boundary negotiation and conflict resolution have played a crucial role.[58] These unwritten rules and regulations are an expression of the commons' knowledge transmitted verbally across generations. Furthermore, this knowledge is not just freely passed along; it embodies a resistance capacity against the elimination of the oral practice that has developed over years of attempts to erase it during the totalitarian period of state socialism. As explained in the previous section, the state socialist totalitarian regime attempted to homogenize the legal landscape while eliminating any possibility for a plurality of context-specific rules and regulations.[59]

To engage with each of these places of study, I have developed a situated methodological approach that emphasizes *immersing in the field of relations*, utilizing spatial ethnography, and experimenting with diverse forms of research-creation, allowing for reflexivity and awareness throughout the process.[60] In some instances, my relationship with the reality of the place of study has been more intense, while in others, it has been less so, depending on the situations in which I was immersed. While studying the Movement for the Saving of the National Theater, I was in the position of a more distant researcher, who, because of travel difficulties during the pandemic, had to switch from in-person research to conducting online ethnography. However, I was in daily contact with activists, and I actively participated in debates in local and international media. In Kombinat, I connected more intimately with the community, visiting their houses, learning about their stories, and drafting kinship structures. Similarly, in Kamza, I immersed myself in the domestic and collective sphere. I had the opportunity to relate to a new form of commoning practiced by the local collective, Grupi ATA. As a group of first-generation inhabitants born and raised in Kamza, they are activists who engage in collective activities to voice their genuine concerns about the city and to create a counter-narrative about this place that is roughly as old as they are and that has grown and matured alongside them.

58 Stéphane Voell, "The Kanun in the City. Albanian Customary Law as a Habitus and Its Persistence in the Suburb of Tirana, Bathore," *Anthropos*, no. 98 (2003): 85–101; Bardhoshi, *Antropologjia e Kanunit*.

59 Bardhoshi, *Antropologjia e Kanunit*.

60 The methodological approach and positionality are more extensively elaborated in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

With their lived experience, they have developed a decolonial sense of the self, denouncing the othering done to them and their city.[61] Their name, ATA, in Albanian means *them* or *the others*. Their work contributes to the constitution of Kamza as a centrality in its own right, not only through political and discursive interventions, but also by building on the material and spatial transformations initiated and maintained by previous generations. This intergenerational effort challenges the city's assigned peripheral status, asserting its significance through both lived practice and discursive argumentation. I had the privilege of working collaboratively with them, learning immensely from and with them, and having the chance to exchange and co-produce knowledge in place and for the place. The continued kin-like allyship is one of the most valuable and cherished experiences of this PhD work.

Throughout my engagement with these places of study, I was compelled to be reflexive in my approach to recognize the character of each place. This critical reflexivity also provided me, as a researcher, with opportunities to develop an awareness of ethical engagement. While affiliated with a reputable Western European university like TUDelft, I have been cautious not to engage in, or be perceived as engaging in, an emancipatory or extractivist agenda.[62] As it is pointed out especially in postcolonial, feminist, and decolonial praxis, 'helicopter' or 'parachute' research can be ethically damaging to the communities it conducts research upon. This concern extends to design politics, academic research, and activism.[63] Being aware of the possibility of easily slipping into asymmetric power relations of the researcher and the researched subject, I have aimed at immersing myself in the field of relations and becoming one of the agents in the field, while connecting with my experience of growing up in similar places and continuing to live with the struggles of the Albanian reality. I will elaborate on this further in Chapter 3 of the dissertation, on research methods and significance.

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61 Diana Malaj, "Bathorja Në Shtypin e Përditshem Gjatë Viteve '90 Dhe 2000," Përvijime të Kamzës, Laboratori i Antropologjisë Urbane, Kamza, July 9, 2023; Malaj, "Uncannying Kamza: The Construction of a Disavowed City."

62 By extractivist agendas, I refer to academic knowledge practices that reinforce epistemic hierarchies by treating communities, archives, or collaborators as resources to be mined and collected for academic gain, while offering little or anything in return. This can take the form of tokenism, where marginalized voices are included only superficially, serving to legitimize research that ultimately reproduces existing power structures. On the other hand, emancipatory practices in academia are often tied to ethical concerns of 'participation-washing,' where especially marginalized communities are frequently portrayed as damaged and can only be represented from that place of damage to be considered to have a voice. In contrast, the research is represented as the savior of these communities, risking portraying them without agency over their own community lives. For a profound discourse on these dynamics, see Eve Tuck, "Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities," *Harvard Educational Review* 79, no. 3 (2009): 409–28.

63 In Albania, especially in the areas I engaged with for this study, the electoral politics is another extractivist and problematic practice.

1.3 Raising Questions from the Margins

The overarching research question guiding this work concerns the nexus between the plurality of collectivities and their role in spatial and material manifestations. My inquiry began with a broad interest in identifying the various collectivities that were constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed in Albanian society. I was not at ease with the dominant narrative that, with the fall of state socialism, there were no forms of collective practices. Therefore, I began this work by wondering which less obvious and less vocal collectivities have emerged and persisted during state communism, as well as across shifting temporalities in Albanian society, amid deep political, social, and cultural transformations. I started by questioning:

How have some marginal collectivities in Albanian society reclaimed their right to the city through practices of commoning?

How are these collectivities 'produced through' and 'productive of' space in the city?

Coming from a background in architecture, I am particularly interested in the spatial and material manifestations of these collectivities, with a focus on commoning practices. I wondered how space, territories, and architecture participated in the production of major and minor collectivities. Narrowing it down, I looked into the role that spatial and material dimensions play in influencing their configuration, and vice versa, in a relational way, how practices of commoning shape the spatial and material conditions of the architectures in which they dwell, construct, claim, and protect.

This line of questioning informed my research across all three places of study, including the Movement for the Saving of the National Theater, where this investigation first took shape. As the research unfolded, and particularly through fieldwork in *Kombinat* and *Kamza*, I noticed the persistent role of kinship ties in shaping collective life and spatial arrangements. This led to more focused research, particularly for these two urban realities, although it also influenced reflections on the Theater Movement.

The engagement with the concept of kinship was key to opening up a new understanding of yet another manifestation of the Albanian commons. I reflect on how commoning practices, which were previously intended to be eradicated during the era of state-collectivization, re-emerged and evolved into coping mechanisms and means by which individuals and communities could navigate migration and the challenges of everyday life during times of crisis. This was particularly evident in the anarchic interregnum between the state-socialist regime and the

currently consolidating neoliberal order. In the systemic schism between the two regimes, commoning was reliant on relationships of extended kinship, proximity, and customary regulations. While keeping a broader interest in the plurality of collectivities and their relation to the built environment, for this research, I observe the spatial manifestation of this political period, when the state was weak and sometimes almost absent.

I therefore narrowed my focus on questioning:

How do Albanian conditions of commoning in marginalized urban areas and the significance of kin-making influence spatial configurations? What is the role of spatial and material conditions in reinforcing or weakening kin-making as commoning practices?

1.3.1 From kinship to practical kin-making

The concept of *kinship* has undergone a significant transformation since its emergence in 19th-century anthropology.[64] Over the past few decades, the emphasis has shifted from descent and alliance ties to a more processual understanding grounded in kin-making, relatedness, relationality, residence, and resource (or substance) sharing.[65] While this conceptual reorientation has been globally relevant, it is observable in Albania with its distinctive characteristics. In the commoning places I have studied, the unstable shifting role of state and market structures made practices of kin-making particularly pertinent.

Contemporary kinship studies emphasize the pragmatic, everyday, and situated nature of kin relations. Kinship is no longer viewed as a fixed or natural given but as something *made* through shared dwelling, care practices, food exchange, affective and collective labor. Janet Carsten[66] argues that *relatedness* emerges through acts of sharing the residence and substance (such as food, space, or bodily fluids), thereby destabilizing and providing a corrective understanding of the earlier Eurocentric assumptions of kinship as purely genealogical.

64 Sarah Franklin and Susan McKinnon, *Relative Values: Reconfiguring Kinship Studies* (Duke University Press, 2001); Maurice Godelier, *The Metamorphoses of Kinship*, Reprint, trans. Nora Scott (Verso Books, 2020).
65 Janet Carsten and Stephen Hugh-Jones, eds., *About the House: Lévi-Strauss and Beyond*, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 1995); Janet Carsten, *Cultures of Relatedness: New Approaches to the Study of Kinship* (Cambridge University Press, 2000); Franklin and McKinnon, *Relative Values*; Janet Carsten, *After Kinship*, New Departures in Anthropology (Cambridge University Press, 2004).
66 *After Kinship.*

For Ingold, the term *relational*, drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the rhizome as "anti-genealogy," denotes a constitutive capacity in which entities are not given in advance but come into being through ongoing processes of relation. Beyond the idea of relatedness, where Carsten focuses on the practice of kin-making as a material and social work for creating bonds, *making kin* is increasingly understood as a *relational* practice that extends beyond species and the exclusively human environment, foregrounding the entanglements of multispecies as well as humans and non-humans in the process.[67]

In the Albanian context, particularly in areas shaped by migrant urbanization after the dismantling of socialist planning institutions, kin-making is not merely a social structure but a spatial and material practice. Here, kin relations manifest in acts of building homes together, cohabiting in extended family compounds, sharing social and material infrastructure, and negotiating proximity through consensus and conflict resolution in times of the absence of stable state infrastructures. However, these kin-based practices of organization are not confined only to moments of institutional void. They persist and adapt even when formal institutions are present, functioning as a parallel and pragmatic sphere of everyday governance and support.

These practices suggest a shift toward a broader theory of *kin-making,* encompassing livelihoods and material political practices. Kinship, in this expanded sense, becomes a way to navigate precarious housing, negotiate or challenge ownership and belonging, and produce spaces of solidarity and mutual support. The observations reveal how, similar to what Janet Carsten observed, commensality or food sharing, substance sharing, and common residence become key modalities through which kin ties are enacted, often blurring lines between family, neighbor, and friendship. This distinction is classically known in anthropology as the boundary between inherited or "pure" kinship and kin-like or "made" relationships. In this way, kinship becomes a lens through which to understand the spatial and political forms of commoning that arise under conditions of demographic shifts and marginality.

I thus draw on empirical cases from Albania to trace how practices of kin-making and relationality intersect with the politics of residence and territorial rights, as well as access to both material resources, such as land, housing, and food, and affective bonds, including care, trust, and obligation. Through this, I develop the concept of *kin-based commoning* as a generative lens for understanding forms of collective life in the urban places I engaged with in Albania.

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67 Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2000); Tim Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description* (Routledge, 2011); Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press, 2016).

1.4 The political statement of kincommoning

Theoretically speaking, there is an ideological clash between the theory of the commons and its emancipatory ambitions, on the one hand, and the concept of kinship, which is often associated with the conservatism of family structures, on the other. Both concepts are contested terrains of dichotomies of nature and culture, emancipation and tradition, civilization and primitivism, kinship and kin-making, and the commons and commoning. My concept of kin-based commoning extends beyond this dichotomous thinking, proposing a grounding of commons theory and an acceptance of kin-making as a relational social-spatial practice.

I introduce the concept of *kincommoning* practices, which foregrounds the role of practical and everyday kin-making ties in activating commoning practices. Based on my observations, kin-based commoning has served as a mechanism across temporalities in Albanian societies. It did so during periods when state structures intentionally sought to capture or erase their agency; however, it emerged in its fully articulated form during the anarchic interregnum between the two state regimes. During this time, kinship and commoning became crucial not only for meeting material and spatial needs but also for making pragmatic use of the cracks in the system, constituting both a lived-experience strategy of survival and a tacit political statement.

In this way, the tacit politics of kin-based commoning practices assert forms of agency and resistance that often bypass—and at times directly counter—formalized political discourse and institutional recognition. These acts are not explicitly framed as political demands or ideological stances. Still, they acquire political significance through their spatial and material manifestation. Practices such as occupying land or abandoned buildings, constructing dwellings or an entire city, and collectively managing resources outside the state's purview can be understood as mechanisms of political subversion. They are sustained through a hybrid economy that draws on both local forms of work and solidarity, as well as participation in the transnational flows of remittances from a global working-class emigrant labor force.

The political nature of these practices lies precisely in their everydayness and spatial character; by organizing life through kinship networks in the absence of state support, these communities challenge dominant logics of property, governance, and legitimacy. They expose the failures of formal institutions, along with professional expertise, and create alternative constitutive structures of support, survival, and belonging. In this case, politics is played at the microlevel, challenging macropolitics through spatial configuration, through establishing borders, and erasing and

negotiating them. These are vastly transforming interventions that are a subversion and sometimes a continuation of previous ingrained ideologies, as intrinsic political acts.

Criticizing state socialism in 2025, a time when the politics of polarization is globally gaining traction, can feel counterintuitive in a dissertation that also aims to contribute to the theory of the commons. I am also aware that historical critiques of state authoritarianism have contributed to the rise of the neoliberal state model, which is a model that rhetorically aims for a reduced role of the state.[68] However, this dissertation emerges from an Albanian perspective, shaped by a lived experience of one of the harshest totalitarian state socialisms, as the country transitions toward what is now consolidating into a neoliberal state regime, mimicking a Western state model considered universally the best and only option. Therefore, I aim to stay true to the Albanian experience, which entails a critique of how statist politics have captured and weaponized collectivity as an ideology during state socialism. Furthermore, although operating in a completely different economic and political setting, the current neoliberal order in Albania can be seen to continue the logic of authoritarianism. From the Albanian standpoint, the state operates through a sort of oxymoronic authoritarian neoliberalism that shrinks the agency of the commons. In recent developments, public-private partnerships are yet another example of how the state increasingly serves the interests of the economically powerful rather than those of the people it is supposed to represent. As the Albanian anthropologist Bardhoshi points out, the role of the state needs to come across as grounded while recognizing the pluriversality of its own society, a state where law does not arrive as imposed and transferred from a universal place, but emerges as political language, as a "social space" or habitus that aims for "the protection of human dignity."[69]

My work embodies the ideological agnosticism afforded to me by the Albanian experience. Therefore, although I recognize the importance of the framework, my engagement with the theory of the commons does not employ an emancipatory rhetoric often used by some authors of this theory.[70] I am exploring the concept of the commons, commoning, and kin-making not as a framework for emancipatory practices, but as a framework for a different understanding of the agency of the common people, recognizing their capacity and learning through and with them.

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68 The practice of this neoliberal state, however, contradicts its own ideological narratives. As seen worldwide, the minimization of the state's role has been translated into cutting social security and welfare while simultaneously failing to shield public institutions from being co-opted by market forces.

69 Bardhoshi, *Antropologjia e Kanunit*.

70 See, for example, Stavrides, *Common Space: The City as Commons*; Stavros Stavrides, *Common Spaces of Urban Emancipation* (Manchester University Press, 2019). I elaborate more on this position in the Concluding chapter.

This becomes urgent at a time when colonial systems of operation are still present and continue to reconfigure themselves within the framework of a neoliberal state in Albania and beyond. Therefore, engagement with commoning practices, and more specifically, the elaboration of the concept of kin-based commoning, constitutes a decolonial scholarly operation from a research perspective, aimed at debunking dominant narratives that view these practices as backward and unworthy.

At the same time, my work does not lean towards conservatism in any form, as it does not romanticize kinship relations. Instead, it recognizes the forms of resistance that emerge through the everyday negotiations, adaptations, and reconfigurations of social and spatial practices within patriarchal kinship structures. Rather than idealizing kinship as an inherently solidaristic or benevolent structure, I understand it as a contested field where power relations are constantly challenged and renegotiated. This is why my work relates to the current kinship theory that looks into kin-making as a processual, practical, and everyday relational mechanism that is not necessarily and solely biologically inherited but also questioned and reconfigured outside and beyond blood relations. This perspective enables an understanding of commoning that is neither trapped in nostalgia nor co-opted by neoliberal logics of self-reliance, resilience, and even teleological ideologies of emancipation. Instead, kin-based commoning is examined as a lived practice shaped by historical, cultural, economic, and political legacies, while holding the potential for pluralizing dominant modes of governance and ownership.

1.5 Outline of the dissertation

This dissertation is organized into four major parts, within which the individual chapters are developed. Part I serves as the introduction to the entire work. It outlines the central motivations and research interests, offers a brief overview of the contextual setting in which the study is situated, and presents the research questions. It also clarifies the intended contribution, the positionality from which the research is conducted, and the broader intentionality guiding the project.

Part II comprises two chapters that address the theoretical and methodological foundations of the dissertation. Chapter 2 positions the research within relevant scholarly discourses and delineates the theoretical terrain needed to articulate the study's central concepts, as well as those that emerged during the research process. Chapter 3 begins as a positionality chapter and gradually develops into an elaboration of the methodological approach guiding the inquiry.

Part III, titled "Empirical Grounds and Situated Reflections," forms the core of the dissertation. Chapter 4 offers a concise introduction to the Albanian context in relation to the aims of the study. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 present the empirical work, centering on my field research in three sites—Kombinat, Kamza, and the National Theater—where I examined practices of commoning.

Part IV concludes the dissertation. It reflects on the process of conducting research in Albania, revisits the research questions, articulates the methodological and theoretical contributions of the study, and continues with a thematic analysis that synthesizes the dissertation's findings. This part closes with final reflections, including potential directions for future research.

PART 2

On Concepts, Positions and Methods

2 Situating Theoretically

In Between Discourses of Commoning and Kin-Making

2.1 Introduction: Carving an In-Between Theoretical Space

In this chapter, I lay out the theoretical positioning of this dissertation, situating the study between the two concepts: commoning – elaborated extensively in political, social, and economic fields – and kin-making – a concept central to the domain of socio-cultural anthropology. By focusing on the material and spatial manifestations of practices of commoning and kin-making, I emphasized the need for further theorization of this interplay. This aligns with the study's transdisciplinary ambition to revisit and expand the theoretical ground between the concepts the research began with—collectivity, the commons, and, mostly, commoning—and those encountered through fieldwork observations, such as kinship and kin-making. The need to do so emerged from my empirical awareness of the influence of various forms of collectivity (including state collectivity and commoning) and kin-making on the spatial and material practices I studied in this research project in the context of Albania. Because of the situated empirical exploration of my approach in this study, this chapter does not elaborate on a rigid analytical theoretical framework. Instead, it sets the stage for situating my work theoretically within existing discussions of the concepts I am working with, to further enable the bridging of them in the concluding chapter as a theoretical contribution.

This transdisciplinary theoretical space aims to provide a perspective on unnoticed and often intentionally rendered unseen forms of minor, sometimes fragmented, collectivities in Albania across various political regimes and, further, in other resonant geographies of the so-called non-Western realities.[71] It addresses the epistemic void, the lack of a vocabulary that allows access to the understanding of these urban realities marginalized by the disciplines of architecture and urbanism. It contributes to the recognition of other forms of urbanism and architecture beyond what is considered professional, beyond the state and the market, and beyond superficial participatory models and imposed developmentalist theoretical frameworks. This theoretical contribution challenges the *othering* language that shapes spatial politics toward these overlooked forms of producing space, advancing a process of pluriversalizing their recognition with new terms such as embodied, need-oriented, neo-customary, and relational spaces. With this attempt, I invite the unlearning of simplistic, reductionist readings of these spaces as informal, chaotic, and anomalous, which justify imposed forms of urbanism. I make space for the recognition of co-organized, genuine forms of accessing and producing space in the city, reflecting on the agency of material and spatial practices of commoning and kin-making.

This work is, therefore, positioned at the edge of the discipline of architecture, a vantage point from which to activate a critical view of the discipline. With awareness of the need to expand the theoretical basis of architectural and urban thinking on the common(s), I engage with kinship theory, which has been the exclusive domain of the discipline of anthropology. Furthermore, focusing on empirical exploration and theoretical concepts, I engage rhizomatically with knowledge from various fields, primarily architecture and anthropology, but also including insights across radical historiography, urban studies, sociology, economics, human geography, and feminist and post/decolonial theories. My work engages with these fields transdisciplinarily, in the sense that it transcends disciplinary boundaries, integrating knowledge and methods from both academic and non-academic sources. However, at the center of the research stands the nexus between relational practices of commoning and kin-making and their spatial and material manifestation.

71 I am aware of the risk of reproducing colonial essentialist categories and dichotomies of Global North/South, West/Rest, as well as Western Balkans, Southeast Europe, and the Global South. I use these geographical categories not as stable entities, but as tools for orientation. Therefore, my work is driven by the need to go beyond these representational colonial dichotomies and to recognize the plurality of perspectives.

The concept of urban space has been widely present in the theory of the commons, especially in the discourse on urban commons and their governance, as resources and spaces for claiming access and for resistance in the city. However, the spatial and material dimension, as understood in the field of architecture, is not fully explored or grasped in these theories of the commons. My work aims to address this gap by centralizing the material and social-spatial practices as the entry point and central focus throughout the study.

2.1.1 Working with Unstable Concepts in Flux

A reflexive approach to conducting empirical work in the Albanian context has enabled me to observe and identify unnoticed manifestations of spatial collectivities, and then to theorize them within and in-between the two theories of the commons and kinship. Both commons and kinship are powerful and often idealized concepts within the realms of spatial politics. They invoke imaginaries of solidarity, reciprocity, and collective life. However, both concepts are discursively and materially far from stable. Embedded in both are structural ambivalences that simultaneously render them theoretically contested terrains of contradiction and potentiality.

In relation to the instability of the concept of the commons, it is clear by now that the risk of 'commons washing' exists within the capitalist development of urbanities. The value of the commons is not only recognized by scholars who want to empower communities, but also by "the dominant rationality of government: neoliberal regimes have started to recognize the economic value of the commons, allowing a re-appropriation of the commons from within capitalism."[72] This relates to capitalism's tendency to capture surplus value and capitalize on it. The commons, although they have the potential to resist this tendency, are also used as yet other subjects of appropriation. Scholars like Silvia Federici have warned us against allowing collective energy to be harnessed by capitalism as a means to overcome the system's perpetual crises, which De Angelis refers to as the "commons fix."[73] In an ambivalent way, the spatial practices of commoning, such as creating shared gardens, occupying buildings, or self-managing water, may resist commodification while also reproducing hierarchies of gender, race, or class, depending on who is allowed to participate and whose labor is rendered visible.

72 Enright and Rossi, "Ambivalence of the Urban Commons."

73 Massimo De Angelis, "Does Capital Need a Commons Fix?," *The Communism of Capital?*, ephemera theory and politics in organization, 13(3) (August 2013): 603–15; Federici, *Re-Enchanting the World. Feminism and the Politics of the Commons.*

On the other hand, the concept of kinship, which became relevant in this work through fieldwork in Albania, is not a stable one either. Often mobilized as a grounding mechanism for mutual aid and care, kinship has been used officially as a regulatory and normative structure that defines who belongs and who does not, who is entitled to inclusion, and who is excluded. In this way, kinship can enable profound forms of care and solidarity, especially in precarious contexts, as observed in the places where I have studied commoning practices in Albania. Yet, it can also reproduce patriarchal, heteronormative, and lineage-based hierarchies. The same kin-based ties that sustain kinship structures might also operate to control or exclude, as found not only in patriarchal settings but also during state socialism in Albania, which will be discussed throughout this work.

Spaces created through kinship can be both a mechanism of survival and support, and, in the absence or failure of state institutions, kin networks fill gaps in needs. Still, they may also consolidate power and create dependency within kinship structures. As observed in Albania, kin relations, which extend beyond genealogical bonds, are an integral part of macro- and micro-politics across the temporalities of different regimes. However, they are not recognized as such. They are often dismissed by the language of macro politics through the rhetoric of state consolidation and institutional building, neglecting that kin relations are, in themselves, one of those societal mechanisms that the urban sociologist AbdouMaliq Simone calls "people as infrastructure."[74] As will be shown in Part 3 of the dissertation, kin relations have been and remain part of state institutions and the structures around them. They have been operational and simultaneously sustaining and sabotaging them. Kin relations (genealogical and non-genealogical) are part of the power and fugitive of it, to borrow Harney and Moten's term.[75] However, as shown by other urban scholars, the relevance of kinship is not characteristic only of non-Western societies or migrant neighborhoods in the West, but continues to play a role in urban settings everywhere.[76]

74 AbdouMaliq Simone, "People as Infrastructure: Intersecting Fragments in Johannesburg," *Public Culture* 16, no. 3 (2004): 407–29.

75 Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Minor Compositions Automedia, 2016).

76 Apostolos Andrikopoulos, "Kinship Theory and Migration Studies: Challenging Ethnocentrism, Normativity, and State-Centered Epistemologies," in *Reflexivities and Knowledge Production in Migration Studies*, ed. Janine Dahinden and Andreas Pott (Springer Nature Switzerland, 2026); Thomas Pfirsch and Consuelo Araos, "Urban Kinships: Everyday Kinship and the Making of the City," *Articulo - Journal of Urban Research*, no. 20 (December 2019): 20.

Both commons and kinship are deployed as concepts in the making; therefore, I work with them as the verbs commoning and kin-making, respectively. Although overlooked so far in current debates, the concept of kin-making embodies a significant capacity to expand theories of the commons toward relationality and decoloniality.[77] By shaping forms of proximity, access, and use, kin relations generate spatial configurations that both reflect and reinforce collective life. Kin-making, therefore, operates as a spatial logic at the relational level of commoning practice. It broadens attention to social-spatial practices already acknowledged in theories of the commons, emphasizing the relations underpinning them. Additionally, it highlights the significance of connections that often go unnoticed or are deliberately obscured by official politics and policies.

In this theoretical chapter, I therefore reflect on the nuanced ways in which the concepts of *commoning* and *kin-making* have been discussed in existing scholarship. I point out ideological instances in which these concepts have contrasted, but, more importantly, I identify convergent directions and points of contact between them. I observe that both concepts are in flux and represent theoretically contested terrains of ongoing debates. Therefore, after a brief non-exhaustive mapping of the two bodies of theoretical knowledge on the commons and kinship, I establish the groundwork for theorizing a new concept of *kincommoning* elaborated in Parts 3 and 4 of this dissertation. This concept serves as a bridge, operating in the in-between theoretical space I carved out in this chapter and throughout this dissertation, centering the spatial and material aspects of its manifestation in the Albanian context. This concept aims to mobilize this insight to trace how the logic of kincommoning operates in the production of space, situating Albania's experience within broader debates on the commons while foregrounding its distinctive trajectories.

77 Although not set in a settler-colonial context per se, nor dealing with Indigenous sovereignty, my work engages and borrows - non-metaphorically - from decolonial critique. See Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1 No. 1 (2012): 1–40. This is also because the research is geographically located in Albania, which is within the European continent but on its geographic and cultural margins, on what is understood as "the Other Europe." Albania, where this work is conducted, is located in the region often known as the Western Balkans and sometimes Southeast Europe. From this position, this work looks toward and rethinks Western Eurocentrism from its peripheral geographies through a decolonial lens, including kinship as a relevant decolonial concept. This goes against the often-borrowed and imposed Western-centric theories of urbanism, which make a straightforward link between nuclearization and urbanization, diminishing and overlooking the role of kinship (kin-making) in these urban realities. See Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, updated edition (Oxford University Press, 2009); Piro Rexhepi, *White Enclosures: Racial Capitalism and Coloniality along the Balkan Route*, On Decoloniality (Duke University Press, 2023).

2.2 Tracing Commoning Discourses Beyond Dichotomies of Rural/Urban, Local/Global, State/Customs

As previously explained in the Introduction to this dissertation, the concept of the commons refers to tangible and intangible resources shared by a group of people who ideally manage these resources autonomously through inherited or situated knowledge, self-set rules and regulations, and the practice of commoning. Radical historians have traced the discussion of the commons back to pre-capitalist feudal Europe.[78] By incorporating insights from Indigenous studies, Black studies, and decolonial theory, several scholars challenge and expand the traditionally Western-centric theory of the commons by disrupting singular histories rooted in English traditions, such as the British enclosure movement.[79,80]

78 In pre-industrial Europe, despite the official ownership of land and resources by the monarch or their legal representatives, communities still fought for their access and rights over the commons. These commons are often referred to as a shared source of subsistence, as the air, water, land, pastures, wood, fishery, and so on. The most popular examples brought in by Peter Linebaugh are the Magna Carta of 1215 and the Charter of the Forest (1217), the medieval charter forcing King John of England to recognize limits on royal power and respect the traditional rights of commoners to use the forest for grazing animals, gathering wood, fishing, hunting, etc. Linebaugh argues that the commons are the material and social foundation of every society, sustaining life and enabling liberty, so that access to shared resources is essential for both survival and freedom. He draws an analogy of the enclosure of the commons by highlighting contemporary struggles around the world over various types of commons. These movements resonate with the fight for and recognition of the rights of commoners that the Magna Carta and the Charter of the Forest represent. See Linebaugh, *The Magna Carta Manifesto*.

79 See e.g. Tessa A. Eidelman and Sara Safransky, "The Urban Commons: A Keyword Essay," *Urban Geography* 42, no. 6 (2021): 792–811.

80 They emphasize other genealogies of understanding the commons and how the rise of capitalism was deeply intertwined with practices like colonial dispossession, the transatlantic slave trade, and the subjugation of women, which shaped the exploitation and exclusion of marginalized groups.

This broader perspective reveals the complexity of contemporary urban enclosures and underscores the need to reimagine the commons as a tool for transformative social justice.[81] My research, which centers on an understudied geography such as Albania, aligns with this attempt to diversify discourse on the commons.

In Albania, the commons have also constituted a core element of the material culture. Several words are used for 'commons' in various geographic areas. For example, *bjeshka* is the term for pasture for grazing in mountainous North Albania, which local communities have traditionally and still autonomously managed. *Kujri* and *mera* are also other words used to refer to forests, pastures, and land used jointly by villages.

In the theory of the commons, a broad discussion of rural commons is presented. Several authors have also introduced the concept in an urban setting, where some identify the urban commons as spaces within the city, while others go further, identifying the city itself as a commons, as will be detailed in the coming sections. Because this dissertation's entry point is the field of architecture and urbanism, it primarily focuses on the discourse surrounding the urban commons. This focus does not imply a hierarchy of urban areas over rural areas; on the contrary, as argued previously by other scholars, these categories are problematic even in the study of "the complexity of urban phenomenon," in Lefebvre's terms.[82] As will be detailed in Part 3, rural commons play a crucial role in this work. In two of the locations studied in Albania, the inhabitants have migrated from rural areas to urban settings, and the characteristics of these rural commons have been carried over by these migrant communities, facilitating the establishment of new urban commons.

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81 The social and political *alter-globalization movement* articulated a transversal critique of the adverse effects of economic globalization as promoted by transnational corporations and institutions like the World Trade Organization (WTO), International Monetary Fund (IMF), and World Bank. Rather than rejecting globalization outright, the movement utilized the commons both to advance a critique of neoliberal globalization and offer a positive, unifying vision of an alternative global order. The movement's principle that "another world is possible" recognizes the potential of the commons to create spaces of autonomy beyond market and state domination. In her article *Reclaiming the Commons*, Naomi Klein supports the alter-globalization movement's agenda by framing the defense and expansion of the commons as a powerful narrative to unite diverse struggles against neoliberal enclosure. Naomi Klein, "Reclaiming the Commons," *New Left Review*, no. 9 (June 2001): 81–89. Yet Dardot & Laval argue that such mobilizations, while politically significant, remained largely defensive. For them, the slogan "another world is possible" lacks a shared institutional or normative foundation, and therefore they propose the "right of use" (*droit d'usage*) as a legal and political foundation for governing resources collectively, rather than relying on state sovereignty or private property. See Dardot and Laval, *Common: On Revolution in the 21st Century*, 181. Silvia Federici cautions against the risks of the discourse of the commons being co-opted and appropriated by a globalist language and agenda. See Federici, *Re-Enchanting the World. Feminism and the Politics of the Commons.*

82 Michelle Buckley and Kendra Strauss, "With, against and beyond Lefebvre: Planetary Urbanization and Epistemic Plurality," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 34, no. 4 (2016): 617–36.

The enclosure of the commons and the local fight to preserve them as a source of sustenance are occurring, entangled in both rural and urban settings in Albania. Given the country's small scale, it is easy to see how these struggles inform and sustain one another. Although not without tensions, contradictions, and real challenges, commoners and activists try to work in coordination to create a front of rural and urban commoners that resists their current enclosure, which is only intensifying.[83]

2.2.1 Strands of Common(s) Theory

The core of the theory of the commons is composed of two main strands, which are reflected in urban studies and the practical applications of commoning: the new institutionalist or governance strand, championed by Elinor Ostrom and her successors, and the radical political strand that includes political thinkers such as Hard and Negri, Dardot and Laval, Masimo De Angelis, Peter Linebaugh, Silvia Federici, Stavros Stavrides and many more. Although these strands share many similarities, they differ in their political motivation and operationality vis-à-vis the capitalist system.[84] Furthermore, both of these strands have undergone empirical expansions and theoretical refinements within and beyond their limits, dialectically exchanging with each other, as well as the permeation of various lines of thinking, such as feminist, critical race theory, and post-decolonial and even anti-colonial currents.[85]

Institutionalist Strand as Governing the Commons

The seminal work of Elinor Ostrom on the self-governance of common-pool resources (CPR) and the Nobel Prize awarded to her in 2009, substantially shifted the attention to the concept of the commons. This recognition contributed to a broader new institutionalist strand she was part of, which considers the capacity of communities to self-organize as a "trusted social capital" at the turn of history, like the end of the Cold War, and the times of post-everything.[86]

83 Philipp Freund et al., "Local Resistance in Environmental Struggles: The Case of Zall-Gjoçaj, Albania," *Contemporary Southeastern Europe* 9, no. 1 (2021): 65–77.

84 Enright and Rossi, "Ambivalence of the Urban Commons."

85 Eidelman and Safransky, "The Urban Commons."

86 Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (Cambridge University Press, 1990).

Ostrom defined the common-pool resource as "a natural or man-made resource system that is sufficiently large as to make it costly (but not impossible) to exclude potential beneficiaries from obtaining benefits from its use."[87] In this definition, Ostrom emphasizes that the challenge with commons governance is not that exclusion is impossible, but that it's costly and complex, especially when the resource is large, shared, and used by many. For example, it takes effort and expense to stop people from fishing in a lake, using an open pasture, or accessing wood in a forest, especially if this becomes the job of an outside (public or private) authority.

In building her argument, she challenged oversimplified models of management and emphasized situatedness, diversity, and human capacity for cooperation, blending insights from economics, anthropology, and political ecology. In her book *Governing the Commons*, Elinor Ostrom critically challenged influential individualistic theories that predicted the inevitable failure of collective resource management.[88] Based on her observations of communities that have, in the long run, successfully managed common-pool resources such as fisheries, forests, and irrigation systems in a sustainable way through customary practices and rules, Ostrom argues that individualistic risks can be mitigated through collective self-governance by local autonomous institutions and regulations crafted by the communities, rather than external governance or privatization.

87 Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*, 30.

88 These theories are Garrett Hardin's influential essay *"The Tragedy of the Commons,"* the *Prisoner's Dilemma* popular in Game Theory, and Mancur Olson's *Logic of Collective Action.* Hardin's theory suggests that, in situations where resources are held in common, individual self-interest will inevitably lead to the overuse of shared resources, resulting in the depletion and deterioration of the common-pool resource. Based on this widely accepted assumption, he argues for the need to regulate the management of common-pool resources through privatization or governmental intervention. Similarly, the *Prisoner's Dilemma* model assumed that rational individuals in repeated interactions would defect rather than cooperate; however, unlike the prisoners who are not allowed to communicate with each other, Ostrom demonstrated that real-life community members can overcome this logic through communication, trust-building, and norm enforcement. Lastly, Ostrom discussed Mancur Olson's claim in his publication *The Logic of Collective Action,* which maintains that without external incentives, individuals and small, concentrated interest groups are more prone to pursue their interests at the expense of inefficiencies in society at large. Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action* (1965). See Garrett Hardin, "The Tragedy of the Commons," *American Association for the Advancement Of Science* 162, no. 3859 (1968): 1243–48.; Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action.*

She argues: "Instead of presuming that the individuals sharing a commons are inevitably caught in [an individualistic profit] trap from which they cannot escape, I argue that the capacity of individuals to extricate themselves from various types of dilemma situations varies from situation to situation."[89]

Ostrom identified a set of eight design principles to guide the local management of the commons, including, among others, the definition and delineation of clear social-spatial boundaries, inclusive collective-choice arrangements, monitoring, sanctions, and conflict-resolution mechanisms.[90] These principles provided an alternative reading of how commons can be governed. They challenged the assumption that only states or markets could ensure the avoidance of overuse and depletion of the common-pool resources. Rather than prescribing a generalized solution, they focused on locally crafted institutions grounded in trust and accountability. They show that successful management of the commons was not only a matter of formal rules, but also social relationships ingrained in mundane everyday practices. By recognizing the legitimacy of local rulemaking through "collective choice arrangements" as crafted by those affected by these rules (principle 2), "not challenged by external governmental authorities" (principle 7) and the need for multi-level coordination in complex systems of "nested enterprises" (principle 8), Ostrom's framework reveals how commons are not inherently prone to depletion. The principles of monitoring, sanctions, and dispute resolution (principles 4, 5, 6) also acknowledge the presence of community tribunals and other customary structures within communities that must be recognized as operating institutions on their own rights.

89 The long-enduring commons she studied are as diverse as the pastures found in Swiss alpine villages such as Törbel, where villagers have long regulated the use of their alpine pasture commons using local rules and clearly defined user rights and responsibilities collectively agreed upon by the villagers; the *huertas* (community gardens) near Valencia, Spain, where irrigation water is allocated without central control by the state or markets; the *zanjeras* or traditional irrigation communities in the Philippines; forests in Japan and Kenya; fisheries in Antalya, Turkey; among others. These common-pool resources, widely spread across the globe, were ones that had well-developed, self-created institutions with clearly defined membership, rules about dividing the benefits of the resource fairly among users, duties to ensure the resource is maintained, and mechanisms to deal with conflict. Importantly, through her research, Elinor Ostrom found that these long-lasting commons institutions typically included four elements: well-defined boundaries, restrictions on entry rights, systems of rotational use of the resource, and strong social norms. See Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*, 14.

90 Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*, 90 Table 3.1.

Ostrom's student and collaborator Charlotte Hess then attempted to provide a broad map of old and new commons, the latter being "without pre-existing rules or clear institutional arrangements."[91] The debate over the commons, more specifically, over their governance, remains, overall, a topical one.

While Elinor Ostrom's groundbreaking work on commons governance provided a vital alternative to state- or market-centric models, with its emphasis on the self-organizing capacity of communities, her framework often worked with a binary distinction between these modes of governance (the state and the market). For Ostrom, the main question was to demonstrate that communities were able to effectively and sustainably govern common-pool resources, without having to turn them into state property or privatize them. However, she did not fully theorize how the state and market often collaborate, particularly under neoliberal regimes. In these regimes, the state is frequently the enabler of market logic, acting not as a counterbalance or a mechanism to hold the market accountable, but as an active supportive agent in processes of enclosure and dispossession. Other scholars have therefore expanded commons theory to account for the entangled nature of state–market alliances, demonstrating how commoning practices today often confront both legal-political frameworks and economic forces working in tandem. This issue has become one of the focus points for the other strand of commons theory, which will be discussed in the following subsection.

91 The variety of the mapped sectors of "new commons" encompass shared resources and collective action initiatives: Cultural Commons as shared cultural heritage, art, and indigenous traditions; Neighborhood Commons such as local resources like community gardens, public spaces, and housing, emphasizing trust and cooperation; Infrastructure Commons cover human-made systems like transportation, communication networks, and public utilities, with challenges like congestion and privatization; Knowledge Commons involve digital and intellectual resources, such as open-source software, libraries, and scientific data, often addressing issues of access and intellectual property; Medical and Health Commons explore shared healthcare resources, including medical budgets and antimicrobial resistance, requiring collective management; Market Commons examine economic systems, advocating for equitable and sustainable practices like gift economies and carbon trusts, and finally, Global Commons address planetary-scale resources like the atmosphere, oceans, and biodiversity, focusing on sustainability and governance. Each sector highlights the need for new management institutions to prevent enclosure, overuse, and degradation. See Hess, "Mapping the New Commons."

Radical Strand of the Theory of the Common(s)

The concept of the commons has inspired a wide range of thinkers and practitioners who see in it the potential for political imagination of a different world beyond the state and the market. This more radical political strand of the theory of the common(s), drawing from autonomist, neo-Marxist, anarchist, post-capitalist, and feminist frameworks, includes less homogeneous theoretical and practical approaches to understand the common(s) not merely as a resource but as a political principle and struggle practice rooted in collective self-organization and resistance to capitalist enclosures in a neoliberal globalist world order, while prefiguring alternative forms of social organization.

Key divergences between the Ostromian institutionalist and radical strands relate to the political potential of the notion of the common(s) and its scalability. These thinkers argue that the concept of the common(s) possesses great potential for developing new political ontology and practices that challenge the conventional understandings of ownership, property, use, and labor. The institutionalist approach, on the one hand, sees the commons as small-scale practices within the systems in which they emerge. Radical theorists, on the other hand, aim to think toward changing the capitalist system. Therefore, while the first seeks to identify and protect the common-pool resources, the radical political strand aims to turn everything into a common(s).[92] This way, for the latter, the commons do not simply exist but are created through "political action" of spatial claim, appropriation, and means for transformation.[93]

The differentiated use of the singular and plural forms of the common and the commons reflects how the question of scalability is conceptualized. For example, some scholars emphasize "the commons" in the plural to refer to shared spaces, resources, and systems of social reproduction.[94] Other scholars of political philosophy, such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, as well as Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, shift the focus to "the common" in the singular as a more overarching and foundational political

92 Problematizing both capitalism and state-socialism – systems that rely either on private or state (public) property and/or an authoritarian state – they see the common in the heart of a forthcoming *communist future*. See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Harvard University Press, 2009), ix. Furthermore, they state that "what the private is to capitalism and what the public is to socialism, the common is to communism." See *Commonwealth*, 273.

93 Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*, 40:73.

94 See, for example, Massimo De Angelis, *Omnia Sunt Communia: On the Commons and the Transformation to Postcapitalism*, In Common (Zed Books, 2017); Silvia Federici, "Feminism and the Politics of the Commons," in *Uses of a WorldWind, Movement, Movements, and Contemporary Radical Currents in the United States*, ed. Craig Hughes et al. (AK Press, 2010); Silvia Federici, *Re-Enchanting the World. Feminism and the Politics of the Commons.* (PM Press, 2019); David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*, vol. 40 (Verso, 2012); Peter Linebaugh, *Stop, Thief!: The Commons, Enclosures, and Resistance* (PM Press, 2014).

concept operating across various scales.[95] However, even scholars who use the term common in the singular are not using it in the same capacity. For example, Hardt and Negri and Dardot and Laval both center "the common" as a transformational political concept, but they do so from distinct intellectual traditions.[96] Hardt and Negri see it as the emergent product of *constituent* power, as the spontaneous, creative capacity of collective subjects, such as the *multitude*, to break with existing political forms and generate new ones through acts of resistance, cooperation, and exodus.[97] In contrast, Dardot and Laval, rather than seeing the common as emerging spontaneously, emphasize an *instituent* power that relies on communities actively creating and sustaining shared rules, obligations, and forms of self-governance that ground common life.[98] They write: "The institution, … should no longer be regarded as primarily the instituted (that which already exists), but rather it is the instituent that shapes the instituted, and which, in time, will again be subverted by the radically new."[99] In that sense, Dardot and Laval may appear to be closer to the Ostromian institutionalist understanding of governing the commons. However, while Ostrom sees institutions as tools for governing resources, Dardot and Laval see them as political vehicles for a new foundation of collective life with the capacity for systemic change.

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95 See, for example, Dardot and Laval, *Common: On Revolution in the 21st Century*; Hardt and Negri, *Commonwealth*.

96 Hardt and Negri operate within a neo-Marxist and autonomist tradition, strongly influenced by Italian workerism (*operaismo*), Foucault's theory of biopower (with their twist to biopolitics), Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy of immanence and Spinoza's concept of *potentia* (power as capacity, the immanent force of life, the ability to act and affect) vs *potestas* (power as command, authority, and domination), as well as Marx's idea of the *general intellect*. In the *Commonwealth*, they define the common as a compound of both material (land, water, air) and immaterial (knowledge, language, affect)—not simply what is shared, but what is co-produced through cooperation and living labor.

97 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude. War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (The Penguin Press, 2004); Hardt and Negri, *Commonwealth*.

98 Dardot and Laval are influenced by anarchism, especially in their critique of state sovereignty, hierarchy, and centralized authority, yet they do not embrace spontaneity as the primary mode of political transformation. This might seem contradictory at first, since much of anarchist thought—particularly in its classical forms (e.g., Bakunin, Kropotkin)—has been associated with spontaneous revolt, horizontal organization, and anti-institutional tendencies. However, Dardot and Laval draw instead on strands of anarchism that emphasize self-organization, federalism, and the constructive power of collective institutions, especially the libertarian socialism of Proudhon and the self-instituting philosophy of Castoriadis.

99 Dardot and Laval, *Common: On Revolution in the 21st Century*, 289.
Rather than viewing institutions as oppressive by definition, they argue—against both statist socialism and romantic anti-institutionalism—that liberation requires the creation of binding, participatory institutions grounded in the norm of the common. They are critical of spontaneous politics (like those in parts of the autonomist tradition) for failing to secure the durability and accountability needed to sustain democratic life beyond moments of rupture or insurrection. In their view, freedom is not the absence of rules, but the collective capacity to give oneself rules—to institute and reinstitute practices and obligations that embody shared responsibility. This position aligns with a more constructive, institutional anarchism, one that sees the political task not just as resisting domination, but as building lasting, self-governed forms of life.

To sum up, these two strands of the theory of the commons, therefore, sometimes collide and sometimes extend each other in a dialectical way. On the one hand, the new institutionalist strand focuses on self-governed institutions of the commons; it has more defined boundaries, operates mainly at small scales, and has limited political ambitions. On the other hand, the radical political strand predominantly emphasizes the potential of the common(s) to resist the capitalist system, to go against it as an anticapitalistic drive, and to bring about an entirely new ontological change, shifting toward a post-capitalist world order.

The theoretical position of my work on the commons in Albania is not aligned with one strand or the other, but draws on aspects of both and beyond, as complementary, sometimes contrasting, and sometimes insufficient. Although not without political limitations, as exposed by the authors of the radical strand, the importance of Ostrom's work lies in the situatedness of her approach, which uses empirical knowledge to derive principles for governing the commons, making the discussion more tangible and operational.[100] Here, my situated approach to the Albanian condition resonates with the Ostromian strand. On the other hand, the critique of the institutionalist strand by the radical political strand strengthens belief in the prefigurative potential of the commons and its capacity to expand the political imagination toward more just futures.[101] However, as noted in both literature and empirical work, theories from the radical strand of commons often struggle to take root in practice, sometimes hovering above with emancipatory rhetoric and universal claims. They have nevertheless been a powerful theoretical and practical guide throughout my research in Albania. At the same time, the empirical work itself has revealed instances in which these theories fall short.

In Albania, a country that experienced a harsh regime of state socialism, and when capitalism is still consolidating, discussions about the commons, as will be discussed further in Part 3, are not so much to be found on the surface but are still very much present in the tacit material politics of everyday life and subtle resistance against intensified enclosures. What makes the country interesting is that articulating concepts such as the commons and the collective meets real resistance because of the still-recent harsh experience with state-imposed collectivism. This makes the discourse materialistic and grounded rather than utopian, but also exposes limitations in recognizing the capacity of the commons as a political agency.

100 Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action.*
101 Breines, "Community and Organization"; De Angelis, *Omnia Sunt Communia: On the Commons and the Transformation to Postcapitalism*; Stavrides, *Common Space: The City as Commons.*

2.2.2 The Structural Dilemma of the Role of the State and Customary Law: Enabling or Capturing the Commons?

A critical discussion of collectivities in Albania should reflect on the role of the state as it shifts from the consolidation of the state socialist regime to its collapse and the shift to a neoliberal one. The commons theory exhibits a persistent ambivalence toward the state. On the one hand, there is a solid consciousness of the problematic role of the state, particularly in its current, widely distributed neoliberal form, understood as a driver of enclosure through privatization, deregulation, and the depoliticization of social relations. On the other hand, the question, popular within anarchic thought, of whether the commons can scale or endure without state mediation remains contested.

Within the institutionalist Ostromian perspective, it is evident that both private entities and the state are unable to effectively safeguard the commons. Rather, it is the communities themselves that do better in this regard. Nonetheless, this perspective does not seek to reject the market regime or the state, which appear to coordinate under neoliberalist regimes. The radical strand, with ontological ambitions and expectations regarding the commons, seeks to go beyond the market and the state. This creates an ambivalent position toward the state within this theoretical strand of commons theory: either abolishing the state or claiming it back. For some authors, dismissing the state as a potential vehicle for advancing a stronger political position for the commons risks political inefficacy. Although they criticize the state, they still see it as a key terrain of power. Rather than abolishing it, which is an idea popular among anarchist factions of leftist political thinkers, the alternative suggestion is to reclaim the state through the power of the commons to have it work not for the powerful few but for the powerless majority.[102]

From the Albanian perspective, using the state to construct a new world, as the common, sounds familiar.[103] Given the history of Albania and other Stalinist regimes that used the state as a tool to construct communism, this formula, however appealing, sounds familiar and is a challenging route to take. Dardot and Laval maintain that the state, whether liberal or socialist, cannot serve as custodian of the common because its logic of sovereignty is fundamentally incompatible with the *principle of unappropriability*.[104]

102 Federici, *Re-Enchanting the World. Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*., 96, 167; Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*, 40:124.
103 Dardot and Laval, *Common: On Revolution in the 21st Century*; Hardt and Negri, *Commonwealth*.
104 The principle of unappropriability, defined by Dardot and Laval, rejects both private and state property in favor of collective use. It maintains that no individual, corporation, or state authority can claim and have exclusive ownership over what is considered common, which must remain open to shared access, and instituted (co-created and subverted) rules. This active political obligation, for them, shall extend not only to resources but also to the institutions and practices organized around them.

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From this perspective, state ownership is not a form of commoning but another modality of enclosure.[105] This is very clear in the case of Albania, where, as explained in Part 3, state socialism carried out the mass enclosure of the commons while using state collectivity as its primary ideological tool. Dardot and Laval consider this process to be "primitive socialist accumulation," pointing out that primitive accumulation, as maintained by Marx, did not happen only as a prerequisite to the establishment of the capitalist regime, but a similar process happened in the countries where state-socialism was established in a totalitarian way.[106] An anthropological account of how the state might operate with the "illusion of property" while using its power to occupy any other forms of property comes from Kriti Kapila's theory of *nullius*.[107]

There is an overlooking of how state socialist regimes appropriated Marxist theories, expanding them with Leninist and Stalinist doctrines, which were instrumentalized to justify the concentration of state power and the disconnection of people from communal land and practices of commoning. This oversight sometimes seems intentional, as it helps preserve the ideal of socialism within leftist politics. This is based on the hope that things can be done better than before. I will return to this discussion in Part 3; however, without taking an explicit political stance, as it is one of the limitations of this dissertation that cannot be overextended into the field of political theory. From the Albanian perspective, however, I am obliged to situate the discourse in relation to the geography in focus, where the state captured the ideal of collectivity, which shook belief in it and in the state institutions, pushing inhabitants to take their lives into their own hands. Therefore, learning from the grounded experiences of state socialist regimes, as well as what happened after their collapse, remains vital as we look forward to envisioning the role of the common(s). Together, these debates underscore the conceptual instability of the commons when considered relative to state power, whether alone, as in state socialism, or in collaboration with market forces, as in the neoliberal state. Therefore, the common(s) can be envisioned as sometimes autonomous, complementary, oppositional, or transformational, but the theoretical alignment between commoning and state structures remains inconclusive and unsettled.

105 "Interview with Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval on the Politics of the Common," *P2P Foundation*, July 24, 2015, https://blog.p2pfoundation.net/interview-with-pierre-dardot-and-christian-laval-on-the-politics-of-the-common/.

106 Dardot and Laval, *Common: On Revolution in the 21st Century*, 49.

107 Kriti Kapila, *Nullius: The Anthropology of Ownership, Sovereignty and the Law in India* (Hau Books, 2022); Nebi Bardhoshi, "Mbi Antropologjinë Urbane Dhe Filmin Etnografik," *Antropologji* 7, nos. 1–2 (2024): 5–28.

Similarly, the identification of customary law with the commons has been a recurring theme in theoretical and political debates. It becomes an imperative theme in relation to events in Albania after the fall of state socialism and the collapse of the state's totalizing power from the top. The revival of customary rules and regulations became a body of knowledge to rely on when institutions did not function well.[108]

While customary law has historically regulated collective access to resources, its association with the commons raises critical questions: does it represent a genuine expression of commoning, or does it risk reducing the common(s) to a static and inherited framework rather than an open and evolving political process? Dardot and Laval sustain that custom and customary rights were fundamentally "grounded in places, not people" (lex loci), which explains their high degree of geographic variability, as well as temporalities in relation to specific periods, seasons, and durations of accessibility (praxis loci). They define custom as "situated at the interface of praxis and law."[109] The story of the migrant population shift in post-1990s Albania partially complicates this account. As will be discussed in Part 3, in the case of population movement, the praxis of customs does not appear to be grounded solely in the place of origin but is also reinterpreted in the place of arrival.

However, Dardot and Laval maintain that because of the "repetitive nature" of the "transmission of custom," "customary law is, in itself, incapable of instituting the principle of unappropriability" as it does not supposedly support use rights and opposes private or public (state-owned) property rights. The essential question raised here is whether it is possible to engage in the practice of "making customs in the long run" and to "willfully establish a custom, [that will make it] possible to create legal rules through collective practice that are not only independent of existing laws but which actively work against them?"[110] This account corresponds to the condition of migratory urban formations in Albania, where inhabitants required recognition of their property rights. However, my question is whether it is the incapacity of customary law or the lack of legal possibilities, paired with uncertainties of displacement, that prevents this principle from being instituted.

108 Stéphane Voell, "The Kanun in the City. Albanian Customary Law as a Habitus and Its Persistence in the Suburb of Tirana, Bathore," *Anthropos*, 2003, 85–101.
109 Dardot and Laval, *Common: On Revolution in the 21st Century*, 210.
110 Dardot and Laval, *Common: On Revolution in the 21st Century*, 278.

2.2.3 The Freedom to Act: Autonomy, Legitimacy, and Recognition in the City

Beyond the dilemma of the role of the state, discussed in the previous section, debates over autonomy and heteronomy are intrinsically related to the question of legitimacy as the first forms of commons, as the capacity of communities to establish rules as "collective-choice arrangements," as argued by Ostrom,[111] but also to claim political agency. De Angelis argues that legitimacy, such as in the case of commoning practices of squatting or so-called informal settlements, "is thus the first resource that must be generated and accumulated by many illegal commoning practices, and the key question faced by many movements is how not to be criminalized."[112] This dynamic is clearly visible in post-1990s migratory movements in Albania, when large numbers of internal migrants, excluded from legal access to land, claimed peripheral urban land through incremental construction, as discussed in Part 3 of this dissertation. Felicity D. Scott calls these spatial experiences of claiming legitimacy "outlaw territories," bringing in examples of spatial formations that emerge in the face of unsettling world events in the 1960s and 1970s through rule-breaking, tactical occupation, and self-built environments operating outside the sanctioned frameworks of the state, while immanently carrying a certain level of experimental radicalness.[113] Such outlawed territories, rather than peripheral anomalies, are the materialization of political and material negotiations, through which communities are simultaneously created and assert their own space over recognition, regulation, and everyday practices of construction, amidst shifting regimes of legitimacy. Several recent and older attempts have been made to involve architecture in these practices and to support this shift toward legitimacy.[114]

More advancement has been made in the field of governmentality, although not without ambiguities. Building on Ostrom's work on the self-governance of common-pool resources as an alternative to both state and market logics, more recent efforts have focused on elaborating and experimenting with policies and practices that acknowledge the commons. In some cases, local state institutions have begun to recognize not only the existence of the commons but also their autonomous forms of governance.[115]

111 *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action.*
112 De Angelis, *Omnia Sunt Communia: On the Commons and the Transformation to Postcapitalism*, 233.
113 Felicity D. Scott, *Outlaw Territories: Environments of Insecurity/Architecture of Counterinsurgency* (Zone Books, 2016).
114 Delsante and Zambelli, "Architectural Agency and the Commons"; Petrescu and Petcou, "The Role of Architects in Initiating, Sustaining and Defending Urban Commons in Mass Housing Estates: R-Urban in Grand Ensembles"; Stavrides, "Common Space Creation: Can Architecture Help? (Towards a Provisional Manifesto)."
115 Emre Akbil et al., *Urban Commons Handbook* (dpr-barcelona, 2022).

Discussions on property rights, as well as on commons rights, access, and use, have been incorporated into debates on city management in several European cities, such as Bologna, London, Barcelona, Ghent and others.

As discussed in the new institutionalist strand, the commons debate concerns rivalry over rights to access and use. In the Ostromian model, the community that manages the commons is mainly homogeneous, and the access is exclusionary. Rivalry, therefore, can be self-managed by setting and crafting rules within communities.

When discussing commons in the city, or *urban commons*, it is no longer possible to speak of a homogeneous community. Here, the proximity of heterogeneous members generates more complex forms of rivalry and negotiation. Debates within the new institutionalist strand consider the urban commons as an operational means to reclaim governance over the city [116]. Such approaches advocate decentralized, polycentric governance, focusing on local knowledge and nested systems of decision-making. The scope of these ideas extends beyond physical spaces to include cultural, digital, and social commons, underscoring the necessity for adaptive property regimes and legal structures that empower communities to steward commons resources.[117]

According to Foster and Iaione, who developed the frame of the city as a commons, cities are composed of interrelated resources, such as public spaces, infrastructure, and cultural assets, toward which there is an entitlement of collective ownership and management by the inhabitants in the city.[118] Resonating with Ostrom's emphasis on the importance of local knowledge and social norms in resource governance, they propose the concept of "urban collaborative governance" as part of their model of "co-city," which entails mechanisms for jointly managing and stewarding city resources. Newly developed institutions are proposed to be established in various ways, such as through cooperatives, community land trusts, or participatory budgeting schemes, empowering residents to participate in decisions that affect their communities.[119]

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116 Hess, "Mapping the New Commons"; Sheila R. Foster and Christian Iaione, "The City as a Commons," *Yale Law & Policy Review*, 2016; Sheila R. Foster and Christian Iaione, *Co-Cities: Innovative Transitions toward Just and Self-Sustaining Communities* (The MIT Press, 2022); Daniel Tumminelli O'Brien, "Managing the Urban Commons," *Human Nature* 23, no. 4 (2012): 4; Natalia Radywyl and Che Biggs, "Reclaiming the Commons for Urban Transformation," *Journal of Cleaner Production* 50 (July 2013): 159–70.

117 David Bollier, *Think Like a Commoner: A Short Introduction to the Life of the Commons* (New Society Publishers, 2014); David Bollier, "The Commons as a Template for Transformation," *Great Transition Initiative*, no. April (2014); David Bollier and Silke Helfrich, eds., *Patterns of Commoning* (The Commons Strategies Group & Off the Common Books., 2015); David Bollier and Silke Helfrich, *Free, Fair, and Alive: The Insurgent Power of the Commons* (New Society Publishers, 2019).

118 Foster and Iaione, "The City as a Commons"; Foster and Iaione, *Co-Cities.*

119 Foster and Iaione, "The City as a Commons."

Residents, local governments, and other stakeholders collaborate in a co-city to produce and manage common resources, promoting a sense of ownership and belonging.[120] For example, the *Bologna Regulation for the Care and Regeneration of Urban Commons* is one such case in which these ideas are being tested. The regulation entails the possibility of an individual or an association of citizens initiating a CGC- Collaborative Governance of the Commons, by making proposals to the city administration, which will afterward be assessed to determine whether it is in accordance with both private and public interests. The approval of the proposal is followed up with a "pact of collaboration." Other applied examples of these endeavors can be found in the *Localism Act* in the UK, *A Commons Transition Plan for the City of Ghent*, the *ex-Asilo Filangeri* in Naples, or in what is recognized as a hybrid setting of *Civic Management Facilities CMFs* in Barcelona.

Although widely celebrated, these examples are still experimental. Researchers are observing them and sometimes even criticize, as the presence of state governmental bodies in the process limits autonomous self-governance and lowers the political capacity of the commons.[121] Some critics consider this an expression of "the post-political meaning of the concept of the commons"[122] and warn that these forms of governmentality are "leading to a substantial democratic deficit."[123]

It is well understood, therefore, that the commons very rarely exist in isolation. Embedded in a wider politico-legal, economic, and socio-cultural framework, they are subject to various heteronomous pressures, be it through state regulation and urban planning regimes or market logics tending to enclose, formalize, and extract value.[124] In this sense, the "freedom to act" may involve claiming autonomy upfront from the state and the market, maintaining it against these pressures, or actively producing it as an act of commoning.

120 Foster and Iaione, *Co-Cities*.
121 Iolanda Bianchi, "The Post-Political Meaning of the Concept of Commons: The Regulation of the Urban Commons in Bologna," *Space and Polity* 22, no. 3 (2018): 287–306; Akbil et al., *Urban Commons Handbook*; Marina Pera and Iolanda Bianchi, "Governmentality, the Local State, and the Commons: An Analysis of Civic Management Facilities in Barcelona," *Social Inclusion* 10, no. 1 (2022): 115–25; de Andés Aldama, "Becoming-Common of the Public. Municipalist Lessons on Urban Commoning as Alter-Planning."
122 Bianchi, "The Post-Political Meaning of the Concept of Commons."
123 Erik Swyngedouw, "Governance Innovation and the Citizen: The Janus Face of Governance-beyond-the-State," *Urban Studies* 42, no. 11 (2005): 1991–2006.
124 David Harvey, "The Future of the Commons," *Radical History Review* 2011, no. 109 (2011): 101–7; Linebaugh, *Stop, Thief!: The Commons, Enclosures, and Resistance*; Sevilla-Buitrago, *Against the Commons: A Radical History of Urban Planning*.

2.2.4 Community as a Terrain of Power Struggle: Between Customary Bonds and Emancipatory Claims

The concept of the community remains essential for political and theoretical interpretation. It is a contested category that shapes and delimits how collective life and/or emancipatory politics are articulated.[125] Discussions of the community center on two key points: its boundaries and its internal relations as forms that make up its organization. In the two strands of commons theory discussed earlier, the concept of community is examined through a tension between viewing it as a bounded, defined, and homogeneous entity on the one hand, and considering it as a processual, unstable, and continuously unfinished formation on the other.

While the Ostromian approach is considered to frame the community as a cohesive group capable of self-organizing, designing, and managing resources, the radical strand views the community with less rigid boundaries. The community is conceptualized as a continuously produced relational entity that emerges through practices of commoning rather than preceding them. For De Angelis, "the existence of a boundary does not mean that nothing passes through; rather, it operates as a filtering membrane, in this case connecting this commons to its environments. It also means that often this boundary becomes the front line that defines the clash of the commons with state and capital."[126] Stavros Stavrides describes commoning-based collectivities as "communities in movement," as fluid formations that refuse confinement.[127] In spatial terms, these communities are constituted across *threshold* spaces where encounters and negotiations can emerge without solidifying into exclusionary identities.[128] Stavrides proposes that the processes of commoning be temporary and commons spaces be organized in communicative and multiplicative thresholds of invented rules. "The threshold character of common space guarantees that use does not define proprietors and that expression-through-space does not define owners of specific space identities, of spaces-as-identities. Struggles for emancipation through commoning, may thus construct an emerging city of thresholds."[129] This way, this kind of non-bounded community is considered to catalyze the emancipation of society, and the practice that creates it is labelled emancipatory commoning. For Stavrides, "Common space, then, cannot be reduced to a place, although acts of commoning unfold in specific places and times, indeed take place. Common space needs to radiate in order to exist as a potential force and result of commoning.

125 Thijs Lijster, *Community, Commons, Common Sense | Article | Social Inclusion*, February 22, 2022.
126 De Angelis, *Omnia Sunt Communia: On the Commons and the Transformation to Postcapitalism*, 231.
127 Stavrides, *Common Space: The City as Commons*, 107.
128 Stavros Stavrides, *Towards the City of Thresholds* (professionaldreamers, 2010).
129 Stavrides, "Common Space Creation: Can Architecture Help? (Towards a Provisional Manifesto)."

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Common space needs to include newcomers, and this objective reconfigures it incessantly as a network of contested, reinterpreted, and re-evaluated spatial relations."[130]

In relation to forms of organization, discussions about internal hierarchy versus horizontality are central. In principle, hierarchical forms of community organization are considered problematic, especially in leftist rhetoric. This vital principle, which aims for organizational horizontality, rejects hierarchy and refuses the reproduction of asymmetric power relations within the commoning process and the communities of commoners. However, authors like Harvey and Federici have shown their skepticism about the thesis of horizontality at all costs. Harvey calls this "anti-hierarchical obsession" unrealistic and "a fetishism of organizational preference (pure horizontality, for example) all too often stands in the way of exploring appropriate and effective solutions."[131]

The concept of conviviality has often been invoked in discussions of the commons to describe the social ethos that underpins cooperative forms of life, drawing most prominently on Ivan Illich's conception of convivial societies as those organized around autonomous, interdependent, and non-commodified relations.[132] Conviviality, for Illich, is a concept that gives individuals the freedom to determine their own lives within a community setting. For Illich, the commons are tangible and intangible resources that provide the fundamental context for conviviality to exist, enabling members of a community to access natural resources, as well as knowledge, culture, and information. Privatization, commodification, or control of these resources by centralized institutions will erode conviviality, according to Illich.[133]

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130 Stavrides, *Common Space: The City as Commons*, 262.

131 Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*, 40:70. Harvey argues that even the Zapatistas' movement, which is referred to as the most successful case of political autonomy, is "often falsely represented as being totally non-hierarchical and 'horizontalist' in their organizational structure, … do make decisions through democratically selected delegates and officers." Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*, 40:125..

132 Avermaete, "Constructing the Commons: Towards Another Architectural Theory of the City?"; Alex Axinte and Doina Petrescu, "Commoning 'Bucla' (the Loop) With Conviviality. Ephemeral Spaces and Informal Practices in Support of Urban Commons in the Post-Socialist City," *Ephemeral Built Not to Last.*, studies in History and Theory of Architecture, vol. 10 (2022): 145–58; Moritz Hofstetter et al., "Conviviality Under Pressure of Market-Modernist Expertocracy: The Case of Water Commons in Rural Switzerland," *International Journal of the Commons* 17, no. 1 (2023): 375–89; Andrea Vetter and Matthias Fersterer, "Conviviality and Commoning," in *Routledge Handbook of Degrowth*, 1st ed., by Anitra Nelson (Routledge, 2025).

133 Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality* (Fontana/Collins, 1975); While conviviality appears to be a promising framework for pursuing aspirations on commoning, the vision of Illich, especially in relation to his work on "vernacular gender," has been criticized to be essentializing of gender roles, evoking "a nostalgic pre capitalist world where men and women had their separate but equal domains, respected one another, and lived in harmony with the natural world." bell hooks, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*, 1st paperback ed, An Owl Book (Henry Holt, 1996), 245.

For conviviality to be retaken as a concept in our contemporary setting requires conscious consideration to avoid romanticizing tradition, naturalizing gender differences, and being aware of hierarchies and systemic forms of domination.[134]

As Silvia Federici argues in her work, the subjugation of women stems from an interaction of factors such as patriarchy, capitalism, and colonialism. The substantial change in work relations during the transition from feudalism to capitalism, enclosure, and privatization of the common lands that led to the dispossession of peasant communities, influenced the shrinkage or the loss of commoning practices, leaving women dependent on waged labor for their survival and life arrangement.[135] At the same time, she maintains that care, reproductive labor, and exploitation of women's bodies are still what the capitalist system relies on to function. This labor is a substantial resource but external to the capital, as it does not produce commodities and is therefore invisible to the system.[136]

Another kind of skepticism over the neo-communalist trend stems from its limited impact, considered as a sort of "bio-regionalism" that offers an escape from capitalism, as "based on local connections and solidarities at the levels of the village, the neighborhood, and the city."[137] While recognizing the "many virtues to these various neocommunalistic proposals," Dardot and Laval do not find "these organizational forms will be sufficient, on their own, to create the politics of the common."[138] The critique goes that convivial, place-based forms of sociality can solidify into closed, identity-bound communities that conflict with more open-ended and instituting understandings of the common.

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134 Gloria Bowles, "Beyond the Backlash : A Feminist Critique of Ivan Illich's Theory of Gender," *Feminist Issue*, 1983, 3–6; Arlie Hochschild, "Illich: The Ideologue in Scientist's Clothing," *Feminist Issues*, 1983.; See also Hochschild, A. R. (1983, January 30). Ivan Illich: Vive la Difference! *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/1983/01/30/books/ivan-illich-vive-la-difference.html

135 Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*, Second, revised edition (Autonomedia, 2004); Silvia Federici, *Patriarchy of the Wage: Notes on Marx, Gender, and Feminism* (PM Press/Spectre, 2021).

136 Federici, *Re-Enchanting the World. Feminism and the Politics of the Commons;* Federici, *Patriarchy of the Wage: Notes on Marx, Gender, and Feminism.*

137 Dardot and Laval, *Common: On Revolution in the 21st Century*, 348.

138 Dardot and Laval write: "Through a kind of revival of the Franciscan approach, these neocommunalisms seem to necessitate an almost spontaneous and widespread ethical conversion to post-capitalist ideology. This shortcoming is similar, in our view, to other leftist appeals that want to be radical, but which see no way out of capitalism except through a general retreat "out of power," through a kind of subtraction from domination." See Dardot and Laval, *Common: On Revolution in the 21st Century*, 348.

In the commoning practices I studied for this dissertation, as discussed in Part 3, women assume central positions without claiming or receiving recognition for their crucial roles. Although not used as an analytical tool, conviviality remains a significant point of reflection, as a precursor to my exploration of the role of kin-making relations within these spaces, a theme to be further elaborated in the theoretical discussion throughout this dissertation. The gender perspective, along with race, class, and geographic perspectives, adds a critical dimension to the discourse on conviviality. However, emancipatory rhetoric is not left without critique either, especially from the perspective of the marginalized.

As a critique of the theoretical foundations of such emancipatory rhetoric, postcolonial/decolonial/anti-colonial scholars point out that these narratives frequently reproduce assumptions about linear progress, Eurocentric models of emancipation, and the inevitability of certain political trajectories, framed in teleological or universalist terms. For example, the cultural theorists Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, in their work on the (under)commons, reject "political futurity" altogether as problematic and oppose managed or governed commons, a position that destabilizes the strands of commons theory. For them, the (under)commons are already here, already practiced, already excessive, and unmanageable. Instead of emancipatory, they emphasize that the undercommons are fugitive rather than free, disorderly rather than governed, grounded in mutual dependence rather than framed as collective rights, unrepresentable and unaccountable to normative political frameworks. For them, the rhetoric of emancipation can itself be a form of capture.[139] Similarly, the anthropologist Anna Tsing writes of *latent commons* "in two senses: first, while ubiquitous, we rarely notice them, and, second, they are undeveloped." She gives the characterizations of these latent commons as "not exclusively human enclaves," as "not good for everyone," as "not institutionalizing well […] moving in law's interstices," and, for her, "latent commons cannot redeem us." She continues: "Some radical thinkers hope that progress will lead us to a redemptive and utopian commons. In contrast, the latent commons is here and now, amidst the trouble. And humans are never fully in control."[140] This way, Anna Tsing describes forms of collaborative life that exist without being formalized, do not announce themselves as political programs, and often emerge in precarious environments, often in capitalist ruins.

139 Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*.
140 Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World. On Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton University Press, 2021), 255.

The language of emancipation is already known to be problematic in contexts like Albania, which had a harsh experience of state socialism that claimed to emancipate the population. The community itself, therefore, can be a place of both conservative and emancipatory capture mechanisms. It can direct movement toward an ideal of collective autonomy of required normative consensus and political intentionality, generating a specific kind of transformed subject. This again becomes the experience of liminality, which has been a constant problematic condition of transition in Albania during state socialism and in its aftermath.[141] The rhetoric of transition and liminality will be elaborated further in relation to the Albanian context in Chapter 4.

This way, the theoretical orientation concerning the boundaries and forms of community organization in relation to commoning lies in a tension between a range of forms, from customary bonds to emancipatory claims and beyond. A variety of commoning practices is found and constructed across various socio-political geographies and cultures, all of which merit attention. They can simultaneously draw on inherited forms of kin relations and situated historical legacies, but also be mobilized as part of political projects that seek to articulate new forms of collective agency. In this sense, the analysis of commoning must remain open to ambivalence.[142] Communities cannot be thought of only as agents of radical reconfiguration, but also as reproducers and re-interpreters of inherited forms of livelihood, and these two aspects do not necessarily have to be mutually exclusive. Community boundaries are continually reproduced through everyday negotiations that do not always align with the ambitions of critical political theories. The challenge, then, is to understand commoning in a way that does not already presume its trajectory but instead places its practices as always already situated in grounded, multiple, and ambivalent intertwined histories, affects, and material spatial manifestations. This is how I recognized commoning in Albania, in a situation in which these practices are exercised as fragmented collectives in denial of their collectivism, without the emancipatory ambition, and not aiming to materialize a political ideal per se. However, they manifest vital and tacit forms of spatial politics in everyday life. Kinship, or kin-making, as mentioned before and as will be elaborated in the next section, is the glue of these commons.

141 Angelos Varvarousis, *Liminal Commons: Modern Rituals of Transition in Greece*, 1st ed., In Common (Bloomsbury, 2022).
142 Enright and Rossi, "Ambivalence of the Urban Commons."

2.3 Tracing Kinship's Flight from Nature/ Culture to Thinking Spatial Practice

> The specific quality of kinship … is "mutuality of being": kinfolk are persons who participate intrinsically in each other's existence; they are members of one another. … emotionally and symbolically live each other's lives and die each other's deaths.
>
> Marshall Sahlins, What Kinship Is-And Is Not (The University of Chicago Press, 2013), ix.

Similar to the concept of the commons, the idea of kinship navigates among academic debates.[143] Kinship has held a central position in social and cultural anthropology as both a theoretical and analytical tool of investigation and categorization. Therefore, anthropology has had exclusivity on the concept of kinship, as "the basic discipline of the subject."[144] However, the engagement of anthropology with the notion of kinship was problematized and deconstructed in the late 1960s, only to be taken up again in fields such as postcolonial studies, gender studies, and even posthumanism. This reclaiming occurred as a paradigmatic shift of kinship theory from an evolutionist, functionalist, structuralist, universalist, and deterministic theory to a more processual, generative, and relational realm.[145]

143 Carsten, *After Kinship*; Franklin and McKinnon, *Relative Values*; Maurice Godelier, *The Metamorphoses of Kinship*, 1. publ. in Engl, trans. Nora Scott (Verso, 2011); Joanna Overing et al., "Kinship in Anthropology," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences (Second Edition)*, ed. James D. Wright (Elsevier, 2015).

144 In the 19th century, Lewis Henry Morgan, considered to be the father of kinship studies, introduced his empirical ethnography and kinship classifications in his works "Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family" (1871) and "Ancient Society" (1877). His work laid the ground for kinship theory. In his evolutionary narrative and descent theory, he maintained that kinship systems and family structures progress in stages, from savagery to barbarism to the ultimate stage of civilization. He classified societies based on these stages. This theory was influential to many, including Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx, in sustaining their theory of historical materialism. Certainly, Morgan's unilinear evolutionary model was further considered ethnocentric, imposing a Western notion of development while ignoring historical contingencies, cultural diversity, and complexity, reducing all of this to a single evolutionary scale. See also Robin Fox, *Kinship and Marriage: An Anthropological Perspective*., vol. 3 (Penguin Books, 1967); Franklin and McKinnon, *Relative Values.*

145 Carsten, *After Kinship*; Jane Collier and Sylvia Yanagisako, *Gender and Kinship: Essays Toward a Unified Analysis* (Stanford University Press, 1990); James D. Faubion, "Kinship Is Dead. Long Live Kinship. *A Review Article*," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 38, no. 1 (1996): 67–91; Franklin and McKinnon, *Relative Values*; Overing et al., "Kinship in Anthropology"; Michael G. Peletz, *Kinship Studies in Late Twentieth-Century Anthropology*, 1995; Marilyn Strathern, *Reproducing the Future: Essays on Anthropology Kinship and the New Reproductive Technologies* (Manchester University Press, 1992); Sylvia Yanagisako and Carol Delaney, *Naturalizing Power: Essays in Feminist Cultural Analysis* (Routledge, 1995).

2.3.1 Unmaking and Remaking Kinship Theory: A Brief Navigation through Discourses

The concept of kinship evolved toward structural functionalism in the 20th century, along two major British and French traditions of anthropology. The British social anthropological tradition developed the descent theory of kinship, examining lineage kinship in small-scale societies in non-Western contexts, where kinship was seen as the basis for social continuity in predominantly African stateless societies that lacked officially recognized institutions. Kinship was considered the basic organizational institution for these societies.[146]

The French tradition in kinship theory is largely attributed to the influential anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. While the descent theory developed in the British tradition emphasized kinship as lineage-based and biologically determined, Lévi-Strauss shifted the focus toward cultural analysis, developing the alliance theory of kinship. His structuralist approach to kinship transformed the field and is often viewed as marking the *transition to culture* in kinship studies. Lévi-Strauss's perspective, deeply influenced by Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistics, revealed that kinship systems are not arbitrary but governed by underlying logical principles that distribute rights and obligations and regulate the division of labor, property transmission, and social status. Central to Lévi-Strauss's work is the *incest taboo*, viewed as a marker of the boundary between nature and culture. His alliance theory argued that kinship is constructed not only through unilineal descent but also through mechanisms such as marriage and the exchange of women.[147]

146 The most notable works developed in this tradition include Bronislaw Malinowski's functionalism (1930) and Radcliffe-Brown's structural-functionalism (1952). Within this strand, Meyer Foster made a shift by identifying two domains of kinship: the domestic domain, which included the nuclear family, otherwise coined as the *axiom of amity*; and the politico-jural domain, which included wider kinship relations as part of broader structures of society to regulate political, legal, and economic relationships. Susan McKinnon, "Doing and Being: Process, Essence, and Hierarchy in Making Kin," in *The Routledge Companion to Anthropology*, ed. Coleman et al. (Routledge, 2017); Overing et al., "Kinship in Anthropology"; Godelier, *The Metamorphoses of Kinship*, 1. publ. in Engl, trans. Scott..

147 Considering the logic of the social order, Lévi-Strauss frames marriage as a system of exchange and reciprocity, as a societal institution that governs relationships between groups rather than just individuals. In *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949), he identified two distinct kinds of kinship structures: the elementary and the *complex* systems. The elementary system defined by *positive marriage rules* would specify categories of permissible spouses and rules of endogamy and exogamy that govern marrying within or outside one's kin group. These systems were based on the principle of reciprocity and alliance through the exchange of women. In contrast, the complex systems defined as the *negative marriage rules* would prescribe unmarriageable conditions, often influenced by factors such as wealth, class, or social status. In his analysis, Lévi-Strauss distinguished between *restricted exchange* and *generalized exchange* in marriage systems. Generalized exchange involves the reciprocal exchange of women between two groups, fostering close, tight, and direct alliances between them. Whereas the generalized exchange, on the other hand, involves an asymmetric exchange and therefore a broader network of alliances that extends to more than two groups. See Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (Boston : Beacon Press, 1969).

Women were portrayed as the *supreme gifts*, essential for the procreation and reproduction of a group and of society at large. While the structuralist work of Lévi-Strauss made a seminal contribution to the study of kinship, it faced feminist critiques because of its language and terminology, which often objectified women and portrayed them as lacking agency.[148]

A third major current in kinship studies emerged in North America, inheriting but also departing from the evolutionary framework of Lewis Henry Morgan.[149] Franz Boas and his students, Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead, rejected Morgan's unilinear evolutionism, making an influential turn toward historical particularism and emphasizing that cultures develop through unique historical trajectories.[150] This shift redirected attention from universal stages to cultural relativism, focusing on language, symbols, and traditions. David Schneider went further in arguing against the universality and structuralist understanding of kinship. For him, the central problem with how anthropologists had studied kinship so far was the projection of their Western view of kinship onto the non-Western cultures they studied. They carried these dual notions of kinship, biological and cultural, assuming that all societies must share a fundamental understanding of kinship rooted in their biogenetic connections and cultural symbolic interpretations.[151] This moment marked what is known in anthropology as the *death of kinship*.

148 As Janet Carsten highlights, "women were unproblematically lumped with a set of devalued terms" when "in many societies marriage cannot be considered an exchange between men" and "women take an active part in arranging marriages, and many even take a leading role in organizing them." See Carsten, *After Kinship*, 13.

149 The North American Tradition is considered a strand on its own because it looked into other aboriginal and indigenous cultures to study kinship compared to the previous British and French traditions. While the British tradition looked into Africa, Oceania, and South Asia, the French looked into Amazonia, Africa, and Southeast Asia, and the North American to North America, the Pacific Islands, and Latin America. Shifting geographies was imperative to shifting paradigms in kinship studies, to the point of deconstructing the entire field and, afterwards, reformulating new directions.

150 Overing et al., "Kinship in Anthropology."

151 For Schneider, as argued in his major book publication *A Critique of the Study of Kinship*, kinship is a cultural construct and makes no sense to use it as a cross-cultural analytical tool to look for variations in different societies. David M. Schneider, *A Critique of the Study of Kinship* (University of Michigan Press, 1984), https://press.umich.edu/Books/A/A-Critique-of-the-Study-of-Kinship. For example, in his fieldwork in Yap, Micronesia, Schneider noticed that kinship among Yapese people did not neatly align with the Western distinction between *biological* and *cultural*, but rather with shared practices, residence, and obligations. He points out the distorted operation that anthropologists had conducted when imposing a biologically-based interpretation of kinship onto such societies, distorting the understanding of local practices and beliefs. David M. Schneider, "Yap Kinship Terminology and Kin Groups," *American Anthropologist* 55, no. 2 (1953): 215–36; Overing et al., "Kinship in Anthropology."

Although Schneider's critique shook the field of kinship studies in the 1960s, it still fell short of incorporating perspectives of gender and power into its analysis of kinship. Besides Schneider's arguments, the groundbreaking discussions of the feminist and postcolonial movements of the late 1960s also influenced the reformulation of a *new kinship theory*. Feminist analyses drew attention to how kinship theories had treated social arrangements, particularly those concerning sexuality, marriage, and gender hierarchy, as if they were biological facts, opening up more space toward reflexive and hermeneutical approaches.[152] Feminist scholars emphasized the highly normative terms of previous traditions in kinship studies, which essentialized and naturalized gender roles, perpetuating the idea that women lack political agency and operate solely in a confined domestic domain.[153] They pointed out that the domestic sphere was often overlooked as a subject of study, leaving women and what was considered the affective aspect of kin groups outside of the anthropological scientific interest. Furthermore, they challenged the widely held view of kinship having a minor role in Western societies, confined mainly to the nuclear family and often seen as detached from political, economic, and religious spheres.[154] Kinship in Europe was investigated for its "instrumental aspects," such as "in property relations, inheritance patterns and economic exchanges."[155] The prevailing assumption so far was that, while the West had established states and institutions, the rest of the world operated in kinship-based societies.

152 Franklin and McKinnon, *Relative Values*, 3.

153 For instance, in 1975, Gayle Rubin argued that, by far, the understanding of both gender and kinship was based on *natural facts*. In her essay *The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex*, Rubin critiques traditional kinship theories for their emphasis on heteronormative marriage and the regulation of women's sexuality. She critiques the tendency to treat certain social constructs, such as gender roles and sexual norms within kinship systems, as if they were natural or biologically determined. Franklin and McKinnon, *Relative Values*; Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (Monthly Review Press, 1975).

154 Carsten, *After Kinship*.

155 Carsten, *After Kinship*, 14.

The idea of kinship was also shaken by the emergence of new reproductive technologies, marking the start of an era of destabilizing the clear distinction between nature and culture. Marilyn Strathern argued that nature should be understood as a contested and negotiated terrain.[156] Yanagisako and Delaney, furthermore, importantly advanced the critique that challenges the naturalization of power.[157] They maintain that power relations are naturalized because they are made to appear inevitable and universal, thereby limiting the possibilities for change in the given, socially constructed order.[158] Certainly, these new directions in kinship studies were not met without opposition.[159] Others like Carsten and Weber have pointed to the process of the transformation of kinship while also emphasizing that kinship continues to be significant, albeit its importance has become more related to pragmatic and mundane everyday livelihood practices.[160]

156 See Marilyn Strathern, *After Nature: Anthropological Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 1992); Strathern, *Reproducing the Future: Essays on Anthropology Kinship and the New Reproductive Technologies*. Also, in her book *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia*, she explores the cultural construction of kinship and gender in Melanesian societies. She works with the concept of personhood and argues that, in this society, persons are understood as *dividuals* rather than individuals. This means that a person is not seen as an autonomous, bounded entity, as in Western thought, but rather as composed of multiple relational and social "parts" derived from their relationships with others. People are constituted through exchanges and their social connections, which shape their identity and agency. See Marilyn Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia* (University of California Press, 1988).

157 Yanagisako and Delaney, *Naturalizing Power: Essays in Feminist Cultural Analysis*.

158 Collier and Yanagisako, *Gender and Kinship: Essays Toward a Unified Analysis*; Yanagisako and Delaney, *Naturalizing Power: Essays in Feminist Cultural Analysis*.

159 Authors such as Robert Parkin and Linda Stone continue to defend the "distinction between biological and social facts," advocating a "return to more traditional approaches to kinship." See Franklin and McKinnon, *Relative Values*, 20. Also, Maurice Godelier seeks to provide a more nuanced account by rejecting the idea that kinship can be reduced to biological facts while stressing that biology remains an inescapable reference point in all human societies. He emphasizes the metamorphoses of kinship and rejects the evolutionist viewpoint that labels "primitive societies" as "kin-based," and points out that in the "context of the fast-growing globalization of the capitalist economy … the process of the overall reproduction of each local society rests less and less on that society's own bases," thereby diminishing the relevance of kinship relations. See Godelier, *The Metamorphoses of Kinship*, 1. publ. in Engl, trans. Scott, 22.

160 Carsten, *After Kinship*; Florence Weber, *Penser la parenté aujourd'hui. La force du quotidien*, Sciences sociales (Rue d'Ulm, 2013).

Echoing the processual new understandings of kinship from "kinship as being" to "kinship as doing,"[161] the concept of *relatedness*, introduced by Janet Carsten, lays out a framework for relationships as dynamic and constructed rather than biologically static or culturally predetermined. Instead of treating kinship as a granted natural given, her approach focuses on how it is actively created through both bodily practices and symbolic actions.[162] She demonstrates how kinship is constructed and reinforced through everyday practices, including cohabitation, food-sharing such as rice, and breastfeeding.[163]

Posthumanist and feminist thinkers expand the idea of "making kin" beyond mere human relationships.[164] The influential thinker Donna Haraway calls for "making kin, not babies," proposing multispecies alliances as a response to the ecological planetary crises.[165] Her similarly stimulating concept of "odd-kin" and her fabulations stories of "the children of compost" depict relationality across species and environments, framing kinship as a practice of becoming-with in sympoiesis, rather than a genealogical societal mechanism.[166]

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161 McKinnon, "Doing and Being: Process, Essence, and Hierarchy in Making Kin."

162 Carsten, based on her ethnographic research among the Malay villagers of Langkawi, published in her influential book *The Heat Of the Hearth: The Process Of Kinship In A Malay Fishing Community* (Oxford University Press, 1997).

163 More specifically, Carsten describes how breastmilk is understood not only as nourishment but also as a shared bodily substance that creates lasting ties between a mother and her child, as well as among siblings who are breastfed by the same woman. She observed this practice in Langkawi, where she noticed that kinship is made through shared substances, not only breast milk but also food, which shapes the body and defines relationships. Carsten's discussion of breastfeeding highlights the processual nature of relatedness (beyond DNA), as it transforms a newborn into a social being connected to others through acts of nurture. See Carsten, *The Heat Of the Hearth*, 90.

164 Adele E. Clarke and Donna Haraway, eds., *Making Kin Not Population* (Prickly Paradigm Press, 2018); Marilyn Strathern et al., "Forum on Making Kin Not Population: Reconceiving Generations," *Feminist Studies* 45, no. 1 (2019): 159.

165 This provocation has generated significant debate, particularly among Indigenous scholars and critical race theorists, who argue that the framework of (over)population risks reducing environmental responsibility to individualized reproductive choices. They contend that questions of environmental justice must instead be redirected toward the structural conditions that shape life and reproduction, such as ongoing histories of colonialism/coloniality, racialization, gendered violence, class inequality, and other systemic injustices, instead of being framed as a matter of personal decision-making about whether to have children. See e.g. Katharine Dow and Janelle Lamoreaux, "Situated Kinmaking and the Population 'Problem," *Environmental Humanities* 12, no. 2 (2020): 475–91.

166 Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene.*

Influenced by a Deleuzian–Guattarian ontology of immanence, several authors participate in the ontological turn, in which life unfolds on a continuous plane of relations and beings.[167] For example, for Tim Ingold, the *relational model* encompasses a constitutional capacity in which entities (human and non-human) do not pre-exist their interactions but emerge through ongoing relational processes.[168] This way, kin relations are understood as the patterning of life, in which humans, non-humans, and materials mutually constitute one another through movement, dwelling, and practical engagement with the world. For Ingold, substances are not merely vehicles for social relations, as in Carsten's view, but are part of a continuously unfolding mesh of life, through which humans and materials co-emerge. The "meshwork of relationships" is not a pre-given genealogical social structure, but rather aligns with a process of continuous becoming, sustained through ongoing engagement with both social and material worlds.[169] In this sense, authors like Ingold and Haraway further radicalize contemporary kinship theory by extending the processual and performative understandings of relationality beyond the human, as emerging in relation to the environment, at the core of an ecology of life, and as a situated response to planetary crises. This resonates with the concept of *kincentric ecology*, a concept coined by Enrique Salmón, which emphasizes the indigenous understanding of kin as the interconnectedness of all life forms, where humans see their surroundings as kin and recognize their mutual roles in sustaining life.[170]

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167 Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*; Isabelle Stengers, "Introductory Notes on an Ecology of Practices," *Cultural Studies Review* 11, no. 1 (2013): 183–96; Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World. On Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins.*

168 Tim Ingold is critical of the term 'relatedness' coined by Janet Carsten. He argues that it still refers to connections among pre-existing individuals. See Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*, 144–51. However, the terms relatedness and relational are often used interchangeably by several authors. See, for example, Lauren Tynan, "What Is Relationality? Indigenous Knowledges, Practices and Responsibilities with Kin," *Cultural Geographies* 28, no. 4 (2021): 597–610. Carsten herself uses the terms 'relationality' and 'relatedness' differently. 'Relationality' refers to the broader concept of how relationships are understood, formed, and maintained, often through flows and transfers of substances, and how these processes shape social connections and meanings. On the other hand, 'relatedness' is used more specifically to describe the connections or ties between individuals, often in the context of kinship and familial bonds. While the terms are interconnected, 'relationality' encompasses a wider scope of social and symbolic dynamics, whereas 'relatedness' focuses on the specific connections between people.

169 Carsten's notion of relatedness similarly departs from fixed genealogical models, offering an ethnographically grounded account of kin-making that could be considered to anticipate later posthumanist approaches, even if it is not explicitly framed in philosophical terms. See Janet Carsten, "Substance and Relationality: Blood in Contexts," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 40, no. 1 (2011): 19–35; Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*; Ingold, *Being Alive*.

170 Enrique Salmón, "Kincentric Ecology: Indigenous Perceptions of the Human-Nature Relationship," *Ecological Applications* 10, no. 5 (2000): 1327–32; Gavin Van Horn et al., eds., *Kinship: Belonging In a World Of Relations*, vols. 1–5, Kinship: Belonging In a World Of Relations (Center for Humans and Nature, 2021).

All the contributions traced above mark a significant theoretical shift: from *kinship* as a naturalized universal system to *kin-making* or *making kin* as relational, and politically charged, encompassing human and more-than-human worlds, materials, and environments. This way, theoretically embedded in a wide range of constructed and deconstructed discussions that transgress multiple fields and currents, kin-making, after all, entails a practical, everyday aspect that opens new possibilities for interpretation. As generative practices, concepts of relatedness and relationality thereby open space for practical and theoretical imaginaries that can be woven into a discourse on the nexus between kinship relations and spatial formations, where architecture and the urban environment can be considered mechanisms of kin-making. Carsten's focus on practice, and Ingold's and Haraway's ontologies, together with discourses on commoning, offer a milieu for examining the material and social work of creating bonds through care, sharing, and proximity. Combining these insights opens a way of thinking about how these bonds co-constitute urban space itself as an emergent outcome of relational practices. By centering situated observations of space, we can conceptualize kin-making and commoning as both socially enacted and ontologically generative processes that simultaneously influence the production of persons, communal relations, and spaces.

2.3.2 Spatialities of Everyday Practical Kin-making

As can be understood from the above section, kinship theory was not entirely absent, but it was only sporadically present in studies of the city and urbanities. The study of kinship usually meant looking into exoticized and rural societies. In urban contexts, kinship research was often limited to migrant or diasporic communities, perceived as the closest approximation of spaces where kinship might be relevant within the city.[171] However, studies in social-cultural anthropology and human geography are rethinking the concept of kinship in a revised manner, in contrast to how the idea had been used for decades, imposed on other non-Western societies, or applied only to rural conditions and migrant neighborhoods in the West.[172]

171 Andrikopoulos, "Kinship Theory and Migration Studies."
172 Pfirsch and Araos, "Urban Kinships: Everyday Kinship and the Making of the City."

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The Southern turn in urban studies challenges the idea that modernization and urbanization inevitably destroy kinship, reducing it to the nuclear family. Several studies from the 1950s have already shown that urban kinship is present and very relevant in Western cities as well.[173] Initially, it was observed that the need for mutual assistance was more pronounced in working-class families due to economic constraints. However, further sociological and demographic studies reveal that kinship ties are present not only in working-class or ethnic-migrant neighborhoods but also in middle-class neighborhoods in Western cities. In this context, urban kinship is not so much about extended families living in the same household, but rather about nuclear families living close to their extended families. Urban kinship, therefore, plays a more significant role in city life than is commonly believed. "The sharing of everyday life creates a kinship not rooted in filiation or alliance, but in help with no expectations in return, pursuing a common cause, and sharing resources."[174]

In contrast to the prevailing nuclearization hypothesis, as Pfirsch and Araos sustain, the contemporary urban conditions, with their diverse housing forms, dense mobility networks, pervasive digital connectivity, and multiculturalism, create conditions for flexible living arrangements, enabling people to remain simultaneously "near" and "far" from their kin. Rather than disappearing, kinship in cities becomes subject to continuous spatial renegotiation and reinvention. However, "when kinship relationships are analyzed in the study of urban life, they are often viewed as a residual category and conceptualized in negative terms, as unspecified 'extra-household' or 'extra-family' kin. It is necessary to build new concepts that capture the operational units of everyday kinship in contemporary cities."[175]

The overlooking of the concept of kinship in urban studies of Western cities points out implications of policies, design, and urban development models, which are often transferred to the rest of the world as universal.[176] This resonates with what is currently happening in Albanian society, where the proclaimed progress and development wipe out local characteristics and disregard the agency of communities in city-making, including the privatization and enclosure of the commons and the possibility of making kin. As discussed earlier, the naturalizing of power as the "order of things" leads us to reproducing social inequalities which are "embedded in symbolic systems" and "elaborated through contextualized material practices."[177]

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173 Andrikopoulos, "Kinship Theory and Migration Studies"; Pfirsch and Araos, "Urban Kinships: Everyday Kinship and the Making of the City."

174 Weber, *Penser la parenté aujourd'hui. La force du quotidien*, 8; Pfirsch and Araos, "Urban Kinships: Everyday Kinship and the Making of the City."

175 Pfirsch and Araos, "Urban Kinships: Everyday Kinship and the Making of the City."

176 Pfirsch and Araos, "Urban Kinships: Everyday Kinship and the Making of the City."

177 Yanagisako and Delaney, *Naturalizing Power: Essays in Feminist Cultural Analysis.*

On the other hand, theories of the commons have paid little attention to the idea of kinship, perhaps partly due to the problematic colonial legacy of this concept within anthropology and its association with conservative, tradition-bound frameworks; an image seemingly misaligned with the forward-looking, emancipatory discourse of urban commons theory. The primary focus of the commons theory, as explained in the first part of this chapter, is to look forward, thereby projecting a post-capitalist future that activates the agency of the commons and commoning practices. Although there is a current of radical historiography within the theory of the commons that examines how modernization and capitalism have contributed to de-commoning, debates over kin ties are still overlooked. However, the renewed interest in kinship through a processual and relational lens, focusing on its practical manifestations in everyday life, creates opportunities to identify commonalities with debates on urban commons.

Practical and everyday kinship focuses on how relationships function in practice. These are support relations of caregiving (such as cooking, shared child-rearing practices, or emotional labor), of shared responsibility (shared economic or social responsibilities), often where formal kinship is absent or insufficient, or where the culture of kin-making goes beyond the limitations of the nuclear family. This shift in interest toward practical kinship makes it possible to bridge the concepts of kin-making and commoning, as they share clear observable connections. This way, the bridging of the active concepts of commoning and kin-making has the potential to look beyond the West-Rest dichotomy and to embrace practical kin-making as one of the factors influencing urban commoning. Every day, kin-making practices underpin the relational fabric that enables commoning practices. Practical, everyday kinship can facilitate commoning by creating bonds of trust and reciprocity necessary for collective management and the sharing of resources. By recognizing practical kin-making as a processual rather than solely genealogical formation, and by including it in the broader range of relationalities that sustain practices of commoning, it becomes evident that kincommoning is not an exceptional or marginal phenomenon but a dynamic intrinsic to every practice of commoning, with its celebrated trustful and supportive aspects, as well as its more problematic aspects. This way, Maria Mies's motto, "no commons without a community," can be extended to *there is no community without kin-making*, which refers to a processual understanding of kin-making.[178]

178 Maria Mies, "No Commons without a Community," *Community Development Journal* 49, no. suppl_1 (2014): 106–17.

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In Carsten's work, the *hearth* symbolizes the domestic space of the home where rice is prepared and eaten, actively creating kin ties. Beyond the Levi Strauss theory of House Society, where property rather than biology is seen as society's organizing principle, other anthropologists have seen in the house, but also food, trees, land, graveyard, and even oral memories, documents, and photographs as the foci where kinship is materialized.[179] In architectural spatialities where commoning practices unfold, spaces such as kitchens, dining rooms, and living areas can be conceptualized as places of kin-making. Similarly, as noted, commoning practices of construction foster the same function of creating bonds and consolidating ties. These practices do not go through thorough planning and management. On the contrary, these practices are entangled with life itself, as Tim Ingold would have noticed, the material of space production is entangled with the material of life.[180] They are latent commons, as Anna Tsing would have artfully noted them.[181]

Similarly, beyond dwelling settings, urban space is not a neutral, pre-existing container but is produced through social practices, symbols, and material conditions. It is continually produced and reproduced through the interplay of spatial practice (everyday actions), representations of space (plans, designs), and representational spaces (symbolic meanings).[182] Kin-making, while no longer considered such, is an active part of these processes.

179 Janet Carsten, "Houses in Langkawi: Stable Structures or Mobile Homes?" in *About the House*, 1st ed., ed. Janet Carsten and Stephen Hugh-Jones (Cambridge University Press, 1995); Janet Carsten and Stephen Hugh-Jones, *About the House: Lévi-Strauss and Beyond* (Cambridge University Press, 1995); McKinnon, "Doing and Being: Process, Essence, and Hierarchy in Making Kin."
180 Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*.
181 Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World. On Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*.
182 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*.

2.4 Toward New Understandings of Situated Relational Spatialities

In this chapter, I explored the various understandings of the two concepts of commons/commoning and kinship/kin-making across different disciplinary and historical contexts. While doing this, I paid particular attention to how and when these concepts are present or absent in discursive and material practices of creating urban and architectural space. What became clear from this exploration is that both concepts sit on unstable ground, shifting from structural and functional interpretations toward more relational, processual, and politically charged meanings. It also became clear that limited attention is given to their intersection, even though kin-making and commoning are often entangled in everyday practices. Their relationship remains underexplored in discussions of how urban spaces are claimed, produced, sustained, transformed, and even defended.

This gap suggests a renewed perspective that considers these two concepts as entangled and influential in their spatial and material manifestations. Kin-making everyday practices, configured in regimes of care, reciprocity, proximity, and mutual obligations, inform how spaces are occupied, inhabited, and organized. Commoning practices are, in turn, continuously affected, constituted through, and even unsettled by kin-making relations. When considered together, they reveal relational grounds that influence spatial arrangements in ways that destabilize dominant narratives and framings of urban governance, informality, or urban development. In this sense, attending to kin-making and commoning in their interplay, we are able to observe configurations of collective life that do not fit neatly into existing categorizations and taxonomies, yet are central to the everyday production of urban livelihood.

Such a perspective suggests that we pay attention to minor spatial politics that attune to situated forms of relation-making that often operate beneath, alongside, or against institutional and market logics. Thinking in these terms and learning from untold and unnoticed stories unsettle assumptions about what counts as urban order, social organization, or legitimate collective action. It makes it possible to learn through the generative capacities of everyday relations to shape urbanities.

These reflections also reposition the trajectory of the dissertation itself. My initial interest in the role of collectivities in Albanian society across shifting political regimes did not presuppose kinship as a central analytic. It was only through fieldwork in Kombinat, Kamza, and even in the Movement for the Saving of the

National Theater that kinship emerged from practice rather than from theory. Observing how construction, care, maintenance, and forms of collective resistance unfolded in relation to kin ties led me to the theoretical debates discussed in this chapter, not to confirm them but to engage with them, through the experience of Albanian urban realities of deep political transformations across various political regimes.

What was presented in this chapter is therefore less a stable analytical framework than a reflexive ecology of concepts to think with, to borrow from Haraway. The conceptual threads outlined in this chapter, such as kin-making, commoning, relatedness, relationality, and situated spatial practices, serve as a process of situating theoretically from which the fieldwork chapters proceed in the following parts of the dissertation. The empirical materials that follow in Part 3 do not illustrate these concepts. Instead, they challenge, expand, and complicate them, allowing the interplay of kin-making and commoning to surface through the lived urban experiences I engaged with as a researcher.

3 In the Midst

Reflexivity as a Methodological Practice

3.1 Becoming Undisciplined

As detailed in the Introduction to this dissertation, for this study, I engage with two main concepts: commoning and kin-making. I delve into their interplay in the Albanian context across shifting political, economic, and cultural regimes, and theorize these concepts from the standpoint of marginalized places in Albania.

In this chapter, I discuss my methodological journey in this study. Throughout this project, I have continuously reevaluated methodological approaches. This has been a transformative process primarily shaped by the specificities of the Albanian experience concerning the macro and micro politics of collectivity. This included the span from state collectivism as an ideological construct and tool of societal control during totalitarianism on the one hand and fragmented commoning practices within marginalized contexts on the other. By putting the situatedness of the three places I have engaged with in this study at the forefront, I reached a pivotal moment of understanding that each needed a specific way of relational engagement from me as a researcher. As a result, I decided against applying a fixed and consolidated methodology throughout the research. Instead, I opted for an approach that prioritizes an awareness of the need to keep my engagement as a researcher responsive to the specificities of the places of study along the way. This commitment makes my research a situated and reflexive practice.

From the specificity of the Albanian context as being in the margins of Europe, a reality of intertwined affinities with European and Eastern cultural worlds, I considered this work an opportunity to challenge the canonical knowledge

production tradition that, not without harm, has historically reproduced hierarchies of knowledge or even a politics of disappearance.[183] This is because situated knowledge has only been given a marginal place. That is clearly evident in the way current architectural projects and master plans signed by 'starchitects' are operating over the territories that I have studied for this research, where the so-called professional way of knowledge violently erases or renders invisible other ways of collective production of space. Areas that emerge alternatively to the convention of the architectural profession have been labeled as informal, chaotic, illegal, vernacular, or "architecture without architects," and have historically been considered as located outside the canon of architecture. Usually, this naming is done based on what they are not, because of a lack of understanding of these spaces; therefore, there is an immediate need to unlearn these taxonomies and engage with these spaces differently. The theories of the commons and kin-making offer an opportunity to come to a closer understanding of what these places are, not to define them, but to take a first step in acknowledging them.

Recognizing the situated nature of knowledge requires a problematization of epistemological hierarchies, which therefore requires a methodological approach that allows the noticing of things that have not usually been in the epistemic loop or have been subject to the politics of exclusion and therefore rendered unseen. Hence, epistemologically, this thesis aims to claim space for othered and marginalized situated knowledge left outside the canonical radar, yet valuable for destabilizing a historically consolidated knowledge-power order. This experience resonates with an entire body of scholarship coming from critical, feminist, post-, and decolonial studies.

For example, my work advocates cultivating situated knowledge, as suggested by Donna Haraway, and underscores the importance of epistemic disobedience, as articulated by Mignolo, for engaging with other forms of knowledge in the margins and interstices of disciplinary confinements.[184] Therefore, as previously explained, this work is transdisciplinary, crossing and going beyond the disciplines of architecture and anthropology, contributing to both and operating in the interstices of these disciplines, and is influenced by currents that cross them from fields such as political and urban studies. Moreover, alongside the discussion of coming out of canonical boundaries, this work sometimes functions as anti-disciplinary, inspired

183 Isabelle Doucet et al., "On Disappearance within Architectural Writing," *Thresholds*, no. 52 (April 2024)
184 For the Argentinian semiotician Walter Mignolo, epistemic disobedience entails a decolonial act of refusing Western-centric and colonial-dominant ways of knowledge production, while centering on marginalized and in-situ perspectives. See Walter D. Mignolo, "Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom," *Theory, Culture & Society* 26, nos. 7–8 (2009): 159–81, in Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*.

by calls for "becoming undisciplined" and elaborated by Christina Sharpe from the standpoint of black scholarship. Sharpe challenges what academia often requires from us: "Despite knowing otherwise, we are often disciplined into thinking through and along lines that reinscribe our own annihilation…."[185] Instead, becoming undisciplined comes as a necessary expression of a process with all its features of uncertainty and incompleteness.[186]

In the context of my research, I embrace this call to produce knowledge otherwise through a more reflexive and situated approach in studying places in the Albanian context. Challenges arise not only because of my personal relationship to my country of origin, which requires extended affective self-reflection, from the fascinatingly unconventional character of these places and the communities that created them, as well as the dynamic power relations at play, including being conscious of my own voice and position as a researcher in an already saturated field. As Celia Lury maintains, for us as researchers to activate social methods, we need to be part of "a broader assemblage or ecology," [187] which I understand as an invitation to immerse oneself in the material and discursive situated relations of the places we study. In my work, therefore, there is no differentiation between discussions of positionality and methodology; they are entangled.

185 Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Duke University Press, 2016), 13.
186 Stefano Harney et al., *All Incomplete* (Minor Compositions, 2021); Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*.
187 Celia Lury et al., "The Social Life of Methods as Epistemic Objects: Interview with Celia Lury," *Revista Diseña*, no. 16 (March 2020): 32–55, https://doi.org/10.7764/disena.16.32-55.

3.2 Immersing in the Field of Relations

To engage with a reality that holds affective significance while maintaining a particular critical stance, I was involved with the Albanian context as practicing an immersion within a *field of relations*. This concept, coined by the 19th-century philosopher William James, was brought back to our contemporary attention by feminist and materialist scholars who argue for a non-conventional way of doing research.[188] In her book *The Minor Gesture*, and specifically in the chapter "Against Method," Erin Manning refers to William James's theory, which envisioned this interplay as a stream of consciousness arising from a field of relations. For James, the field of relations encompasses a phenomenology of various aspects of consciousness, including the relationship between the self and the external world, the connections between different thoughts and perceptions, and the interplay between past experiences and present awareness. The ongoing interactions and relationships between these various elements within the field shape our conscious experience.[189]

For me, the *field of relations* approach emphasizes the interconnectedness of various elements within the Albanian reality, starting from my own experience of being born, raised, and spending adulthood years in the country, as well as having an ongoing immigrant experience outside of it for more than a decade, along with pursuing an academic path inside and outside the country. Immersing myself in the field of relations for me meant not only engaging in human interactions but also, specifically crucial for a study in architecture and urbanism, relating to spatial practices, material environments, and social, political, and cultural conditions.

This approach of immersion, encapsulated by Erin Manning as *starting from the midst*, became particularly resonant for me and my study, as I sought to reconnect with a place considered home, from which, despite my physical distance for a time, I realized I had never truly departed. Returning home to a place that is, and is not,

188 Isabelle Stengers, "William James: An Ethics of Thought?," *Radical Philosophy* 157 (2009): 9–19; John Law, *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research* (Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2004); Erin Manning, "Against Method," in *The Minor Gesture*, Thought in the Act, no. 9 (Duke University Press, 2016), https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107415324.004; Stephanie Springgay and Sarah E. Truman, "On the Need for Methods Beyond Proceduralism: Speculative Middles, (In)Tensions, and Response-Ability in Research," *Qualitative Inquiry* 24, no. 3 (2018): 203–14, https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800417704464; Isabelle Stengers, *Another Science Is Possible: A Manifesto for Slow Science* (Polity Press, 2018); Sarah E. Truman, "Undisciplined: Research-Creation and What It May Offer (Traditional) Qualitative Research Methods," *Qualitative Inquiry* 29, no. 1 (2023): 95–104, https://doi.org/10.1177/10778004221098380.
189 Manning, "Against Method."

the same, through a self that is and is not the same, has been a continuous process of discovery of, in James's terms, the known and the unknown, experimenting with learning and unlearning, of getting closer and distant simultaneously. Recognizing this meant realizing I was starting from the midst, that my study was not a fresh beginning but rather a continuation of encounters from within, a cut through that engages with other flows of consciousness, immersing in the field of relations, not in isolation. As Manning suggests, I aimed to consider these encounters as events, a process of metamodeling in which thinking and making (therefore generating knowledge) merge in research-creation, as a way of enacting *radical empiricism* (as conceptualized by William James). In "Ten Propositions for Research-Creation," Manning details how the hyphenated research-creation experience underscores the importance of the researcher's, artist's, and/or activist's awareness of the spatial and temporal moment when entering the field of relations.[190] This can be stretched further to incorporate architectural and anthropological research-creation practice.

The notion of starting from the midst, in the anarchic mess, suggests letting go of methodological structuring. This liberated me to actually trust my own experience as an insider-outsider, my embodied criticality, and combine it with conventional and not-so-conventional methods employed within the architectural discipline, like architectural and spatial ethnographic research, archival exploration, documentation, activist engagement, critical writing, photography, and ultimately experimenting with filmmaking in a collective setting. More than anything else, the process and topic of commoning became an invitation to cherish encounters and collaborations along the way, as Manning suggests, to practice collective experimentation; therefore, the research-creation itself became a form of commoning practice.[191] This became particularly dominant during the collective experimentation with filmmaking in two of the study places, Kombinat and Kamza.

This engagement resonates with the perspectives of Moten and Harney, originating from what they term the undercommons, rooted in Black culture. The undercommons is understood as a radical, collective, and fugitive space of resistance and alternative learning.[192] The simple term *study*, used by Moten and Harney, underscores the transversal nature of research-creation. It highlights its capacity to transgress disciplinary and conceptual borders and is a departure from conventional

190 Erin Manning, "Ten Propositions for Research-Creation," in *Collaboration in Performance Practice* (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016), https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137462466.

191 Manning, "Ten Propositions for Research-Creation."

192 While the undercommons embrace contradictions and tensions, they stand in opposition to the commodification and bureaucratization of education, seeking to create liberatory ways of knowing. It resists neoliberal educational structures and fosters new possibilities of learning, thinking, and living together.

academic practice. This approach is inherently collective, process-oriented, and a transformative activity.[193] Engaging with this perspective allows me to navigate the complexities of the context with greater depth and nuance. I recognize that my role as a researcher extends beyond mere observation to active participation within a dynamic relational field, while cherishing more the process of engaging with ideas, experiences, and other ways that are open-ended and exploratory.

Adopting this relational perspective enables me to uphold a dual commitment: one of genuine care and concern for the Albanian reality, rooted in personal and scholarly investment, and another of collective critical inquiry, wherein we maintain a vigilant awareness of power dynamics, biases, and potential pitfalls inherent in the endeavor. Essentially, by viewing my engagement with the Albanian reality through the lens of relationality, I am better equipped to navigate the complexities of the field, ensuring that my study remains both sensitive to local contexts and rigorously analytical. Nevertheless, thinking with feminist scholars, a situated approach cannot claim objectivity or a totality of the matters to be studied. Accepting that a totality of the view is unrealistic and problematic to claim, as Haraway argues against the researcher's "god trick of seeing everything from nowhere."[194] Therefore, I embrace the importance of academic work to hold partial perspectives, while also encouraging reflexivity and self-awareness. This becomes important when reflecting on the methods used for conducting research.

The predominant notions of neutrality and objectivity in case study research are often translated into practice as the perpetuation and reproduction of dominant narratives, as neutrality often means aligning with the most powerful. Thinking with a feminist and decolonial critique of the concept of the case study approach, we need to be aware of a potential reinforcement of power balances and a perpetuation of dominant narratives, while marginalizing the lived experience, partial perspectives, and voices of marginalized individuals and communities. Therefore, prioritizing relationality, partial perspectives, and reflexivity implied I had to critically rethink the idea of the *case studies* due to its historical association with positivist and objectivist research methods. In this study, I consider myself becoming part of the communities of study, not as an emancipator, a term related to the colonial legacy of conducting research, but as a participator in a common collective struggle to first and foremost find the language, articulate a position, and own the place of the margin not as a weak place of pain, poverty, and brokenness, but as a place of powerful and radical openness,

193 Manning, "Against Method."; Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*; Manning, "Against Method."

194 Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575, https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066.

as bell hooks suggests.[195] Often, because of my connection to the Albanian context, my engagement in the study was not one-directional; I was not simply a researcher selecting cases to observe and analyze. The boundary between observer and observed was frequently blurred to the point that my own involvement became a subject of reflection, but not in the sense of self-referentiality. I was there not merely to study a particular situation, but to learn through and within a place that is also my own, approaching it with humility. Amidst all these reflections, rather than case studies, I consider the geographies I engage with as *places of study*, as a sort of home-schools. These are places of study where I immerse myself relationally and where I liberate myself in a study process with immense curiosity and urge for answers, while, as Moten and Harney suggest, challenging the knower-known dichotomy and the multiple voices within myself and the collectives with which I engage.[196]

Therefore, I do not aim to give a balanced account of the voices of actors in power and those marginalized as a result of that power, for the sake of neutrality. I aim to provide a broad panorama, but without giving more space to those who already occupy all the platforms. The actors that carry official power are present with their acts, but not as the main focus of the study, as is often seen in many studies that focus on the institutions. Instead, I made a deliberate decision not to conduct interviews or conversations with those in power, whose voices are already ubiquitous across all media platforms in Albanian reality and beyond. I focus on the other hidden realities of how the often-stigmatized subjects of power centralities perceive and experience their conditions, and how they internalize or collectively resist the mainstream narratives of othering propagated about them, through historical or contemporary commoning practices. I am interested in other forms of power from below. *Affirmative refusal*, as theorized by Sarah E. Truman, reflecting on the work of indigenous artists, is about "the distribution of attention in the research event, and research write-up, and dissemination." It is a deliberative act of "thinking critically about the world-making practices I participate in including research events, but also the politics of how I distribute my speculative and affective and scholarly attention."[197] In the field of architectural historiography and theory, finding methods to give more attention to the excluded but critical voices remains an ongoing process.[198] For me, this meant being selective about who I engage with to

195 bell hooks, "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, no. 36 (1989): 15–23.
196 Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*.
197 Truman, "Undisciplined."
198 Janina Gosseye et al., eds., *Speaking of Buildings: Oral History in Architectural Research* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2019); Slobodan Velevski et al., "Taking Place Reflections from the Fieldworker," *Writingplace Journal for Architecture and Literature* 7 (2023).

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create relational attunement in the field, generating research-creation that speaks a communal language of criticality to the production of power dynamics through spatial practices of commoning and de-commoning. Resonating with the call of the decolonial scholar Eve Tuck to cease conducting *damage-centered research* that pathologizes marginalized native or urban communities by enabling them to talk only from the position of pain and poverty, with my work I aim to bring to the surface the capacities of communities to generate forms of life in uncertain situations, through commoning practices of construction, care, and resistance, against all actively perpetuating stigmas and neglection, alongside damage-centered narratives.[199]

Furthermore, when engaging in transdisciplinary research, it is essential to be aware of the risk of treating theory and methods as detached entities. This criticism particularly applies to how methods and tools have been transferred from the field of anthropology to architecture.[200] In qualitative research, as Springgay and Truman warn us, there is often a separation between data and methods, reinforcing the theory/practice divide. That is why it is imperative to understand that data is not "a 'thing' that sits in the world and can be isolated and extricated by a method."[201] To overcome the divorce of data from methods, we need to recognize that data is generative and cannot be isolated from the methods and context in which it is generated. The research-creation approach allows us to accept this generative nature of data through methods of creative practices not in isolation but relationally, immersed in the field of relations, acknowledging the complexities of real-world situations.[202] Similarly, theorization cannot be detached from this process. "In the same way that methods cannot be known in advance and used as preestablished procedures, thought must also arrive in the middle and be immanent to the event itself."[203]

As a researcher who is constantly and simultaneously in and out of the Albanian world, and as someone who, in bell hooks' terms, was somehow able to transgress into a Western university, while at the same time being on its margins, I had my own dilemmas about how to pursue this study. I aimed to be conscious of narratives of othering toward non-Western realities and to possibly identify internalized Western-centric narratives toward Albanian realities. As part of a chair called Methods of Analysis and Imagination, I have been lucky enough to have the freedom to explore research methods. My research-creation approach is simultaneously rooted in personal experience, retrospective understanding, and active engagement with the Albanian reality.

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199 Tuck, "Suspending Damage."
200 Marie Stender et al., *Architectural Anthropology: Exploring Lived Space*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2021).
201 Springgay and Truman, "On the Need for Methods Beyond Proceduralism."
202 Manning, "Ten Propositions for Research-Creation."
203 Springgay and Truman, "On the Need for Methods Beyond Proceduralism."

3.3 Navigating Fieldwork Tensions through Multimodal Reflexivity

As mentioned before, this work is developed in the interstices of various disciplines, across architecture, anthropology, and urban studies, with influences from political theory, feminist, and post-decolonial studies. It is composed of multiple research dimensions engaging with a critical historiography in the making of the totalitarian state-socialist regime and its aftermath in Albania. It employs architectural ethnography to empirically and theoretically reflect on the architectural and urban condition created, maintained, disrupted, and reshuffled during drastic political shifts in Albania. I do not consider the work in all three places of study to be exhaustive or representative. However, it is a starting somewhere from the midst, as mentioned before, a rhizomatic, incomplete study in the process, and mainly an invitation to think differently, and to learn through the commoning practices that have been active and transformative across political periods.

To conduct a situated study that embraces this complexity, I have worked with a multimodal reflexive approach across text, photography, sketch, and ultimately film, to be able to access and generate data throughout possibilities of engagement with the places of study. I have conducted spatial ethnography enriched by material from personal, family, and collective archives and counter-archives.[204] Material from official and technical archives is also part of this work and enriches it. However, it has not been central and was not easily accessible, as it was somehow enclosed within other fields of relations that I was not part of and did not choose to be.[205]

204 Counter-archives are often collective initiatives to sustain alternative and counter-narrative historiographies that bring in subaltern and marginalized voices and challenge, supplement, or refuse dominant narratives sustained by official or colonial archival systems. See, for example, Achille Mbembe, (2002). *The Power of the Archive and Its Limits.* In C. Hamilton et al. (Eds.), Refiguring the Archive. Springer; Ariella Azoulay, (2019). *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism.* Verso.
As part of generating data from other archival forms, I have participated in activities with the collective ATA in Kamza and joined them in their endeavor to create a community counter-archive for Kamza.

205 For an account on the challenges to the use of official archives in Albania, see, for example, Elidor Mëhilli, "Documents as Weapons: The Uses of a Dictatorship's Archives," *Contemporary European History* 28, no. 1 (2019): 82–95, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777318000656; Elidor Mëhilli, "Arkivi si armë," *Shqipëtaret dhe Diktatura Komuniste*, Përpjekja, vols. 38–39 (2025): 322–36.

The reflexivity regarding the use of methods was also influenced by the tension on the surface during fieldwork. The spatial and material conditions of the places of study at the moment I entered the field, along with how relations and events unfolded, influenced how I engaged reflexively. Several consecutive major events impacted the research conditions throughout this study. The earthquake that hit central Albania in November 2019, followed by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the overall use of these exceptional crisis conditions by state institutions in power and developers to launch reconstruction and rushed projects, amplified the threat of demolitions. And therefore, because of the fast-paced urban development unfolding in Tirana and approaching Kamza, there was a direct risk that the study sites would be wiped out entirely or partially. The speed of the interventions, with just a last-minute demolition announcement, and their violent nature added immense pressure during my fieldwork.

The Movement for the Saving of the National Theater was the first place of study that I engaged with. The movement ignited at a time when I was searching for collective activities in Albania and was perhaps one of the most vocal and prominent collective efforts in the Albanian public sphere after the fall of state socialism. My engagement was less intimate compared to the other two places of study, where I fully immersed myself. However, it was still quite intense due to the movement's sustained public attention inside and outside the country.

As also explained in Chapter 7, *The Albanian Theater*, I conducted interviews in November 2019 with some of the movement's participants, including activists, artists, and former colleagues who were practicing architects or researcher-educators in the field of architecture in local universities. I remained in constant touch with a number of them during the COVID-19 pandemic, when travel restrictions limited my physical presence in the field and when all activities were transferred online. The movement had to reconfigure itself, and my research approach had to be flexible enough to continue. I started following from a distance and, without even knowing, I was conducting what I later learned was called digital ethnography.[206] Although online research was a substantial part of the research before the pandemic, it took on a central role during the pandemic and enabled the continuation of the research. Besides conducting online research, I engaged in activist-researcher writing published in domestic and foreign media in support of the cause to save the theater, as one of numerous professionals, researchers, and activists who supported the movement from within and outside of Albania.[207] The brutal demolition of the building and the use of the pandemic for the containment of the protest were not easy moments to witness.

206 Sarah Pink et al., eds., *Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practice* (SAGE, 2016).
207 References from these writing engagements are given in the Chapter on the Theater.

The demolition of the National Theater was a turning point, both emotionally and methodologically. The movement for the Saving of the building (February 2018–May 2020) had sparked hope as an attempt to give a new understanding of what it meant to engage collectively in Albanian society. Its violent ending was yet more proof of the state's hostility toward the genuine need to construct democracy in Albania. This demolition marked the start of many more demolitions in other areas of Tirana, including Kombinat, where I was also studying commoning practices of construction and community building. This influenced my research not only because of the loss of the buildings' physical settings, but also because it affected the emotional and psychological conditions in the entire field of relations in which I was immersed. It influenced our conversations and how people felt about the topics I wanted to discuss with them, often related to activities from three decades earlier, when they had moved into these places. Talking about this was not easy at a time when uncertainty was once again knocking on their door. This made me feel powerless in the face of the oppressive machinery of so-called urban transformation, whose speculative character was blatantly clear. The participation or silence of most professional architects, local and invited, amounted to complicity in reinforcing the powers orchestrating this situation, rather than taking the human and material conditions of the inhabitants seriously. This was nothing new or exceptional for Albania, but it was certainly shocking to me when I experienced it firsthand from such a close-up position, in places so meaningful and with people I had connected with and who had trusted me to be close by. Despite these challenges, I persisted through activist writing. I accepted interviews and podcast appearances, where I denounced the engagement and the role the architects were playing in Tirana, instrumentalized by the politics of the powerful.[208] As an inexperienced spatial ethnographer without mechanisms for emotional distance, I found myself overwhelmed. This moment also changed my own positionality. I felt closer to activism, yet I also began to recognize the performative dimensions of power relations within activist spaces. It was also a moment of reflection on the interplay of actors: the role of citizens, professionals, the media, activists, the deep attachments people can have to buildings and their circles, and the insidious nature of authoritarianism.

208 Besa Luci, *Other Talking Points | #EP5 - Gentrification, A Conversation with Dorina Pllumbi and Iva Čukić*; Maria Novas and Dorina Pllumbi, "Observing the Architectural Stigma of the Ugliness: The Cases of Albania and Galicia," *The Observers Observed: Architectural Uses of Ethnography*, November 2021, 114–20; Pllumbi, "Outrage"; Pllumbi, "Is Tirana's Rapid Transformation Progress or Erasure?"; Pllumbi, "Urban Façades, Political Shades: Tirana's Nationalistic Turn in Architecture and Its Subtexts"; Klodiana Millona and Dorina Pllumbi, "Mes Fadromës Dhe Bienales: Kultura Arkitekturore e Formacioneve Grabitqare," *Nyje*, November 7, 2025, https://nyje.al/mes-fadromes-dhe-bienales-kultura-arkitekturore-e-formacioneve-grabitqare/.

Kombinat and Kamza were the places where I was able to conduct spatial ethnography more closely in person. In Kombinat, I initially conducted ethnographic research on my own and later in collaboration. In Kamza, I was immediately immersed in a collective setting through collaboration with the collective ATA. *Time* has been an important component I had to claim for this study, as it is crucial when doing ethnographic fieldwork both on my own and in a collective setting. Adopting a slow, iterative approach rooted in reflexivity meant repeatedly returning to the same sites to build and deepen relationships with community members I was engaging with. Building relationships requires care and cultivation of ethical cautiousness. Over time, I learned to navigate the delicate balance of forming connections without exerting undue pressure. This involved explaining my intentions in various ways, empathizing, and appreciating people's willingness to participate. Even when my efforts were not always reciprocated, like, for example, in instances when possible participants that I considered valuable interlocutors would refuse to participate in the study for various reasons, I had to learn to understand, respect, and even value that sort of autonomy. This made me cherish it even more when the chance to engage was possible.

My work in Kombinat (and later in Kamza) had woven ambitions of historiographic and theorizing threads. I explored the complex significance of Kombinat as an exemplary place for understanding the meaning of the concept of the collective in Albania. As will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5, Kombinat was initially created as a manifestation of collectivity, an ideological tool of state socialism, and later, when the regime collapsed, it became an area that accommodated migrant communities engaged in extra-institutional collective living. I visit both these periods, with a historiographic and theorizing interest in relation to Kombinat's initial stage of creation, the glorification and repurposing of the squatted buildings.

I worked with a wide range of primary and secondary sources, both published and unpublished, but mostly with data generated on-site. As a researcher with a background in architectural studies and practice, I used the conventional tools of an architect to conduct site surveys, take measurements, and draw plans, sections, and facades. I also worked with older technical archival plans of the buildings. But the buildings of Kombinat were not my only scope. I focused my lens on exploring architecture's impact on the community and its significant role in people's lives and spatial collective practices. Besides surveying the buildings for signs of their histories of being erected, celebrated, abandoned, looted, and reappropriated, which was my primary focus, I engaged in unstructured, exploratory conversations with a diverse array of interlocutors. I engaged in conversations with former workers and people who held various managerial roles within the Textile Factory of Kombinat, including labor, management, and technical positions. Additionally, I connected with residents who had squatted the factories after the collapse of the totalitarian state, particularly during and around the challenging year of 1997.

I continued my study by deepening my connection with members of the Hidrofili community, situated on the southern periphery of the extensive Kombinat factory complex, which had been transformed into housing. A crucial connection was Mirela, a 24-year-old native of Hidrofili.[209] She was a key figure for me to be able to relate to the life of the Hidrofili community, their stories, and practices of everyday life.[210]

Following the November 2019 earthquake, the master plan Kombin-Art was approved online in January 2020 during the pandemic, bypassing the public consultations required by law. The latter was justified by the exceptional situation of the pandemic and the need for housing after the earthquake. When the implementation began, I witnessed the level of destruction on-site. On paper, the demolitions were going to start with the buildings I had been studying more closely, the two squatted former industrial buildings of the community of Hidrofili, an inherited name from the former industrial textile production process. Over the span of 2019-2023, including adjustments to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, I conducted several periods of close-up fieldwork, entering and documenting most of the dwellings. I entered two-thirds of the houses in both buildings for architectural surveys, documenting the interventions and adaptations made by inhabitants. I conducted more in-depth and extended conversations, both individually and in groups or pairs, depending on their availability and willingness to engage. I could ethically activate my camera when possible as the quickest tool for documentation, but I would also take more time to use sketches and architectural surveys.

Conversations included residents who had continued to live in Hidrofili since moving to Tirana in the early 1990s, as well as those who moved in the decades that followed. Others had initially lived in Hidrofili but then relocated to nearby areas or the city of Kamza to build separate family homes. As the space given in this dissertation indicates, I have dedicated more time to and engaged deeply with Kombinat. However, my work in each of the three places of study – The Movement to Save the National Theater, Kombinat, and Kamza – has been significantly influenced by research conducted in the other locations, carried out simultaneously or at different times. The places of study were not in close proximity to each other but within a 7-8-kilometer radius, so they were not far apart, and I kept finding connecting threads among them.

209 My meeting with her was facilitated through a left-wing organization called “Organizata Politike” at the time (now known as Lëvizja Bashkë), which had conducted activist work on the working conditions of women in Kombinat’s manufacturing firms that began their activities after the 1990s.

210 All the names of my interlocutors in this dissertation are anonymized unless they explicitly requested on being referred to with their real names, or they have been engaging publicly in the activities I have studied.

Notably, by total coincidence, I learned that one family, which becomes more central in the Kamza chapter, had initially been located in Hidrofili. Their experience and the involvement of one of their daughters in the ATA collective in Kamza later becomes a connecting thread between Kombinat, Kamza, and ultimately the National Theater.

Amidst the risk of demolition, as part of reflecting on the fieldwork situation, at Hidrofili I used geo-scanning instruments with the help of some local engineers in Tirana. I had not planned to use this tool. The need for this came at a moment when the studied buildings were anticipated to be demolished at any time, and no satellite images were of good enough quality to be helpful in my inquiry into the way inhabitants had adapted the ex-industrial buildings for housing. Ironically, the demolition did not start from that area, which was designated as phase one in the master plan, but from the opposite side, which was closer to the main square of Kombinat. Apparently, the developers had recalculated the most profitable way to start the investment. The inhabitants were not informed about these plans. It seemed as if Hidrofili's existence was spared for a while. In the midst of these uncertain situations, video recordings and later documentary filmmaking came into good use as ultimate tools of research-creation, as will be discussed in the next section.

3.4 Collective Filmmaking as a Layered Method

Entering a field of relations is, in essence, a performative act. As encountered in feminist theory, even the simple act of looking with curiosity, the gaze, establishes power dynamics.[211] Furthermore, a critical embedded exploration, such as walking while holding a camera, as we did during the production of films in the terrains of Kombinat and Kamza, poses questions and activates the observational gaze, raising ethical considerations about what the act does and how it is perceived. Considering the camera a prosthesis, as Brian Massumi suggests, "the object can be considered a prosthesis of the body, provided it is remembered that the body is equally a prosthesis of the thing."[212] There is a power dynamic at play when holding a camera, as well as when dwelling in a woman's body and holding a camera. Similarly, the act is not neutral and requires care in its operation, with consideration for the subjects at whom the camera is directed. The renowned Vietnamese filmmaker, theorist, and poet Trinh T. Minh-ha interrogates the colonial gaze, ethnographic authority, and gendered exclusions embedded in Western knowledge systems. Minh-ha emphasizes that the "speaking subject" must not be reduced to "the native informant" but must speak in her own terms, in a language that may resist the expectations of a Western audience.[213] In decolonial and feminist visual practices, therefore, the camera can become a site of negotiation rather than domination, where those being filmed may look back, speak back, or refuse to engage.

For this study, the medium of ethnographic/documentary film was used as a tool, serving as an extension and complementary to the fieldwork conducted both independently and in a group. I was able to experiment with filmmaking in a collective setting, during activities organized together with the collective ATA, with which I had the great opportunity to collaborate.

211 bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (South End Press, 1992).
212 Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Duke University Press, 2002), 95, https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822383574.
213 Trinh T. Minh-ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics* (Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 1991), https://www.routledge.com/When-the-Moon-Waxes-Red-Representation-Gender-and-Cultural-Politics/Minh-ha/p/book/9780415904315.

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Around ten years ago, this group of young residents from Kamza, who were in their teenage and student years, formed the interdisciplinary collective called "Grupi ATA." They were inspired by two of their professors and aimed to reclaim the label "THEM," which the term "ATA" means in Albanian. They sought to challenge the othering identity imposed on them by addressing issues related to center-periphery tensions, collective-traditional family structures, gendered roles, environmental concerns, and more. Their practice includes activism through theater performances,[214] online and field activism, offering legal counseling, public meetings, and the annual Laboratory of Urban Anthropology (LAU) together with the anthropologist Nebi Bardhoshi and other scholars from IAKSA (Institute of Cultural Anthropology and Art Studies). Over the past few years (2022-2025), I have engaged with the activities of Grupi ATA in various capacities, as an audience member and participant in their activities, as an invited speaker and later mentor in the Laboratory of Urban Anthropology, as a co-organizer of a Training School, and as an invited contributor to their online magazine. Throughout these activities, we engaged with Kamza's inhabitants to unravel the epistemologies of city formation.

In March and September 2023, two events were held consecutively: a Training School and a Laboratory of Urban Anthropology, both focused on using ethnographic film as a fieldwork method. During the Training School entitled "Tirana and Kamza: The Planned, the Unplanned, and Everything in Between," we created several transdisciplinary groups pairing local activists with scholars from various European universities (as part of COST Action Writing Urban Places) and from various fields of architecture, urbanism, literary studies, socio-cultural, and political studies. The purpose was to experiment with collective film production in various areas of Tirana and Kamza.[215] In September 2023, ATA organized the annual edition of the Laboratory of Urban Anthropology titled *Përvijime të Kamzës* (Outlines of Kamza), which centered on ethnographic film in Kamza.

214 Among the various activist practices of the collective ATA, Augusto Boal's *Theater of the Oppressed* has been a key method of activism used by them in Kamza and beyond. Furthermore, Grupi ATA engaged in activism and performance at the Festival for the Saving of the National Theater, as discussed in Chapter 7.

215 I initiated this training school, which was later co-organized together with Diana Malaj, Willie Vogel, and with the support of various local and regional activist groups and institutions like ATA, IAKSA (then Institute of Anthropology and Art Studies), and the engagement of mentors from the yearly International Documentary Film Festival Dokufest Prizren. The training school was a three-day fieldwork event of the COST action Writing Urban Place and was accommodated by the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism at the Polytechnic University of Tirana. The participants, as well as the lecturers and mentors, were carefully selected to enable an entangled local and beyond-local discourse on city (trans)formation through planned and unplanned actions. For a detailed report on the Training School, see Dorina Pllumbi et al., *Training School Report: Tirana and Kamza: The Planned, the Unplanned, and Everything in Between.* (2023), https://writingurbanplaces.eu/training-school-report-tirana-and-kamza-the-planned-the-unplanned-and-everything-in-between/.

Training School: Tirana and Kamza: The planned, the unplanned, and everything in between

During the training school, we looked into two adjacent polarities, on the one hand, Kamza with its autonomous character, and on the other, Tirana, the epitome of a perpetual desire for planning and order coming from the top. We reflected on how both Tirana and Kamza are now going through the pressure of a neoliberal state and market. We reflected on the center-periphery tension between these two polarities, and the way this tension is created, maintained, and even politically used. We also looked into how communities resist planning implementations that are currently going on, often associated with demolition, displacement, and gentrification.

With this training school, we considered the concept of the unplanned and the informal as not doing justice to the formation process and character of these urban realities. These terms have been used with a negative connotation to keep entire communities understudies, outside of disciplinary knowledge and attention, but also disenfranchised by political rights. This fieldwork event was an invitation to employ embodied methods of exploration to understand and interpret these urban realities through collecting local stories that would help to subvert and go beyond mainstream dichotomies of planned-unplanned, formal-informal, center-periphery, regulated-anarchic, top-down bottom-up, and so on. Instead of focusing on the unplanned and informal, we employ the notion of commons and commoning as a theoretical key to understanding these realities. We visited areas where the so-called unplanned construction practices have been well accepted and integrated into the urban setting and areas where they are in the process of being erased. We observed how commoning practices operate as a relational mechanism, both as a co-constructive and as a resistance means.

We experimented with walks and ethnographic film as research-creation methods to explore these areas of interest in the cities as a basis to articulate theoretical vantage points about urbanities in Tirana and Kamza. We employed three concepts: *embodied exploration*, *commoning practices*, and *material unrest*. We walked in groups of 4-5 in designated areas in these cities, where we explored the spatio-temporal urban situations encountered during these walks and documented them in video recordings that were later edited into short films.



FIG. 3.1 Starting the walk from the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism, Tirana. Photo Holly Dale

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FIG. 3.2 Working Group in Bathore, Kamza. Photo Büşra Dilaveroğlu

Six short ethnographic films were produced and screened initially during the last day of the training school and later at several places, aiming to reach a broad and diverse audience.[216] Ethnographic film revealed to be a powerful tool to capture the material and spatial complexity of the urban realities going through rapid transformation, such as the areas we explored in Tirana and Kamza. Through this medium, we were able to work simultaneously not only with the spatial, but also embodied, temporal, and affective dimensions of the realities we were immersed in. Film was able to encapsulate reality by focusing on both the built environment conditions and practices and discourses of the inhabitants who had created, lived, and transformed it.

216 They were screened at the TUDelft, at the international film festival Dokufest in Prizren Kosova, at the Laboratory of Urban Anthropology 2023, at 'Urban House' a community center in Tirana, at the film festival Balkan Without Borders in Montenegro, and The National Romanian Architecture Biennale of 2023, in Tampere University Finland, and in educational courses such at TU Darmstadt and TU Vienna.



FIG. 3.3 Architect and artist Klodiana Millona during fieldwork exploration. Photo Büşra Dilaveroğlu

For instance, in Kombinat, an area we explored and where I was part of the working group, I found film to be an invaluable tool based on my prior fieldwork experience. Although I had been on my own repetitively for three years, to go, even if for one day (the duration of the fieldwork for the three-day training school), together with three other women-researchers was a new way of relating to the field, practicing observation and building up other relational ties, along with interpretation and thinking with each other.[217] Our collective experience as researchers and amateur filmmakers, each hailing from diverse academic and cultural backgrounds, was about delving into the collaborative process that culminated in the creation of the documentary film *Would You Call Yourself a Kombinats?*. The documentary portrays life within the Stalin Textile Factory following the collapse of the five-decade state-socialist regime in Albania in 1991 and subsequent deindustrialization and squatting.[218]

217 Our working group in the field was composed of Agata Kochaniewicz, PhD researcher in Social Anthropology from NTNU Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Elina Alatalo, an architect and PhD researcher in Environmental Policy from Tampere University, and Sidorela Vatnikaj, a local human rights activist. After the training school, I co-edited the film together with Agata Kochaniewicz over two months of frequent online meetings.
218 *Would You Call Yourself a Kombinats?*, directed by Dorina Pllumbi et al., 2023, https://dokufest.com/en/festival/2023/the-planned-the-unplanned-and-everything-inbetween/would-you-call-yourself-a-kombinats/.



FIG. 3.4 Working group during the making of the film "Would you call yourself a kombinats?", Tirana. Photo Dorina Pllumbi

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When in the field, we allowed ourselves to stay receptive and intuitively reflexive to the situations we encountered, engaging in an embodied exploration of the material and spatial conditions of the terrains. Certainly, I was not a stranger showing up one day to film. Three residents of Hidrofili were informed about this filming initiative. One of them, although he had previously agreed, refused at the last minute to participate, while the other two were glad to talk in front of the camera. A male inhabitant, gave vivid descriptions of how they had found the building, the way he, together with his extended family, had transformed it into houses, and how he had made the arrangements for every family member, taking into account their needs and activities. A young woman who was born and raised in Hidrofili, shared with us the perspective of a child. Archival footage from her birthdays, marriages, and other parties held at her house by her extended family was used in the film and enriched it, adding a temporal dimension. In the afternoon of the fieldwork day, we were able to walk through and video-record parts of the demolished areas. This way, the film documents the area's current reterritorialization as the new masterplan is implemented and as demolition and construction efforts reshape the landscape, erasing the livelihood practices of commoning that were co-constructed within these appropriated architectures over about three decades. Film served as a medium that allowed us to conduct an ethnography of construction and destruction simultaneously, while we were in the field at a moment when tensions were high and on the surface.

Throughout the film's editing process, we engaged in constant discussions about its narrative structure, visual aesthetics, and ethical considerations. The experience of making this film revealed the potential of documentary filmmaking as a tool that can complement fieldwork methodologies of spatial ethnography, offering insights into complex cultural landscapes and spatial (trans)formations. Observing how the film performed across academic, activist, and community platforms, we reflected on its limitations and potentialities to foster deeper analysis, active engagement, and impactful storytelling. Ultimately, we noticed how the film accommodated the transdisciplinarity of the approach, blurring boundaries between these realms that often operate separately. We navigate ethical dilemmas in portraying communities of our own or foreign cultures, considering the influence of different audiences on the ethnographic film production process.

Laboratory of Urban Anthropology 2023: Përvijime të Kamzës

While the training school fostered a broad transdisciplinary engagement of European non-local and local scholars, activists, and artists, the subsequent Laboratory of Urban Anthropology, Përvijime të Kamzës (Outlines of Kamza), held in September 2023, was even more situated. As a continuation of the work of Grupi ATA and IAKSA to generate an understanding of the urban reality of Kamza, focusing on the neighborhood of Bathore, it brought together local and diasporic scholars, artists, and activists, although invited foreign artists were also present, such as the photographer Hans Peter Jost, whose picture became a central tool to spark memories and conversations during fieldwork.

The laboratory's organizers proposed experimenting with photo elicitation. This method included images captured by the Swiss photographer Hans Peter Jost during his visit in 1993, which were the years of the first migrants' arrival in Kamza. The images offer visual insights into the arrival conditions in Bathore. Edmond Pergega, one of the architects who was a participant at the previously discussed training school, identified the location of the initial settling huts and other signs in the city, and the location where the picture of the Swiss photographer was taken. This was the initial step in identifying the first arrivals and visiting them as part of our search to learn more about their experience.

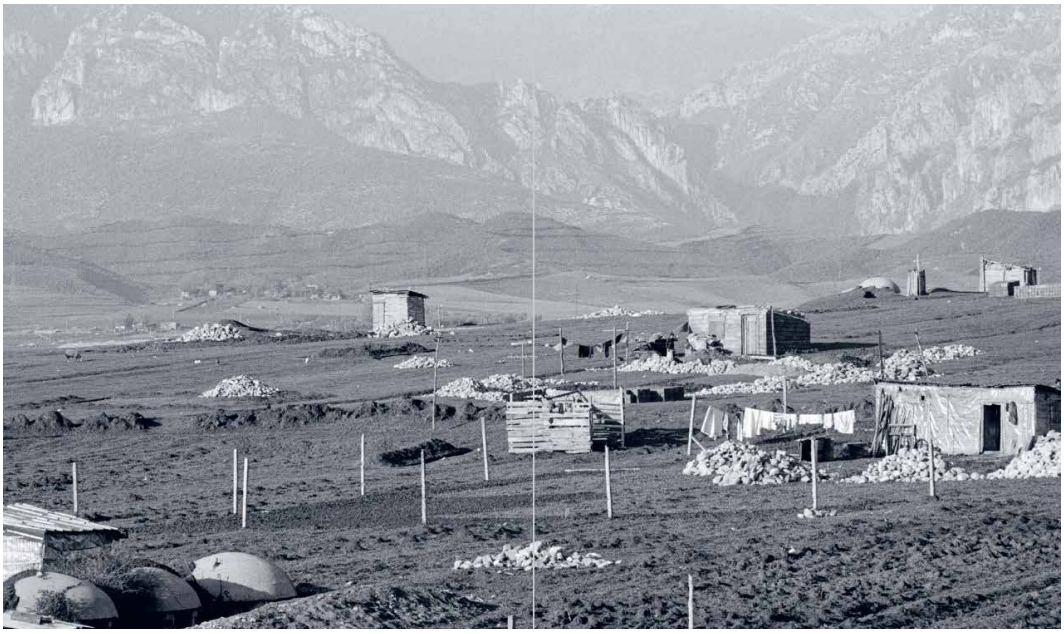


FIG. 3.5 Start of urbanization in Bathore neighborhood in Kamza in 1993, photo credit Hans Peter Jost



FIG. 3.6 Architect and artist Klodiana Millona giving a workshop on filmmaking. Photo Dorina Pllumbi



FIG. 3.7 Laboratory of Urban Anthropology, September 2023. Photo Thomas Krempke



FIG. 3.8 A talk by Diana Malaj (co-founder of ATA Group) on Bathore's portrayal in the daily press of 1990s-2000s, Laboratory of Urban Anthropology, September 2023. Photo Dorina Pllumbi

The purpose was to trace back and record the (hi)stories of these families. This would reveal a historical dimension to the place, a dimension that has been ripped off because of Kamza's designation as informal. During this research-creation process, each group created short ethnographic draft films to document and open discussion among participants in the laboratory and the wider public attending open events. Two of the films from the Training School, *Would you call yourself a Kombinats?* and *The city that was not supposed to be on the map*[219], were screened at a public event during one of the Laboratory evenings.

219 The film will be discussed in the chapter on Kamza

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FIG. 3.9 Forensic attempt to find the position of the first houses in the picture of Hans Peter Jost. Source: Edmond Pergega

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For us, it was a new way of communicating and catalyzing engagement with different audiences. The film served as a tool to distill previous fieldwork material, engaging with communities to generate new insights from the open archive that is the city itself, in order to make its story visible. Through this visibility, the film aimed to challenge the stigmas dehumanizing newcomers in Kamza. It showcases the affective entanglement of macro and micro spatial politics in issues related to access and the right to the city, as well as the implications of planning instruments on the exclusion of spatial commoning practices.

Just as writing is used as a tool that aims not only to describe the architecture of a place but also to transcribe and prescribe, therefore serving as an operational tool,[220] the interpretative dimension of ethnography stands at the core of its operation. For the ethnographer needs "first to grasp and then to render," therefore, writing, photographing, interviewing, and filming go hand in hand.[221] Film was used during these collective experimentations mainly "as a means of exploring, not explaining,"[222] although its interpretive dimension is intertwined with the embodied process of recording in the field and the later editing. We noticed how video recording, similar to photography, has a forensic dimension that reveals new insights every time the material is revisited, away from the field, during what is often considered post-production. This way, there are embodied and corporeal drives to the use of film while in the field, but its exploratory capacity extends beyond the fieldwork, during the editing process, and also with the engagement of the various audiences for whom it is screened.

Although ethnographic filmmaking was employed as a tool both in Kamza and Kombinat, it was used slightly differently in each context. In Kombinat, previous ethnographic work preceded the video recording and even the idea of producing a film. In Kamza, filming was integrated earlier and used in the fieldwork as an immediate tool. However, the organizers of the Laboratory of Urban Anthropology, and I to a lesser extent, had previous fieldwork experience in the city. Ethnographic work can precede, follow, or unfold simultaneously with filmmaking. In practice,

220 Havik, Klaske. Urban Literacy: Reading and Writing Architecture. Nai 010 Publishers, 2014.; Jane Rendell, "Architecture-Writing," *The Journal of Architecture* 10, no. 3 (2005): 255–64, https://doi.org/10.1080/13602360500162451.

221 Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in *The Interpretation of Cultures, Selected Essays* (Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1973), 10; Tanya M. Luhrmann, "Thick Description: Methodology," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, 2nd ed., vol. 24, ed. James D. Wright (Elsevier, 2015), https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-097086-8.44057-2.

222 Lesley Lokko, "Exploring, Explaining and Speaking in Tongues: Visual Scholarship and Architectural Education," in *Visual Research and Methods in Architecture*, intellect ed., ed. Igea Troiani and Suzanne Ewing (Bristol, Chicago, 2021).

video recording occurred both through deliberate, pre-planned engagement and through embodied, situational, and intuitive responses to the field. Incorporating family or community archival materials further enriched the films, allowing for the inclusion of the dimension of time, an essential layer when addressing socio-spatial transformations in the context of political and economic regime shifts.

In both places, film turned out to be a medium that could take on various roles, from documentation to interpretation to opening and facilitating discussion. However, the intention was not to create self-contained, independent films, but rather to create work that remains adjacent to discourses within and beyond the field, circulating across various academic, educational, research, artistic, and activist settings.

3.5 Limitations or Possibilities? Uncertainty as a Methodological Condition and Its Challenges

Cutting across disciplinary boundaries requires navigating diverse disciplinary languages and conceptual traditions, while also remaining reflexive to non-academic dynamics that shaped the research process in unexpected ways. The trajectory of this study encountered several challenges, some of which I mentioned in the previous section, and others I will list here as: temporal, geographic, conceptual and theoretical, writing and interpretation, and ultimately affective limitations or potentialities.

Temporal: Although the study makes a cross-temporal effort to engage three historical periods—and occasionally reaches further back into pre-socialist times—it nevertheless remains constrained by temporal limitations. Urban transformation in the Albanian context is still very much in motion, which means that the analysis can offer only snapshots rather than a depiction of a completed trajectory. However, the latter has not been the study's ambition, but it can be recognized as a limitation. I was aware of this limitation from the outset, yet I attempted to navigate it by adopting a cross-temporal conceptualization that situates recent history and contemporary developments within longer historical arcs. Furthermore, there is no structured balance in the attention given to the time periods I focused on. Because of the difficulties of accessing archives from the state socialist period and the easier access to the events of the post-1990s period through fieldwork, the latter period received

greater attention and more space in this study. However, being caught up in fieldwork and finding it difficult to declare it finished was another challenge I encountered. It was not easy to define the end of the fieldwork and decide when to move on from it. This is especially due to the intensity and continuation of the events in the field. Especially my exploratory approach made it a struggle to determine the boundaries of my fieldwork. Similarly, working within a transdisciplinary milieu posed challenges.

Geographic: The study focuses on three particular locations, considered as meaningful spatio-temporal places for studying practices of commoning. These sites were selected deliberately for how commoning became materially and spatially manifested; however, this necessarily introduces a geographical limitation. They cannot be considered representative of all Albanian cities, nor of the so-called post-socialist context at large. I was aware of this limitation from the start and, for that reason, positioned the project as a situated study rather than one seeking generalized claims. Nevertheless, despite these geographical delimitations, the phenomenon under study significantly resonates across various contexts to offer analytical insights that may extend beyond the specific geographical locations I engaged with for this study.

Conceptual and theoretical: Empirical realities can be incompatible with abstractions or the conceptualizations of a given theoretical perspective. As argued in the theoretical part of this dissertation, relational commoning is often fragmented and fugitive, making it difficult to grasp through existing theories of the commons. This is particularly relevant when studying the commons in Albania, which do not fit neatly into dominant frameworks developed so far within commons theory. Most of the literature assumes conditions, institutional arrangements, or histories that differ from those characterizing the Albanian context. Practices of commoning in Albania are shaped and conditioned by legacies of state socialism, rapid marketization after its fall, uneven or arbitrary forms of state governance, and kinship- and proximity-based forms of organization that fall outside already known categorizations of commons as emancipatory or leading toward post-capitalist regimes. As a result, applying established theoretical models risks oversimplifying or misrepresenting everyday practices, the political misuse of the concept of informality, and the hybrid forms of collective life that unfold in-between systemic cracks. The challenge, therefore, is not only analytical but also conceptual, which means working with theory while allowing empirical realities to complicate, disrupt, or extend that theory. In this study, this has been considered a gap, and, as elaborated in the theory chapter, I have not worked with a pre-structured theoretical framework but have rather considered an unconfined theoretical frame of the discourses surrounding the working concepts.

Writing and interpretation process: The variety of visual material, voices, and theoretical threads made it uncomfortable for me to settle on a linear narrative or mode of argumentation. I took an approach that could be considered undisciplined to the writing process, one that I also had to learn how to do iteratively and non-linearly. This was part of a process characterized by ongoing reordering, reframing, and reworking of chapters. Producing a coherent dissertation thus required negotiating tensions among coverage and detail, description and interpretation, the situatedness of fieldwork, and the project's theorizing ambitions in a terrain of working with concepts across disciplinary boundaries, overlapping temporalities, and uncertain categorizations. Working through these complications also required learning to trust the process in order to get past these challenges. Most of the study unfolded without a preformed argument, and the process of writing, and most probably this final product, still echoes the embrace of reflexivity.

In this way, I had to grapple with uncertainty as a methodological condition,[223] allowing ideas to emerge slowly through repeated encounters with the material and through moments of hesitation or doubt. This meant proceeding without always knowing how different parts would eventually cohere, yet considering this a richness in possibilities rather than a limitation. Certainly, the process of writing will continue after this dissertation is defended, with other forms of revisiting and interpretations of the research material I engaged with for this study.

Affective engagement: As someone deeply entangled with the subjects and geographies of my study, I gradually found myself disenchanted with the promises of intellectualism, academia, and even activism. The affective and material impacts of demolition on human lives, bodies, and environments are real. It first and foremost affects those left without homes and community spaces, but it also deeply impacts activists and researchers who stand close to these struggles and who witness such violence in close proximity. Engagement fatigue and, at times, burnout are present in both realms of academia and activism. However, in this process, I learned to accept and live with the limits of both worlds, as they are shaped by the conditions of neoliberalism today. Such a realization did not arise from theoretical reflection alone, but from the grounded, lived experience of doing fieldwork. In the field, I came to understand that researchers are often insufficiently prepared for what they may encounter. Yet, this lack of preparation is partly compensated for through embodied knowledge developed throughout the ethnographic praxis. This is also made up for meaningful and profound experiences of relations with human and material entities of spatial existence.

223 Klaske Havik et al., "Editorial Productive Uncertainty / Indeterminacy in Spatial Design, Planning and Management," *OASE*, no. 85 (2011).

PART 3

Empirical Grounds and Situated Reflections

4 Situating Albania

Entangled in Kinship, the State, and the Commons

4.1 The Rhetorics of Transitioning and Westernization

Nowadays, we increasingly hear of the transitioning toward a green economy, circularity, and the efforts to increase awareness about the damaged planet we live on, the injustices and violence imposed by a condition of coloniality, imperialism, and militarization. These transitions have shaped not only our material conditions but also the way we relate to one another, to space, to its use, and to its production in Lefebvrian terms.[224] These shifts are rarely smooth. They sometimes come imposed and sometimes through revolutions, sometimes they propel resistance and require navigating uncertainties, and reconfiguring agencies and becomings.[225]

In Albania, the concept of post-socialist transition carries a similar yet distinct connotation that has defined the lives of generations born in the 1980s and 1990s. The years following 1991, which symbolize the collapse of the communist utopia, have been labeled as a transitional phase by scholars and politicians alike.[226]

224 Henri Lefebvre, "The Production of Space," London, 1999.
225 "Control and Becoming: A Conversation between Toni Negri and Gilles Deleuze," *The Funambulist Magazine*, February 22, 2011, https://thefunambulist.net/editorials/philosophy-control-and-becoming-a-conversation-between-toni-negri-and-gilles-deleuze.
226 Elez Biberaj, *Albania In Transition: The Rocky Road To Democracy* (Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 1999); Adrian Civici, *Udhëtim në tri kohë* (Onufri, 2019); Arlind Qori and Sofokli Meksi, *The Albanian Limbo: From Bureaucratic Socialism to Neoliberal Capitalism* (Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, 2023).

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With Albania's newfound openness to the world after the fall of the Iron Curtain, the regime's demise ushered in a period of turmoil and anarchy. An entire generation to which I belong grew up with unanswered questions about what we were transitioning to as a society, whether this transition would have an end, and what that end would look like. On the one hand, the concept of transition in Albania, especially in the initial years after the collapse of state socialism, served as a hopeful notion, feeding into hopes and beliefs in a better societal future. It served as an acknowledgement of society projecting an uncertain, yet presumably better, pluralistic, and democratic future reality. On the other hand, the notion of societal transition has been repeatedly used in political discourse by actors across the political spectrum, and often by the Albanian public itself to explain and justify the abnormalities of a society that struggles between the hard politics of the past and the sloppy, corrupt politics of the present. The latter is recognized to gain some authoritarian features.[227] During this period, the oxymoronic concept of "endless transition" became the only stable explanation for more than three decades, addressing the perceived persistent "anomalous" and "exceptional" circumstances.

Following Katherine Verdery's anthropological analysis of socialism and its aftermath, Albanian anthropologist Nebi Bardhoshi uses the concept of liminality to explain Albania's transitional condition.[228] The ethnographer and folklorist Arnold van Gennep developed the widely known theory of the "rite of passage," which has been extensively used in anthropology to explain the "liminal" ceremony or event that marks a crucial period in a person's life, passing from one condition to another.[229] Bardhoshi stretches the concept of liminality to *liminalization* of the entire Albanian society for an extended period of time. Liminalization is a longer condition that Bardhoshi defines as "endless processes of transformation,

227 Florian Bieber, *The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans*, New Perspectives on South-East Europe (Springer International Publishing, 2020), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-22149-2.

228 Bardhoshi, *Antropologjia e Kanunit*; Bardhoshi, "Ethnographic Temporality and the Ethnography of Time: On Political Economy of Anthropology and the State"; Katherine Verdery, *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?* (Princeton University Press, 1996).

229 Van Gennep defined the rite of passage as "rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age." It has been related to birth, puberty, marriage, death, and so on. Three distinct stages are identified: *separation* from the old condition, *margin* (or *limen*), meaning the threshold, the in-between state of no longer being in the old condition but not quite yet in the new, and *aggregation* or reintegration into the society with a new status. See Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (University of Chicago Press, 1960). Victor Turner expanded this theory, elaborating on the middle, in-between stage of the rite of passage, namely liminality, characterized by ambiguity, disorientation, and potential transformation. See Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, The Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures (Cornell University Press, 1969).

structuring and supporting the dictatorial situation that is enforced on society by [what Bauman considers] a gardener state."[230] In his view, liminalization is not a process related only to the current post socialist condition. Rather, it began much earlier, during the communist era, when society was considered to be transitioning toward an ideal of modernity while building socialism.

These societal shifts, whether conducted as a centralized state project or as a counterreaction to it, had their bold spatial manifestations. As will be seen in the coming chapters, the socialist state aimed to profoundly transform Albanian society, using architecture and urban planning as one of its primary tools to achieve this goal. Later on, with the collapse of the regime, a counterreaction to the overcontrol of the territory and the population burst in demographic shifts took material matters of their own lives in hand, intervening extensively in the spatiality of existing Albanian cities as well as constructing new ones.

The politics of Westernization, as another form of transitioning, has played out in the Balkans, imagining the region often as *almost Europe, but not quite*, in terms of Homi Bhabha's phrasing about colonial mimicry.[231] Historicism has been instrumental in fabricating long-term narratives and images of backwardness and exoticization, resulting in a two-fold influence on Albania: firstly, through external forces that have played a crucial role in the country's geopolitical positioning and power dynamics, and secondly, through internalized perceptions that have shaped Albanians' self-understanding.[232]

230 For Zygmunt Bauman, the "gardener state" is a type of modern state that views society as a garden, something to be planned, ordered, cultivated, and, if necessary, weeded, thereby purging undesirable elements. Bardhoshi deploys this metaphor to describe how the Albanian socialist state viewed society as a subject to socialist modernity, to be shielded not only from external enemies, but also to be cleansed of internal enemies. This account, which originated from the field of law, is particularly relevant when it comes to the clash between what is considered the pre-modern, or the "primitive human" of *kanun* (Albanian customary laws) and the imposed juridical system of state socialism. Bardhoshi, *Antropologjia e Kanunit*. See also Bardhoshi, "Ethnographic Temporality and the Ethnography of Time: On Political Economy of Anthropology and the State"; Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, first edition 1989 (Blackwell Publishers, 1991).

231 To quote from Bhabha: "… colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference." Of Mimicry and Man: The ambivalence of colonial discourse, in Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 86.

232 Enis Sulstarova, *Arratisje Nga Lindja. Orientalizmi Shqiptar Nga Naimi Te Kadareja*., 4th ed. (Pika Pa Siperfaqe, 2019).

As with many similar contexts, Albania, as part of the Balkan region, has been subject to Western-centric historicism by foreign and local scholars.[233] In this perspective, modernity is viewed through an evolutionary lens, categorizing societies as either developed, underdeveloped, or in the process of developing. Historicism often seeks to interpret history as a series of stages culminating in a final destination, such as the evolution of human rationality. Accounts of Albanian cities, the way they have developed, and the current conditions have often been framed as not quite European, as if being caught in a state of what the Italian scholar Andrea Buleri described in relation to Tirana as a "suspended contemporaneity."[234]

As a critique of Western centrism, Foucault challenges historicism by arguing that history should not be about a coherent, teleological narrative but rather about a series of ruptures and discontinuities. He focuses on how power, knowledge, and social practices shift over time, rather than tracing an overarching historical development.[235] Through their concept of *histoire croisée*, Bénédicte Zimmermann and Michael Werner propose an approach to entangled and relational histories, one that is attentive to the intercrossings and mutual influences that shape historical trajectories.[236] Many postcolonial and decolonial authors, such as Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, argue that marginalized peoples have the fundamental right to write their own history. This way, the *right to history* is a political struggle, especially for those in the Global South.[237] This call to pluralize history has inspired reflections on how history is written. The challenge of linear and teleological transitions is a continuous attempt by contemporary thinkers who argue that "transition" itself is a political narrative, used to naturalize certain forms of social organization and delegitimize others.[238]

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233 In *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that European thought has been uncritically universalized as the foundation for understanding history, modernity, and political concepts such as democracy, capitalism, and the state. He challenges the assumption that Western European historical trajectories are universally applicable and therefore argues in favor of a Foucauldian poststructuralist critique of "historicism." See Chakrabarty, Dipesh. Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference. Princeton Studies in Culture/ Power/ History. (Princeton university press, 2007.)

234 See e.g., Andrea Bulleri, *Tirana, Contemporaneità Sospesa* (Quodlibet, 2012).

235 Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, 2nd edition (Taylor & Francis Group Limited, 2002).

236 Bénédicte Zimmermann, "Histoire Croisée: A Relational Process-Based Approach," *Footprint 14, Architecture as Exchange Framing the Architecture Competition as Contact Zone* 14, no. 26 (2020): 7–14.

237 The historian Enzo Traverso has formulated the concept of the *right to history*, particularly in the field of memory and historical justice, but also in relation to processes through which dominated groups seek to take possession of their own past. Achille Mbembe, in his work on postcolonialism and *necropolitics*, has argued that history is a privilege that tends to belong to the dominant. In the realm of the Subaltern Studies in India, Chakrabarty argues against a Western-centric way of history writing by requiring the exercise of the subaltern's right to history.

238 David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything* (2021),

Earlier, as Maria Todorova argues, the Balkan region was subject to Orientalizing narratives. The "trap of backwardness," as she termed the Eurocentric evolutionist view of the Balkans, has shaped the geopolitical hierarchies of knowledge production for the region, as well as asymmetric power relations with Europe.[239] In her seminal book, *Imagining the Balkans*, she debunks the Orientalist narrative that constructs the Balkans as Europe's *Other*, a space perceived as backward, violent, and uncivilized. Todorova draws on Eduard Said's concept of Orientalism, and coins the concept of *Balkanism*.[240] She sustains that the Balkans are part of Europe because of their "predominantly white and Christian" population.[241] Although there have been several experiences of colonization projects in the Balkans, as is the case with the Italian (and then German) occupation of Albania (1939-1944), or earlier imperial domination under the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires, the region's experience cannot be fully reduced to formal colonialism. Yet even in the absence of enduring settler colonial rule, the Balkans remain entangled and caught in colonial logics of representation and hierarchies of power. This condition, often described as a form of *coloniality without colonies*, underscores how the region continues to be positioned within asymmetrical geopolitical and cultural frameworks that echo colonial structures. Todorova's intervention shifts attention from the colonial East/West divides to the hierarchies within Europe, showing that othering can occur even without formal colonial domination.

Even within the Balkan peoples, there has been a racial hierarchy in place. Other thinkers explore how these hierarchies are reproduced within Eastern and Southeastern Europe itself, and how the politics of othering play out in the gradation of cultural and power hierarchies, rather than in dichotomous East-West polarities. In a more recent book *White Enclosures*, Piro Rexhepi addresses the way the power of whiteness is reproduced in the Balkans through subordinate practices of racism. The argument here is that Todorova misses out on a more nuanced read of the way white privilege plays out in the Balkans when making a color blind read of the peoples of the Balkans, when categorizing Eastern Europeans as white and overlooking the presence and racialization of the Roma and Muslim populations present in these territories.[242]

239 Maria Todorova, "The Trap of Backwardness: Modernity, Temporality, and the Study of Eastern European Nationalism," *Slavic Review* 64, no. 1 (Spring 2005) (2005): 140–64.
240 Alongside the concept of Balkanism, Todorova criticizes the Western popular term of *balkanization*, which is used as a stereotyping trope toward the Balkans and as a synonym for fragmentation.
241 Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, 455.
242 Rexhepi, *White Enclosures*, 13.

The practice of architecture has been an instrument of power to enable the endeavor to transform the built environment to materialize it ideologically. The continuous condition of transitioning of Albania, be it under colonial or state socialist regimes, and currently, under the neoliberal push to allegedly Europeanize the country,[243] has affected the production of the built environment as well. Particularly, the commons – as resources, knowledge, and practice – which, to borrow from Linebaugh, stand at the core of every culture, have been under pressure for decades across the various regimes. My work develops from a situated and entangled perspective, seeking not only to revisit history but also to theorize through discussions of the commons and kinship in relation to their tacit spatial politics in society. It examines how commoning practices in Albania have been influenced by political fluctuations and the legacies of state socialism, neoliberalism, and the shifting times between regimes. Most importantly, it highlights the way practices of commoning of construction, care, and resistance, not only persist in their tacit politics, but actively participate with their agency in the production of the built environment.

243 See, for example, how materials presented in curatorial events of *Albania's pavilion at the Venice Biennale* and the parallel event of the *Architectural Festival Bread and Heart* held in Tirana in June 2025 suggest a clear agenda behind this engagement. As stated in one of the promotional materials, the aim is to "put the country on the European map" of architecture. Such language, along with the pavilion's title, "Building Architectural Culture," implicitly assumes a lack of existing architectural tradition, as if history begins anew, suggesting that architectural culture must be imported and constructed from scratch in a place where that is not to be found. The film *The Albania Calls*, podcasts, registered conversations at the biennale, and the parallel architecture festival, reinforce this narrative through the use of exoticizing video in the background from the socialist era and its subsequent collapse, drawing on tradition and myths of Albanian hospitality, to stage a spectacle in the service of a new era of progress. See Zoë Dare Hall, "Building Tirana: The Bold Architectural Vision Reshaping Albania's Capital," Forbes Global Properties, *Forbes*, June 23, 2025, https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbes-global-properties/2025/06/23/building-tirana-the-bold-architectural-vision-reshaping-albanias-capital/; *The Albanian Calls*, directed by Anneke Abhelakh and Konstanty Konopinski, 2025; Federica Zambeletti, *Building Architecture Culture Public Programme | Welcome from the Curator Anneke Abhelakh*, episode 1, with guest Anneke Abhelakh, May 7, 2025, https://open.spotify.com/episode/0QvXBuvEsieHpasqlWifAu; Andi Arifaj, *Building Architecture Culture Public Programme | On Freedom*, with guest Nebi Bardhoshi et al., May 7, 2025, https://open.spotify.com/episode/0QvXBuvEsieHpasqlWifAu; Andi Arifaj, *Building Architecture Culture Public Programme | On Agency*, with guest Andi Eftimi and Elidor Mehilli, May 7, 2025, https://open.spotify.com/episode/0QvXBuvEsieHpasqlWifAu.

The Albanian case, along with similar contexts, reveals a tension within the discourse on the commons that stems from differing historical and geographical experiences of Marxist thought. Dardot and Laval argue that for the philosophical commitment of the common to materialize, it must be rooted in concrete and instituted practical engagement.[244] Therefore, the discussion cannot remain confined to isolated prefigurative experiments in Western urban contexts. Instead, it should be connected in a pluralistic way with other forms of collective organizations that exist beyond the state and market and across diverse geographical settings. In Albania, for instance, practices of commoning are often fragmented, imperfect, and marked by internal hierarchies. Yet, the concept of the commons offers a valuable framework for recovering, recognizing, and instituting collective forms of life in a context where notions of the collective have been successively constrained, firstly and paradoxically by state control through state collectivism, and later by the pervasive forces of neoliberal transformation.

That is why, in my research, I have chosen to situate myself within the field of relations to engage directly with diverse forms of urban commoning practices. This is somehow a form of resistance to the dominant and troublesome understanding of the Albanian condition through the rhetoric of historicism, transition, and westernization. Recognizing the relational role of kin-making in commoning practices of construction, care, and resistance represents non-linear revivals of pre-socialist and customary oral traditions, reinterpreted within new spatial and political circumstances. They have often emerged as vital mechanisms of social organization and mutual support in moments when the state was largely absent and the markets unstable. My focus lies in their spatial manifestations as an attempt to develop a renewed understanding of phenomena that have long been overlooked, stigmatized, or dismissed within dominant urban and political discourses. These forms of commoning often entangle and echo practices of resistance commoning whose primary drive lies in contesting various forms of enclosure, as noticed in numerous instances of environmental and urban activism. They expose the persistence of society to democratize from below.

244 Dardot and Laval, *Common: On Revolution in the 21st Century*.

4.2 Pre-Socialist Kin-Based Collective Forms of Societal Organization

Studies on kinship in Albanian societies are numerous, and, as mentioned, have been conducted in the style of nineteenth- and twentieth-century evolutionist anthropology. Several works have examined the pre-modern societal organization, based on customary law known as kanun and clan or tribe-based societies. The organizational units were various, known in Albanian as *fis, farefis, vëllazëri,* based mostly on relations to a common ancestor from the patrilineal side, as well as often combined with location and territoriality, such as in the case of *bajraktar*, *fshat*, and *mal*.[245] Albania is composed of two distinct regions and dialects, the Gheg and the Tosk, bounded by the river of Shkumbin. There are various customary laws distributed all over the territory, like the Kanun of Labëria, Kanuni i Skënderbeut, Kanuni i Dibrës, Kanuni i Mus Ballgjinit, and so on. Amongst the most famous is the Kanun of Lekë Dukagjini, collected and codified by the Albanian catholic priest Shtjefën Gjeçovi in the 19th century. This kanun has been applied in the Northeastern part of Albania. In this study, I am referring primarily to this kanun because the migrants who have moved toward Tirana, residing in the ex-industrial buildings of Kombinat and co-constructing Kamza, originated mainly from the Northeastern part of Albania. However, it is important to note that these migratory areas are not homogeneous and that they contain inhabitants of other origins, but those that I have had the chance to encounter and engage with are mainly from the Northeast. As noted by other scholars, there has been a revival of customary law in these newly arrived areas (Voell, 2003), which, in this thesis, I consider a manifestation of the kin-based commons of our times.

245 Margaret Hasluck, *The Unwritten Law in Albania*, Reprint edition, ed. J. H. Hutton (Cambridge University Press, 2015); Ian Whitaker, "Tribal Structure and National Politics In Albania, 1910-1950," in *History and Social Anthropology*, 2nd ed. (Tavistock Publications, 2004).

Especially the Ghegs of the Northeastern part of Albania have been the subject of some extended attention from European voyagers like Edith Durham[246] and Franz Nopcsa[247], two key figures who observed the societal organization of the tribes of this area in the 19th century while crossing the Balkans.[248] They present the image of a self-organized pre-modern society, which was quasi-autonomous even under the Ottoman empire for two reasons, first, because of the rough terrain they were living in, and second, because the Ottoman empire had recognized the self-rule of the villagers in these areas, which in several instances had been places of insurrection against its jurisdiction. These accounts provide rich material that helps us understand the ways of living in kin-based societies in Albania, as well as how these societies were portrayed through the Western gaze. However, these works have been subject to continuous critical consideration, often being perceived as biased and loaded with misconceptions, generalizations, or partial truths.[249]

The oral customary law is attributed to Albanian nobleman Lekë Dukagjini because he collected and codified it in the 15th century. However, it is understood to be rooted in earlier pagan times due to its secular nature and its operation across various religions in Albania. An example of this cross-religious application of customary law was that oaths would be taken on the Bible or the Quran, depending on the person's religious affiliation. It would be equally accepted if conducted in a mosque or a church.[250] Edith Durham and Franz Nopcsa provide detailed interpretations of how the rules and regulations of the kanun were applied among members of the clan-based groups.

246 Edith Durham, "High Albania," 1909, https://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/durham/albania/albania.html.
247 Franz Nopcsa, *Fiset e Malësisë Së Shqipërisë Dhe e Drejta Zakonore e Tyre* (Botimet "Eneas," 2013).
248 Another particular study of the mountain-dwelling Albanians conducted by the American anthropologist Carleton Coon, affiliated with Harvard University, shows the intention to position Albanians in the taxonomy and hierarchy of races racially. Coon, in 1929, led an expedition to collect "anthropometric data on 1,067 Albanians from ten areas of the North." See Carleton S. Coon, *The Mountains of Giants: A Racial and Cultural Study of the North Albanian Mountain Ghegs* (Cambridge, 1950); Robert Elsie and Carleton S. Coon, "The Photo Collection of Carleton Coon," Early Photography in Albania, 1929, http://www.albanianphotography.net/coon/.
249 For example, as Albanian anthropologist Nebi Bardhoshi points out, the studies conducted by foreign geographers or anthropologists in Albania in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries assumed the lack of national awareness of European people living in tribes. See Robert Harry Lowie, "The Albanians," in *An Introduction to Cultural Anthropology* (Rinehart & Company, 1947), 506–26. When the independence of Albania from the Ottoman Empire was already declared in 1912 as a result of the National Awakening Movement. Furthermore, there is confusion within these studies regarding exogamy, which is sometimes applied among members of the same clan, extended families, and sometimes the entire village, known as an exogamous village, but never an exogamous region, as noted in some of these studies. Furthermore, it is mainly assumed that the only lineage taken into account is the patrilineal, when in fact it is the most emphasized one. However, the matrilineal lineage is also considered important to be remembered, although it is indeed recorded over fewer generations. See Bardhoshi, *Antropologjia e Kanunit*, 151.
250 Hasluck, *The Unwritten Law in Albania*.

As noted by Bardhoshi, they viewed the operation of kanun in two completely distinct, yet partial and somehow complementary ways. Durham considered the mountain-dwelling Albanians to be living under the tyranny of the kanun rules. That kanun was considered to take precedence over the power of the spiritual religious books, asserting that the influence of civilizations that had taken over these territories "had glided over this culture like water over a duck's feathers." On the other hand, Nopcsa asserted that the "Albanian mountaineer was a jurist who knew very well how to use customary law for his rights." Bardhoshi notes that in Albanian culture, both of the positions would be found, where pragmatism in navigating situations of conflict moves along the beliefs that "the law is with the strongest" and the opposite, that "the right always overpowers the strong," thereby offering two lines of theoretical pursuit, one related to researching norms and the other processing their application.[251]

Family structures in Northern Albania (as well as in Kosovo and parts of Western Macedonia) were characterized by large complex family households, *kullë* or *shtëpia e madhe* (literally "the large house" from Albanian), often consisting of multiple conjugal units under one roof, with an agnatic core (father, sons, brothers, male cousins). It was a co-residential and patrilineal unit comprising several generations of agnatic kin (men descended from the same male ancestor) together with their wives and unmarried children. The household was typically organized under the authority of the eldest male, known as the *plaku i shtëpisë* (the household elder), who exercised moral, economic, and disciplinary control over all members.[252] The *large house* (*kullë)* was not merely a dwelling, but a moral and juridical institution grounded in customary law codes that regulated life in the Albanian highlands. Within this framework, the household operated as the fundamental unit of production, inheritance, and honor (*nderi*), with property held collectively and managed by the patriarch on behalf of the lineage. Decisions about marriage, land use, and dispute settlement were made collectively by the male members of the house, often in consultation with kin councils (*pleqni*). Gender and age defined the internal hierarchy: women's status was subordinate, particularly that of younger wives (*nuse*), whose roles were defined by domestic and reproductive labor. Authority and inheritance passed through the male line, while women were incorporated from outside through marriage, reinforcing the *kullë's* patrilineal integrity.[253]

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251 Bardhoshi, *Antropologjia e Kanunit*, 103–4.

252 The 1918 census conducted by the Austro-Hungarian army revealed that complex households were predominant in rural areas, with some households exceeding 100 members. Urban areas also had a significant proportion of complex households, though less than rural areas. Karl Kaser, "The History of the Family in Albania in the 20th Century: A First Profile," in *Household and Family in the Balkans: Two Decades of Historical Family Research at University of Graz*, ed. Karl Kaser, Studies on South East Europe, v. 13 (Lit, 2012).

253 Berit Backer, *Behind the Stone Walls: Changing Household Organization among the Albanians of Kosova*, ed. Robert Elsie and Antonia Young (Dukagjini Balkan Books, 2003).



FIG. 4.1 Paintings: Untitled (2024) and Small house-big family (2024) by Kosovo-based artist Brilant Milazimi, Autostrada Biennale 2025, Source: Author

Spatially, the *kullë* embodied its social order. The dwelling was organized around a large hearth or central hall, the *oda e burrave* (men's room), where male members met guests, discussed politics, and settled disputes. Women occupied separate, interior spaces and were often excluded from the *oda*, reflecting their limited participation in public and decision-making life. This is considered to be "the last resort in the Balkans of the large complex family household."[254]

When the large family became too extended and it made no sense to continue living in a large house, it would be the decisive moment for the household to be divided into smaller units. This is codified in the rules and regulations of the kanun. As a practice spread throughout the Balkan region, in Albanian households as well, "the transmission of property was not related to death or marriage and took place when the household divided into several different groups after generations." The property share was done based on descent lines.[255] This is a practice that still continues in Albania.

254 Backer, *Behind the Stone Walls: Changing Household Organization among the Albanians of Kosova*; Kaser, "The History of the Family in Albania in the 20th Century: A First Profile," 441.
255 Karl Kaser, "Introduction: Household and Family Contexts in the Balkans," *The History of the Family* 1, no. 4 (1996): 383, https://doi.org/10.1016/S1081-602X(96)90008-1.

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The large household, however, is considerably reduced in size and members. As will be explained later, the phenomenon of the large house is better continued among the Albanian population outside the official Albanian territory and continues on a smaller scale in the North of Albania, often in reinterpreted versions of it. It can be observed in Kombinat and Kamza as a mechanism of urban formation, which will be discussed in detail in the following chapters.

Across the Balkans, the most tangible commons were pastures, forests, and water sources, which were used *in common* by multiple households, lineages, kindreds, or village communities. In Albanian societies, the commons as resources included communal *pastures (bjeshkë, livadhe, kujri, mera)* for grazing livestock; woodlands and forests for collecting timber and firewood; water resources like springs and irrigation channels, which are collectively maintained; as well as mountain routes and seasonal shelters *(stane)* used by transhumant seasonal herders. As collective forms of life, these commons do not abide by the contemporary understanding and ambition of the commons, which emphasizes horizontal governance and accessibility. However, there are features of how these kin-based societal organizations governed access to the commons through oral rules and regulations, often also codified in the Kanun.

Although these forms of societal organization are considered to be relics of a bygone era of pre-modern and pre-state-socialist times, they have demonstrated resistance to the spatial politics of state collectivism, which will be explained in the following section. With the fall of the communist regime, they have found forms of revival and reinterpretation in both rural and urban areas, as will be discussed in the fieldwork findings of the places I have studied for this thesis. Today, communities in rural areas are resisting another neoliberal form of enclosure of these commons, assisted by environmental activists. One example is the resistance against the colonial hydro plant projects constructed in several Albanian rivers, such as Valbona, Zall Gjoçaj, and Lake Sope in Dibra.[256]

256 Freund et al., "Local Resistance in Environmental Struggles: The Case of Zall-Gjoçaj, Albania"; Diana Malaj and Brunilda Pali, "'We Will Persevere Until Justice Prevails': Mapping Criminalised Environmental Resistance in Albania," in *Criminalisation of Dissent in Times of Crisis*, ed. Anna Di Ronco and Rossella Selmini, Critical Criminological Perspectives (Springer Nature Switzerland, 2024), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-75376-3_5.

4.3 The Spatial Politics of State Collectivity Against the Commons[257]

Heavily influenced by Stalinism, the Albanian state, led by Enver Hoxha from 1944 until his death in 1985 and his loyal successors until 1991, adopted policies of rapid industrialization, collectivization, and central planning in a bid to turn an overwhelmingly agrarian economy into a socialist one.[258] It aligned with Stalin's emphasis on heavy industry as a source of socialism, despite Albania's lack of an industrial base and tools for such industrialization.[259] Forcibly and following Soviet-style collectivization of agriculture, traditional peasant economies were shattered, creating a climate of totalitarianism and economic insecurity.[260]

257 Parts of this section appeared in a previous form in the published chapter. Dorina Pllumbi, "Commoning as a Material Engagement of Resistance: The Struggle to Save the Albanian National Theater," in *Design Commons: Practices, Processes and Crossovers*, ed. Gerhard Bruyns and Stavros Kousoulas (Springer International Publishing, 2022), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-95057-6_2.

258 Although Karl Marx's work on the class struggle and revolution was conceptualized in relation to an advanced context of industrialist and capitalist society, his late work, such as the *Grundrisse*, did consider pre-capitalist conditions. For example, Marx maintained that the Russian *mir* (peasant commune), if sustained by socialist advances through industrialization, might be allowed to escape the capitalist stage and become the basis of socialism. See e.g. Teodor Shanin, *Late Marx and the Russian Road: Marx and the Peripheries of Capitalism* (Verso Books, 2018).

259 As the history of Marxism goes, other thinkers influenced by Marx adapted extensions of Marxist theory, moved beyond the industrialized European condition to address other non-industrialized geographies. Lenin, for example, in his theory of uneven and combined development, maintained that the potential for revolution could exist in less industrialized countries if they were integrated into the global capitalist system and could mobilize peasants to become the proletariat. In practice, he was careful to implement NEP (New Economic Policy) reforms in 1921 in the early Soviet Union as a temporary retreat from full socialism, after realizing that pushing a pure communist economy was killing the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 rather than saving it. Stalin, on the other hand, was one of those Marxist leaders who considered Lenin's NEP a temporary phase to overcome and practiced adapting Marxist-Leninist principles into a totalitarian form of state socialism. The Stalinist form of Marxism-Leninism championed rapid industrialization, collectivization, and statist centralized political authority, which influenced the implementation of communist policies in the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, including communist Albania. With programs such as the *Five-Year Plans*, which were implemented in Albania as well, Stalin sought to convert agrarian states into industrialized nations by placing heavy industry over agriculture and consumer products. Collectivization disrupted traditional farming practices, and industrialization accelerated the proletarianization of rural populations, turning them into wage-dependent workers in a state-run industry. Stalinism became an example of legitimized authoritarianism applied through political purges targeting perceived opponents. See e.g. J. Arch Getty et al., *The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932-1939* (Yale University Press, 1999).

260 Elidor Mëhilli, *From Stalin to Mao: Albania and the Socialist World* (Cornell University Press, 2017); Olsi Lelaj, *Nën Shenjën e Modernitetit* (Pika Pa Siperfaqe, 2015).

Following the example of Stalin's purges in the 1930s, Hoxha's purges focused on consolidating authority, eliminating political dissidents, and eliminating opposition within Albania's Party of Labour. Ideological dogmatism and Stalinist fervor characterized Albania's domestic and international policies, especially after Hoxha condemned Khrushchev's de-Stalinization and ended relations with the Soviet Union in 1961. As mentioned in the Introduction of this thesis, Albania briefly aligned itself with China (1961–1978) after posing the same accusations of revisionism and betrayal of Marxist-Leninist principles.[261] Communist Albania is often described as having adopted a policy of self-isolation, guided by a robust ideology of socialist nationalism. This shift aligns with the Stalinist doctrine of "Socialism in One Country," which marked a departure from classical Marxist internationalism. The latter emphasized global proletarian solidarity, which ideologically stands in contrast to nationalism.[262]

One of the arguments in my work here is that counterintuitively and in contradiction to its own ideology, state socialism in Albania featured a process of de-commoning. The architectural and urban planning historian Sevilla-Buitrago coined this term to encapsulate a discourse developed within the commons, mainly focusing on capitalist realities.[263] In short, de-commoning describes the process by which capitalism, aided by urban planning, enclosed the commons and turned commoners into waged laborers in the initial phase of primitive accumulation, as explained in the work of Marx. Furthermore, as argued by Sevilla-Buitrago and as emphasized in the theory of the commons (and in subchapter 2.2 of this dissertation), this process is argued to be continuous, and the enclosure of the commons – therefore de-commoning – has been present throughout history and the current societal and economic conditions in geographies of a more advanced capitalism.[264]

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261 Marku, "Communist Relations in Crisis."

262 As I have argued elsewhere, in the historiography of Albanian state socialism, which is still being written, the last period is debatable, whether to frame it as isolationism or as attempts at state sovereignty. The Albanian leadership sought to avoid, by all means, a colonial-like relationship not just with Western major geopolitical powers, but also with what they labeled Socialist Imperialism and the revisionism of the Soviet Union and China. The Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, violating the Warsaw Pact, was especially decisive in this move of breaking relations with major powers. This fear of invasion marginalized Albania's political and economic position, influencing a turn toward nationalism and investment in militarization. It was the time when bunkers began to be constructed across the country, and scenarios of invasion became part of domestic politics. The state apparatus was extremely vigilant in what was presented as the fight against internal and external enemies. See e.g. Pllumbi, "Urban Façades, Political Shades: Tirana's Nationalistic Turn in Architecture and Its Subtexts"; Mentor Beqa, "A Critique of the Concept of Isolationism: The Case of Albania," *European Academic Research* IV, no. 12 (2017): 10705–15.

263 Sevilla-Buitrago, *Against the Commons: A Radical History of Urban Planning.*

264 Federici, *Re-Enchanting the World. Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*; Harvey, "The Future of the Commons."

Theories of the commons, however, while recognizing the problematic authoritarian character of socialist states, do not fully reflect or intentionally omit how state collectivist politics directly influenced the enclosure of the commons as state ownership, for the sake of state control.

In their book *Common: On Revolution in the 21st Century*, especially in Chapter 2 entitled "The Communist Burden; or Communism Against the Common," Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval provide a critical reflection on the historical legacy of 20th-century communism, particularly Soviet-style state socialism, and how it paradoxically undermined the very idea of *the common*, despite its declared commitment to collective ownership.[265] The authors use "against the common" to highlight that what passed for communism in the 20th century was, in practice, hostile to genuine practices of commoning, to shared governance, mutual aid, or democratic control of resources, and that state ownership is not equal to the common.[266] This resonates deeply with the Albanian experience, where state collectivism was used as a primary ideological tool to capture not only private property but the commons as well.

State ownership under state socialism turned the state into a monopoly over resources, eliminating not only market competition but also commoners' access to them. In Albania, the agrarian reform of 1945 intervened in the dismantling of the peasant-land relation by establishing state-managed cooperatives.[267] However, there are reports of resistance to this, especially in the North of Albania.[268] In urban areas, the businesses and private homes of the bourgeoisie were confiscated. These houses were then allocated to new owners who were part of the new ruling class of the state bureaucracy. In terms of societal organization, the Albanian state socialist apparatus imposed a superstructure of organizations over the previously existing collective kin-based societal structures. The totalitarian regime, through this superstructure, aimed not only to produce the proletariat from scratch but also, through this state collectivist superstructure, to extend its controlling power into every corner of the small country and every aspect of everyday life.

265 In subchapter 2.2, I explain the different uses of the terms "common" and "commons" by authors, both in singular and plural forms.

266 Dardot and Laval, *Common: On Revolution in the 21st Century*, 35–58.

267 Olta Sokoli and Reiner Doluschitz, "Cooperative Evolvement through Political Era/Epoch: Albanian's Case and Comparisons," *Ekonomika Poljoprivrede* 66, no. 1 (2019): 189–204.

268 Lelaj, *Nën Shenjën e Modernitetit*, 131–36.

The Base Organization of the Party stood as the smallest but a highly active unit of political life.[269] Established in every workplace, cooperative, or women's or youth unions, these organizations consisted of all Party members in that unit and were led by a secretary. Its activities revolved around ideological education, monitoring work performance, and maintaining discipline through collective or public rituals of *kritikë dhe autokritikë* (criticism and self-criticism).[270] Base Organizations functioned as proxies of the central power extended throughout the Albanian territory. They were intended to function as places of assembly, but actually, through them, the Party's directives secured a concrete presence in everyday life, regulating behavior and production.[271] They served as instruments of ideological training and propaganda distribution, as well as mechanisms of social control and disciplinary corrections, binding individuals to the collective while ensuring continuous surveillance.[272]

Anthropology and architecture, like every intellectual field, became instruments of state propaganda. During state socialism, Albanian ethnographers had to adhere to the ideological line of the PPSH (Albanian Party of Labor) and state directives. Albanian ethnography, which mainly developed during the era of state socialism, traced the autonomous societal organizations and, with a nationalist ambition,

269 Under state socialism, Albania was governed by a centralized party-state led by the Party of Labour of Albania (PPSH), defined as the "sole leading force" in the 1976 Constitution. The structure included the Party Congress, Central Committee, and Politburo, with Enver Hoxha as the leader until 1985, followed by Ramiz Alia. Local control was managed by district Party committees, each headed by a First Secretary. The Base Party Organization served as the fundamental unit of governance, merging ideology, discipline, and social life, thereby embodying the Party-state's authority in everyday life.

270 Practices like *fletërrufe* (lightning letters) are an example of the punishment of individuals during these periodic meetings. This practice involved letters used to criticize, publicly shame, and denounce individuals for behaviors and actions deemed inappropriate and against the ideological line. This practice was an institutionalized method of social control and ideological enforcement. The aim was to encourage self-criticism and make the individual reflect and get back to conforming to the ideals of the party-state. The charges of *fletërrufe* ranged from minor infractions (laziness in the workplace, missing deadlines, neglecting socialist duties) to more serious charges such as ideological deviations, Western influence, or personal immorality. The writing and display of these letters was often done collectively, involving the input of a group (colleagues, classmates, neighbors). This was exposed as practicing collective responsibility, but it also normalized peer surveillance. Certainly, this is a practice not unique to communist Albania. Similar methods of public denunciation were used in other communist regimes, such as the "big-character posters" in Maoist China or public self-criticism sessions in the Soviet Union.

271 Lelaj, *Nën Shenjën e Modernitetit*; Ardian Vehbiu, "Organizata Bazë (I-IV)," *Peizazhe të fjalës*, December 9, 2009.

272 To extend its influence beyond formal membership of the party, the PPSH (Albanian Party of Labor) also controlled a network of mass organizations such as the Democratic Front, the Union of Working Youth, the Women's Union, and the Trade Unions, all subordinated to Party leadership. Ideological control was reinforced through the Institute of *Marxist-Leninist Studies*, the education system, and the *Sigurimi i Shtetit* (State Security), which functioned as the regime's intelligence and secret police under the Party's supervision.

explored the origins and ethnogenesis of Albanian culture.[273] This meant that customary law and traditional organization were treated ambiguously. In the early period, socialism in Albania was more internationalist, and tradition was viewed as an obstacle to be eliminated. The term used for traditional practices, such as tribal social organizations and rituals, was *backward waste*, which was supposedly hindering Albanian society's progress and modernization. Under the Bolshevik ideals, this "waste" needed to be cleaned up for the new society to emerge in the realm of socialist ideology, imposed from the top down. Especially after the late 1970s, during the period of almost autarky, there was a shift in attitude toward tradition, which was referred to as the cradle of Albanian culture. This clash between the customary societal organization and the law imposed by the state was yet another condition of continuous liminalization in Albanian society, a transition toward modernity that would not allow for the possibility of pluriversality.[274]

Similar to anthropology, the architectural practice was centrally controlled and pressured. Seen as a deterministic tool for materializing the state ideology in the built environment, architecture had to express the spirit of socialist realism, which permeated every cultural aspect. Working under a politically oppressive regime, the figure of the architect did not have the possibility to be politically committed, to engage in discourse beyond the ideological state-party line.[275] With the persecution of well-known architects, the possibility for Albania to have politically and even theoretically committed architects who would question planning and architectural decisions ended. The figure of the architect was reduced to that of a technician, and architectural education, influenced by schools in the Eastern Bloc, also acquired a strong technical character.

While design was carried out within centrally controlled bureaus, construction had to be optimized for economic efficiency in times of scarcity, a challenge for a small, remote country. The so-called *aksione* (community volunteering activities) were centrally organized, *forced volunteering* days of work *to construct the homeland*,

273 The work of Rrok Zojzi, Andromaqi Gjergji, Mark Tirta, and many other ethnographers and ethnologists of the time focuses more on using ethnography as a historiographic tool, as Bardhoshi has pointed out. Bardhoshi, *Antropologjia e Kanunit*.

274 Bardhoshi, *Antropologjia e Kanunit*.

275 This pressure was reinforced during the mid-70s when artists, but also architects, were persecuted, and even incarcerated, for daring to experiment with architectural form. Their work was judged as being influenced by Western modernism in architecture, which was prohibited as it represented the Western imperialist capitalist world. Meanwhile in Albania, like in other totalitarian states, the party line was persistent in the aim to create a nationalist style that would highlight national identities. The incarceration of the anti-conformist architect Maks Velo in 1978 marks the most vicious aggression of the regime against architecture as a profession. See e.g. Petraq Kolevica, *Arkitektura Dhe Diktatura* (Marin Barleti, 1997); Maks Velo, *Paralel me arkitekturen* (Librat "Njeriu," 1998); Maks Velo, *Kohë Antishenjë* (Zenit, 2000).

including infrastructure, housing, or cultural buildings. All citizens, regardless of their status, class, or gender, and even at a young age, were forced to perform this type of unpaid work, while the living conditions were precarious.[276] This is still a fresh and entrenched memory associated with the notion of collectivity.

Hannah Arendt argues that totalitarianism eliminates the division between private and public spheres. While her concern is mainly the elimination of the public sphere, Arendt sees the public and the private as crucial to each other's existence. The private for her is the home of the public; it is the place for the individual to retreat in self-reflection, to then be able to appear in public again.[277] The myth of the supreme leader had permeated Albanian homes, where having a framed picture of the dictator, along with other family portraits, became common practice. Arendt explains:

"Totalitarian government, like all tyrannies, certainly could not exist without destroying the public realm of life, that is, without destroying, by isolating men, their political capacities. But totalitarian domination as a form of government … destroys private life as well. It bases itself on loneliness, on the experience of not belonging to the world at all, which is among the most radical and desperate experiences of man."[278]

She explains how terror paralyzes our relations and abilities to act in common, to be politically active and courageous, while simultaneously damaging our need to retreat in private. At the same time, while staying in this classic binary explanation of public-private realms (she also refers to classic examples like Rome and Athens), and while not identifying a separate category for the commons, for Arendt, the public realm is the common that keeps us connected. This way, regarding the importance of acting in public, in the background, are always those near to us, like friends and family, and certainly those belonging to a community.[279] The orchestrated collectivism forcibly replaced this public-private dichotomy and captured the common(s) in Albania during the totalitarian regime, to the point that, after three decades, it remains a difficult discursive terrain to navigate in Albanian society.

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276 Mëhilli, *From Stalin to Mao*, fig. 26.

277 Hannah Arendt, "The Public Realm: The Common," in *The Human Condition* (The University of Chicago Press, 1998).

278 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New ed, A Harvest Book (Harcourt Brace & Company, 1973), 475.

279 Daniel Brennan, "Considering the Public Private-Dichotomy: Hannah Arendt, Václav Havel and Victor Klemperer on the Importance of the Private," *Human Studies* 40, no. 2 (2017): 249–65, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10746-017-9424-x.

4.4 Contradictions of the Politics of Kinship Under State Socialism

Marx and Engels' theories on Primitive Communism, which depict prehistoric communities as organizing themselves in relatively egalitarian ways based on shared resources, certainly influenced the ideologues of state socialism in Albania, but they were more focused on the historicistic aspect of these models rather than using them for a continuity of the new socialist livelihood. As Nebi Bardhoshi points out, Engels' book *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* was central to classifying elements of tradition that could be useful for the pursuit of ideological purification in socialist Albania. In this fashion, during what is known as the cultural revolution of Albania in 1967, a cleansing campaign was undertaken to eradicate religious institutions and practices, when thousands of churches, mosques, tekkes (Bektashi lodges), and other religious sites were closed, demolished, or repurposed.[280] Clergy, especially those from the Catholic Northern regions, were imprisoned, exiled, or sent to labor camps, and even private religious expressions were criminalized. This was considered a necessary attack on old customs and bourgeois culture, declaring them feudo-bourgeois waste. The campaign targeted kinship loyalties, extended exogamy, private property, and patriarchal traditions, thereby condemning anything that did not align with the new culture of Socialist Realism.[281]

Within the Balkan region, the extended family has been the subject of diverse interpretations across the political spectrum, claiming resonance with both conservative and progressive ideologies. For example, similar to the Albanian *kullë* or *shtëpia e madhe* (large house), the z*adruga* is one of the most recognized models of the large Balkan house in the South Slavic area.[282]

280 As a reminder, the socialist Albanian party-state used the language of revolution and claimed to lead the Albanian people through the revolution.

281 Miranda Vickers, *The Albanians: A Modern History* (I.B.Tauris, 2011), 178; Hoxha, *Communism, Atheism, and the Orthodox Church of Albania*; Marku, "Socialism in Action: Albania's Ideological and Cultural Revolution and the Lessons from History."

282 Although they differ in several aspects, such as living arrangements, both large family models, the South Slavic *zadruga* and the Albanian *kullë*, share similarities as patriarchal collectives, kin-based livelihoods based on customary rules and regulations. Both were patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal, with the elderly patriarch being the central authority, and both were based on oral customary rules and regulations for economic arrangements. Kinship was the central feature of relations, and even disputes were "subject to the principles of blood feud." John W. Richards, "The Slavic 'Zadruga' and Other Archaic Indo-European Elements in Traditional Slavic Society - ProQuest," *Mankind Quarterly* 26, no. 3 (1986): 321–37; Maria Todorova, "Slava und Zadruga," *Historische Anthropologie* 1, no. 1 (1993): 123–30.

Regardless of minor variances, I want to point out that the core difference remains largely a product of political interpretation in the national discourse.[283] What is interesting to compare is the socialist interpretation of *zadruga* in socialist Yugoslavia and the Albanian interpretation of *kullë* during state socialism. The first was identified as a proto-cooperative, as "native communism" that prefigured socialist collectivization. It was invoked as a model that resonated with Marxist theories and served as an ideological genealogy for the socialist self-managed economic system in Yugoslavia.[284] The Albanian state socialist ideology, by contrast, framed the *kullë* and the *Kanun* as "feudal remnants" to be abolished in the name of modernization. While the Yugoslav interpretation of the extended family emphasized economic sharing and egalitarian cooperation, it minimized aspects of patriarchal hierarchy to the point of romanticizing it as a democratic system.[285] In Albania, instead, any continuity had to be interrupted to restart the construction of a new socialist society. Land and property collectivization policies in the 1950s-1970s led to the formal division of large households into smaller units, motivated by financial incentives. In cases of resistance, this division was enforced by displacing family members or entire smaller family units. However, despite formal divisions, many families continued to function as informal large households, maintaining traditional practices.[286]

A new model of state-governed *kooperativa bujqësore* (agricultural cooperative) was implemented and showcased as a symbol of the progress of the new family.[287] This progress resulted from the success of state policies aimed at dismantling the large family as a patriarchal and wasteful societal organization of the past. The model of *familja e re kooperativiste* (new cooperative family) was promoted as the new

283 Typically, the Albanian version is compact in a single building, whereas a zadruga could be found in a single building or a few buildings grouped close to each other.

284 However, *zadruga* was simultaneously claimed and interpreted from the other side of the political spectrum to highlight its conservative traditionalist and religious features. See Dubravka Stojanović, "Imagining the Zadruga. Zadruga as a Political Inspiration to the Left and to the Right in Serbia, 1870-1945," *Revue Des Études Slaves* 91, no. 3 (2020): 3, https://doi.org/10.4000/res.3692.

285 The purpose of this comparison between *kullë* and *zadruga* is to highlight how similar spatial and kinship organizations were interpreted as contrastingly different in contexts that shared the ideology of state socialism. However, I aimed to stay within the limitations of this study, and I did not delve into the history of Yugoslav socialism. This is also because comparative analysis has not been within the scope of this study.

286 Bernd J. Fischer, "Albanian Highlands Tribal Society and Family Structure in the Process of Twentieth Century Transformation," *East European Quarterly* (Boulder, United States) 33, no. 3 (1999): 281–301; Kaser, "The History of the Family in Albania in the 20th Century: A First Profile," 445–48.

287 Two agrarian reforms were implemented in Albania during state socialism. During the first Agrarian Reform of 1945-1946, there was a confiscation and redistribution of land from large landowners and religious institutions to peasants. The second Agrarian Reform began in the 1950s and entailed the collectivization of land and livestock into state-owned cooperatives, turning peasants into waged laborers within them, forming a "rural proletariat." Some of the rural populations were transferred to urban industrial workers in the new industries to join the "urban proletariat." See, for example, Julie Vullnetari, *Albania on the Move: Links between Internal and International Migration* (Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 62.

family that superseded the large traditional family, which would be freed from the hierarchical "power of the elder," having the family be smaller, divided, and resting on "solid new foundations" provided by the socialist state.[288] Indeed, this would offer a new position for youth and an opportunity to break free from the patronization of older generations. Blood feuds were almost entirely eradicated. The position of women improved, as early customs of arranged marriages were abolished and women were legally recognized as equal to men.[289] However, targeting patriarchal structures during state socialism in Albania did not come as a full embracing of feminism and a requirement from the masses, but as a state directive from the top. Substantial rights were granted to women and advancements were made in their status. However, these remained within the framework of an essentialist condition, where the central role of women was still reproductive work, and their expected contribution to society was expanded in the public sphere with feminized industrial or agrarian jobs, while still carrying the bulk of the domestic labor and adherence to traditional gendered roles with caregiving and housekeeping.[290] These progressive gains, however, would not be enough to justify the manner in which they were implemented with the aim of extreme change of cultural norms and beliefs.[291]

When it comes to regional politics, there was a distinction in how populations in the North and South of Albania responded to the socialist regime, resisting or embracing it. Although not openly declared, it is commonly known that, in practice, Hoxha's regime enjoyed greater support among the Southern population and therefore favored the South. The North, which had been initially resistant to the regime, suffered more persecution.[292] As Miranda Vickers maintains, "Hoxha's regime not only impoverished the economy; it all but destroyed the intellectual life of the country, and far from healing the north-south divisions it actually widened the gulf between the

288 Lelaj, *Nën Shenjën e Modernitetit*, 80.

289 Lelaj, *Nën Shenjën e Modernitetit*, 80; Bernd J. Fischer, "Albanian Highlands Tribal Society and Family Structure in the Process of Twentieth Century Transformation," *East European Quarterly* (Boulder, United States) 33, no. 3 (1999): 294.

290 Fischer, "Albanian Highlands Tribal Society and Family Structure in the Process of Twentieth Century Transformation," 1999, 291–96.

291 During the initial phase of the regime's installation, industrial investments were met with enthusiasm. As will be discussed in the chapter on Kombinat, for many, going from peasant to industrial worker meant an upgrade in status. For women, it meant freedom from patriarchal structures of the family, although the new structures were no less controlling. The case of Kombinat (Subchapter 5.1), where the primary workforce was composed mainly of women, illustrates a broader pattern of feminization typical of the textile industry and, similarly, in agrarian cooperatives. The moral frame was that of a heteronormative family, as well as safeguarded by state collectivism through collective structures. Abortion was illegal, and the government in the early 1950s was pressuring women to bear more children and propagating the status of "hero mother" for those who had more than eight children. Divorce rates were extremely low.

292 Kaser, "The History of the Family in Albania in the 20th Century: A First Profile," 445–48; Vickers, *The Albanians*, 197.

Gheg and Tosk regions."[293] Throughout this period, and to some extent still today, the North, especially the Northeast, has been commonly portrayed as less developed and uncivilized, and the party-state had stated its mission to smooth this contrast.[294]

Paradoxically, although the socialist state deterministically intervened in family structures and rhetorically claimed to eliminate the central role of kin relations in order to create a new socialist society, the system of *biografia politike* (political biography), which itself is based on kin relations, remained one of the most powerful mechanisms through which the state itself organized and disciplined both social and spatial hierarchies. The classification of individuals and families into categories of *"good* or *bad biography"* (*biografi e mire/ e keqe*), based on class or kin origin and political loyalty, extended the party-state's authority deep into the relational level of everyday life. Those with "bad biographies," often linked to pre-socialist elites, religious figures, or having dissident relatives who escaped abroad, were systematically excluded from higher education, professional advancement, and participation in Party structures.[295]

The effects of this classification were reflected in the spatial politics of the organization of the engineered socialist society. Access to housing, urban residence authorizations, and employment in major cities was regulated through the same moral-political logic. Urban areas, particularly Tirana, were conceived as privileged spaces of ideological reliability.[296] There were planned and conducted demographic migration waves based on the state's program to create and mobilize a working force for industries. As in the case of Kombinat, the state created several new urban centers near new industries for the extraction of natural resources, such as various minerals, as well as new energy production industries close to water resources. These new urban centers influenced the rise of centrally planned urban migration. Furthermore, individuals assigned to bureaucratic jobs and the administration cadre,

293 Vickers, *The Albanians*, 209.

294 After the 1970s, many newly educated professionals, part of the new bureaucratic elite, mainly newly graduated professionals, and primarily originating from the South, were sent to work in northern regions as part of the "Go where the Party needs you!" campaign. They were located there with the stated aim of transferring knowledge and expertise to these remote, so-called underdeveloped areas, while also holding managerial positions. This almost resembled a process of internal coloniality.

295 There was a process in place for cleaning the bibliography, typically associated with a specific service provided to the party structure, sometimes spying services.

296 The unequal treatment between northern and southern Albania was reflected both in patterns of demographic movement and in the distribution of power within the bureaucratic elite of the time. Hierarchical regional origin was also a determinant of privilege. The North and the South were viewed differently, which influenced demographic shifts toward cities, especially Tirana, which became an urban myth.

serving the state apparatus and working in institutions located in the capital city and other important urban centers, were also centrally appointed. From the early 1960s, the regime implemented a strict rural-urban migration policy, consisting of a set of rules such as permission to move residence (*leje e shpërnguljes*) and an urban residence permit to settle in a new location (*leje banimi ose pasaportizimi*), which had to be thoroughly justified.[297]

Kin relations and shared place of origin certainly played a role in a chain of internal migration. At the same time, those with compromised biographies were often assigned to peripheral or rural localities, excluded from strategic industries, or denied urban housing altogether. The biography system thus acted as a form of moral zoning, producing a geography of trust and suspicion that mirrored the party-state's social order. Local Party committees and Base Organization monitored neighborhoods and workplaces, ensuring that spatial mobility and everyday proximity were filtered through political criteria. Biography based on kinship became not only a bureaucratic record but also a spatial instrument of governance, disciplining where one could live, study, or belong, thereby materializing its moral order in space.

Those close to power were not safe either. Writers such as Fatos Lubonja, who suffered imprisonment and persecution because of these mechanisms, wrote about how biography determined one's fate and level of freedom. He writes that "in our country you inherited your father's guilt," and that "the biography followed you like a shadow."[298] Although, rhetorically, the new bureaucratic socialist elite propagated equality, which in Albania was paradoxically handled by the state, it still began to reproduce itself by referencing kin ties and extending attention to biography. Marriages started to be arranged within the elite circles of the leadership, which even had their spatially designated area in the city of Tirana called *Blloku*, as well as access to the most spectacular places all over Albania for vacations and the like.

297 Vullnetari, *Albania on the Move*, 63. See also Örjan Sjöberg, *Rural Change And Development In Albania* (Westview Press, 1991); Örjan Sjöberg, "Underurbanisation and the Zero Urban Growth Hypothesis: Diverted Migration in Albania," *Geografiska Annaler. Series B, Human Geography* 74, no. 1 (1992): 3–19; Örjan Sjöberg, *Rural Retention in Albania: Administrative Restrictions on Urban-Bound Migration - Stockholm School of Economics*, 1994.

298 Fatos Lubonja, *Second Sentence: Inside the Albanian Gulag*, trans. John Hodgson (I.B. Tauris, 2009), 8–10, 31–33.

4.5 Internal Movements: From Being Isolated to Being Othered

I belong to a generation that experienced the regime change in 1991 and the anarchic times that followed during my childhood, without having the capacity to rationalize the events. The adults of that era were not entirely conscious of the unfolding events either, after the numbing effect of totalitarianism, in line with Arendt, and the shocking conditions of anarchy.[299] What they did recognize was the absence of prolonged oppressive rule and their sudden accelerated agency to pursue a better life in new horizons of uncertainty and hope. These forces shaped practices of formation of new urbanities, as well as practices of inhabiting and transforming existing ones.

Faced with a weakened state and after five decades of excessive control, many Albanians, previously reliant on state jobs, were compelled to participate in significant demographic shifts following the failure of the state and the loss of their jobs. This included emigration to neighboring countries like Italy and Greece, as well as internal migration toward the capital and coastal regions. Suddenly, a once remote population sought integration into the capital city, Tirana.

Kombinat and Kamza, two places I have studied for this work, have been heavily influenced by the migratory domestic movement from northeastern Albania following the fall of the totalitarian regime.[300] As described in the previous subsection, the demographic movement of the population during state socialism was strictly controlled. It was only in 1993 that "the right of every Albanian citizen to choose their place of residence and move freely within the state's territory, and emigrate abroad" was formally granted in law.[301] However, this freedom of movement was already being claimed by the Albanians right after the collapse of state socialism in 1991, when an exodus of emigration abroad and internal migration had already started, later accelerating in the turbulent year of 1997.

299 Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.
300 Vullnetari, *Albania on the Move*; Erka Caro, "From the Village to the City: Adjustment Process of Internal Migrants in Albania" (PhD, Groningen, 2011).
301 Vullnetari, *Albania on the Move*, 66.

Internal migrants were moving from all around Albania, but mostly from the mountainous, remote areas of the northeast and southeast toward the lowlands of western Albania, where the most important cities were located, including Tirana. These migrants were drawn by more economic opportunities and the hope of better infrastructure in education and healthcare. They were escaping extreme poverty after years of marginalization and isolation. A broad-brush map of the extended area around Tirana and Kamza, illustrating the approximate distribution of Tirana's residents by place of origin, would reveal certain patterns in their spatial location. Pre-socialist residents of Tirana, known as the old Tirana's families, are located in the city's central area, where traces of the Old Town are still present. In this area and in neighborhoods created during state socialism, within what is recognized as the Ring of Tirana, but also in more satellite neighborhoods like Kombinat, reside residents who arrived in the capital city supported by state socialism through demographic planning, having access to jobs, housing, education, and health institutions of the time. The population moving in during the waves of migration following the collapse of state socialism in the 1990s, depending on their economic opportunities, could locate inside the capital city, but the majority, including residents of Kamza, had to settle on the outskirts of Triana and build everything from scratch, unaided by the state or planned programs.[302]

Many of the arriving inhabitants began their lives in wooden huts or abandoned buildings, relying on their kin-making and commoning practices. The difference in urban fabric is noticeable. These entire areas have been officially designated illegal and informal for a long time, and have consistently been criticized as chaotic, messy, and characterized by wild urbanization. The spatial manifestation of the new urban areas surrounding Tirana is described in derogatory terms as a ring of "village-like peri-urban areas," implying that the process resulted not in the urbanization of the newly arrived rural population, but rather the ruralization of the capital city itself.[303] As the migration scholar Julie Vullnetari maintains, "… Their inhabitants – in-migrants mostly from poorer mountainous districts of Albania – are considered by many as a threat ready to invade the city with the 'cultural backwardness' they have brought along to their new destination."[304] Similarly, these areas have been stigmatized by professionals and academics in the fields of architecture and urbanism in Albania, who have largely sought to avoid engaging with these areas, viewing them as anomalies beyond their disciplinary field of concern, thereby reinforcing the alienation of both the areas and their

302 A more recent phenomenon is the construction of gated communities on the outskirts of Tirana for a newly formed wealthy class in Albania.
303 See Dervishi, Z. (2001), 'Urbanizimi i jetës së popullsisë fshatare apo ruralizimi i qyteteve? Rasti i Tiranës [Urbanisation of villagers' life or ruralisation of towns? The case of Tirana]', Politika dhe Shoqëria 1 (8): 33-42.
304 Vullnetari, *Albania on the Move*, 102.

inhabitants.[305] Vullnetari argues that the social and spatial segregation is expressed in the mindset of "the pre-1990 Tirana residents, who hold the most important jobs in administration, business, and other key areas, and who live in the affluent quarters of the city, complain of the 'suffocation' caused by this large-scale in-migration. Yet, it is this 'army' of primarily manual and semi-skilled workers, living in the disadvantaged peri-urban areas, who are working in their homes and businesses and providing them with services every day."[306]

The spatial segregation between Tirana's center and peripheries has long been reflected in, and instrumentalized through, electoral competition across the political spectrum. State socialist leadership was not the only one to favor the movement of primarily Southern inhabitants toward urban areas, as they were considered more loyal to the regime. Similarly, the major right-leaning democratic party (PD), led for an extended period by Sali Berisha, who himself originated from northern Albania, was said to have tolerated and even encouraged migration from northern regions for populist electoral purposes.[307] However, the conditions under which these two waves of migration unfolded toward the central lowlands of Albania, and in particular Tirana and its vicinity, were profoundly different. The socialist-era movements were centrally planned state projects that guaranteed access to the privileges of urban life in the capital, including established welfare conditions such as housing, education, and healthcare. The second demographic shift after the collapse of state socialism in 1991 occurred when the state was largely absent, lacking the leverage or will to offer supportive conditions to the new migrants.[308] These migrants were thus compelled to construct new livelihoods independently, evoking and mobilizing kinship ties and commoning practices of construction, care, and resistance to materializing urban formations. These often stigmatized areas have become the living environment of the workforce that sustains the capital's economic life while becoming political centralities in their own right, like in the case of Kamza.

305 Novas and Pllumbi, "Observing the Architectural Stigma of the Ugliness: The Cases of Albania and Galicia."
306 Julie Vullnetari, "Albanian Migration and Development: State of the Art Review," *IMISCOE Working Paper*, 2007.
307 The surge of migrants was attributed in part to political backing from Berisha, who rose to prominence during the movement that toppled the dictatorship in 1991 and later headed the PD, which came to power in 1992. The party became an umbrella for the broader anti-communist sentiment of the time, encompassing a diverse group that included both vulnerable migrants from the northeast and the dispossessed heirs of former landlords who had been promised land restitution.
308 For a more detailed account of how the newly arrived migrant had to self-organize to resist the state's attempt to demolish their makeshift houses and claim the right to the city, see Malaj, D. (Forthcoming 2026). "Uncannying Kamza: The Construction of a Disavowed Cityy", in E. Alatalo, D. Pllumbi, & D. Milián Bernal (Eds.), *(Hidden) Narratives of Spatial Resistance*. NAi Publishers.

In 1997, when internal demographic movements in Albania intensified, the country experienced an almost civil war triggered by the collapse of the Ponzi schemes, as explained in the Introduction of this dissertation.[309] Stigmatizing language toward the relocated migrant population reached its peak during this period and its aftermath.[310] Nearly three decades later, this stigmatizing language appeared to have eased out, giving the impression of greater societal acceptance of internal migrants. However, in recent years, amid Tirana's construction boom and wave of urban renewal projects, such discriminatory discourse has resurfaced. It has been articulated recently and primarily by politicians in power who advocate the clearance of entire so-called self-built areas to pave the way for large-scale development projects, many of which are designed by star architects. Some of these projects are currently under investigation for their speculative nature and the brutal evictions they have entailed. A particularly emblematic case is the neighborhood of 5 Maji in Tirana, where a masterplan designed by Stefano Boeri is being implemented under the name *Riverside* (after the Albanian name of the area known as *Bregu Lumit),* a symbolic "upgrade" from the Albanian to an English name that reflects the broader politics of erasure and rebranding at play in the city's contemporary urban transformation.[311]

309 Smoki Musaraj, *Tales from Albarado: Ponzi Logics of Accumulation in Postsocialist Albania* (Cornell University Press, 2020).

310 Malaj, "Bathorja Në Shtypin e Përditshem Gjatë Viteve '90 Dhe 2000."

311 Dorina Pllumbi, "Is Tirana's rapid transformation progress or erasure?" *Kosovo 2.0*, 2022; Suzanne Harris-Brandts and Ervin Goci, "Formalising Tirana," *On Site Review 43: Architecture and Time*, 2023; Ervin Goci and Suzanne Harris-Brandts, "Contemporary Hazard and Health Discourse in Urban Renewal: A Critical Examination of Smart, Sustainable, Earthquake and Pandemic-Proof Imaginaries Driving Dispossession in Tirana, Albania," *Urban Geography* 0, no. 0 (n.d.): 1–22.

4.6 Claiming Space in Common(s)

As explained in the Introduction of this dissertation (subsection 1.2.2, The margins and the marginalized as radical places of study), the following chapters of Part 3 of this thesis are the result of the fieldwork I conducted in the three marginalized places in Kamza, Kombinat, and the National Theater. The chapters provide a cross-temporal reflection of how commoning practices unfolded in various political moments in the three places of study. The study engages with the dynamics of political transition through the lens of relational commoning, emphasizing its role in mediating social and spatial reorganization through relations of kin-making and proximity.

The research has been conducted with both historical and theoretical ambitions, treating them as entangled dimensions that continuously inform and sustain one another. Because of the situated character of this research, I aimed to give each of the places its own space as a microcosm I engaged with. In each of these places, I encountered distinct characteristics of commoning, which are described in their specific contexts. Therefore, while writing the chapters, I sought to foreground the places and their lived realities without isolating the practices of commoning from the microcosmos in which they are embedded. The thematic, theoretical, and methodological reflections that connect these experiences are developed in the concluding part (Part 4) of the dissertation, where I analyze the results of the multimodal spatial ethnography conducted across these sites.

As explained in the methodology chapter in Part 2 of this dissertation, my degree of presence varied from one place to another, depending on the circumstances encountered on the ground. I was therefore able to enter homes, observe everyday life, and take part in and co-organize events and activities at these places of study. Each place was thus accessed differently, and through this diversity of engagements, I reflect on the situated epistemologies of commoning that emerged in these contexts.

Among the sites explored, Kombinat occupies the most extensive space in the two following chapters (Chapter 5). This is not to establish a hierarchy of importance among the places I engaged in for this study, but because I had the chance to spend more time in Kombinat. This allowed me to reflect more closely on the particularly dense and layered materialization of Albania's political dynamics within Kombinat's microcosm. It is a place that, on a small scale, encapsulates the broader transformations that have unfolded across the country during fluctuating political regimes, from state socialism to the anarchic years that followed and the current neoliberal phase. From its conception, Kombinat has embodied the mobilizing force

and productive enthusiasm of the socialist enterprise. It is characterized by long working shifts, the feminization of labor, and top-down attempts at emancipation and the creation of a new modern society through the ideology of state socialism, along with the failures. Here, the post-socialist transformation becomes tangible in the way former industrial buildings turned into unlocked commons once state power was dismantled, allowing marginalized populations to claim and inhabit them. In the present, these same spaces reveal the renewed enclosures imposed by the intertwined interests of private capital and the neoliberal state, which actively erase the material and spatial attempts of the inhabitants to sustain their livelihoods on the ground.

While Kombinat holds a significant space in this dissertation, Kamza comes in as a site that reveals the broader capacity of migrants' agency to create a city from scratch. An unplanned city that is not perfect, but that carries the tacit spatial politics of being constructed through situated knowledge inherited and reinterpreted in a new setting. I write about the place through ethnographic observations, honoring its character and the way this work has been conducted through the idea of situatedness and immersing in the field of relations.

The Movement for the Saving of the National Theater exposes the marginalization of collectives in Albania, regardless of whether they are located in the peripheries or at the very center of the capital city. It stands as a critical case in which citizens united to assert their right to participate in the decision concerning a building that held significant symbolic, emotional, and heritage value. The state's refusal to engage in dialogue and its lack of will to acknowledge this collective effort, as in other protest cases in Albania, revealed another instance where the agency of the commons is diminished under the consolidation of the neoliberal regime, where state power increasingly aligns with private interests. This shrinking of collective agency is also visible in the other two places of study: in Kombinat, through the demolition of squatted ex-industrial buildings, and in Kamza, through the replication of Tirana's apartment block (*pallat*) model, which erases the city's distinctive character and modes of construction. In the case of the Theater, the demand to participate in the city's spatial politics was vocal and clearly articulated. At the same time, the act of demolition was executed with brutal force, making this an emblematic case of the ongoing struggle over the urban commons in contemporary Albania.

While asymmetries of power in spatial politics of the various participating actors clash on the ground in Albania, this research work is positioned as an academic effort to highlight othered perspectives and non-canonical epistemologies that hold critical value in expanding our understanding of the collective production of space in the city. These non-canonical epistemologies are ways of knowing and producing knowledge that operate outside, or in tension with, dominant institutionalized

frameworks of thought within well-defined academic fields, such as architecture. They challenge the presumed universality of consolidated epistemic paradigms by foregrounding situated, embodied, and relational forms of understanding that emerge from specific historical, cultural, and material conditions. Therefore, this study positions the Albanian experience of systemic rupture and deep societal transformation as a paradigmatic case for understanding material and discursive grassroots efforts to reclaim and reshape the city. These situated epistemologies arising from the experience of marginal communities underscore the significance of nuanced forms of commoning as collective spatial agencies in geographies historically excluded or silenced by canonical systems of knowledge production.

5 Unraveling Collectivities in Kombinat

From Glory to Uncertainty[312]

Kombinat, more than a neighborhood, is a story. … Kombinat has all the ingredients for a great narration: start, characters, heroes, conflicts, intertwining, action, and conclusion. All in well-defined space and time, easily recognizable and describable. It is true that the style is up to the narrator, but Kombinat has plenty to give, even to those who want to share its story. The peripheral neighborhood of Tirana, which took life and name from the textile complex called "Stalin" born in the 1950s has something undeniably epic. As such, any attempt to describe it shall start with the famous "Once upon a time" …

Rando Devole, Uno Specchio tra passato e futuro[313]

312 A few paragraphs in this chapter have been published previously in Dorina Pllumbi, "Kombinat: The Unseen and Their Architectural Oddkins," Architectural Design 92, no. 2 (2022): 30–35, https://doi.org/10.1002/ad.2790.

313 Rando Devole, "Prefazione: Uno Specchio Tra Passato e Futuro," in *Kombinat. Storia e Vita Quotidiana Di Un Quartiere Simbolo Di Tirana*, ed. Luigi Za (besa, 2012), 9. [translation from Italian by the author]

Kombinat is a peripheral ex-industrial neighborhood located approximately six kilometers southwest of Tirana's city center. The neighborhood dates back to the creation of the Textile Complex "Stalin" (*Kombinati Tekstil Stalin*), inaugurated in 1951. Kombinat was a pioneering state project in the introduction of state socialism in Albania, representing a monumental investment aimed at accelerating the country's industrialization. It served as an ideological showcase of socialist accomplishments. The textile factory's industrial area and the working-class neighborhood were adjacently positioned. This industrial hub functioned not only as an operational entity but also played a pivotal role in the foreign and domestic politics of socialist Albania (1946-1991). It became a key geopolitical negotiator, facilitating the transculturation of Albanian society with the Soviet Union and the broader socialist world. Its significance extended beyond the confines of industrial production, positioning it as an entity deeply intertwined with the socio-political landscape of the time.[314] Furthermore, beyond being one of the large industrial hubs in Albania, Kombinat embodied the tangible realization of the party-state's objective to transform a small, predominantly agrarian country. It became a laboratory for developing the previously missing industrial proletariat.

A strategic use of propaganda accompanied the creation of the textile factory, which was promoted in the media of the time through televised documentaries and written newspaper reports, fostering a collective belief in the progressive socialist vision. This concerted effort aimed at instilling faith in the state's ability to implement the socialist project with active participation from the population. This made Kombinat a microcosm, a generator of collective enterprise that was primarily induced from the top but simultaneously supported from the ground up by the engineered working-class community that populated it.

Since 1991, following the collapse of the totalitarian socialist state, Kombinat has had to confront the aftermath of anarchic episodes that swept across Albania.[315] The onset of deindustrialization began with the deterioration of the state and the halt in production.

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314 Tom Avermaete and Cathelijne Nuijsink, "Architectural Contact Zones: Another Way to Write Global Histories of the Post-War Period?," *Architectural Theory Review* 25, no. 3 (2021): 350–61, https://doi.org/10.1080/13264826.2021.1939745.

315 As described in more detail in the main Introduction of the thesis and the previous section on the Albanian context, with the fall of state socialism, the role of the state, the market, the individual, and the collectives shifted drastically. Massive external and internal migratory waves accompanied this. The country underwent substantial reforms, including privatization, which were led by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. The year 1997 was a particularly tumultuous period, marked by the collapse of the so-called Pyramid Ponzi schemes, which resulted in two-thirds of the population losing their savings that had been invested in these fraudulent financial firms. See Musaraj, S. (2020). *Tales from Albarado: Ponzi Logics of Accumulation in Postsocialist Albania*. Cornell University Press.

What was once the pride of the party-state lay as a desolate landscape, marked by the emptiness of abandoned mills. Amid the tumultuous early 1990s, several of these buildings were privatized, and many were squatted, transformed, and repurposed into dwellings by migrant inhabitants arriving from various corners of Albania. While Kombinat is emblematic of the state's capacity to socially engineer collective life from the top down, in this study, I also consider it a tangible testament to a community life created from scratch after the dissipation of the state's totalizing force. This aspect of Kombinat's history was extensively overlooked and considered unimportant.

Therefore, in the first subchapter on Kombinat entitled *From Glory to Uncertainty,* I revisit the history of Kombinat's foundational and productive periods. This exploration spans multiple layers and temporalities, initially examining its geopolitical implications and domestic politics in Socialist Albania, as well as the microcosm of working-class communities. I write about the glorious way Kombinat was brought to life, the personal and collective spirit of the time, the operation of the factories, and the uncertainties that the fall of the socialist regime brought for the industry and the newly created proletariat. I therefore offer a glimpse of daily work, leisure, gendered relations, and, more importantly, practices of commoning within a community shaped by major influential forces, such as controlling structures of the party-state during totalitarianism. Although, as said, this is one of the most documented and written periods, I am interested in understanding how practices of commoning that were not imposed as state collectivism had to fully or reluctantly embrace, or to some extent negotiate, their agency within this major state project.

Secondly, I delve extensively into the overlooked and stigmatized history of the reuse of the ex-industrial area of Kombinat, which is often read only as a history of decay after its glorious times. I extend my exploration toward the history of the afterlife, not as a tragic ending of collectivity, as has usually been considered in the local dominant narrative, but as an expression of the commons, fragmented, fugitive, marginalized commons, based on kin and proximity. This marginalized part of Kombinat's history stands in total shadow, in stark contrast to the well-documented, celebrated narrative of its creation and glory. Attention to this period aims to delineate the difference between what comes from the top and what operates on the ground, as well as the role architectural space plays in creating, sustaining, and accommodating these different types of collectivities. Furthermore, and in addition to historiographic ambition, I see value in theorizing what seems disorderly, but which I have found to be paradigmatic spatial and material interventions by the inhabitants within the former industrial structures. This exploration is particularly relevant to understanding how migrant communities, after the fall of state socialism, asserted their agency in the arrangement of spaces like Kombinat.



FIG. 5.1 Demolition of squatted former industrial buildings at Kombinat to make way for new apartment blocks envisioned in the Kombin-Art masterplan. Site visit 23.02.2022

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As described in the second subchapter 5.2 on Kombinat titled *Starting Beyond the End*, the place that embodied a propagated socialist utopia underwent, in its afterlife, a three-decade-long transformation into a form of communal living that persevered within the same territory and the mills. However, it remained detached from state protocols and planning, market logic, and ideologies. Certainly, for those who worked in the mills and had their lives and identities entangled with the buildings and labor, the squatting of the mills was considered a tragedy. Nevertheless, viewed through the lens of the theory of the commons, we can observe how the architectural setting of the mills of Kombinat materializes the shift in the property's character from state-owned to commons-appropriated, transforming the roles of the state, the individual, and the community. It exposes how practices of different collectivities operate in different regimes in the same spatial setting. Therefore, the architectural structures, once housing the ambitions and hard work that went into the grand project of building state socialism, now bear witness to pragmatic interventions by squatter inhabitants that have granted the massive Kombinat structures a second life. These architectural structures have afforded amateur interventions that effectively repurposed these gigantic buildings, rendering them valuable to numerous migrant families relocating to Tirana in pursuit of a better life in the capital city, as they claimed their asserted right to the city and the aspiration for a better life.

Today, the old and new inhabitants of Kombinat find themselves with limited opportunities to contest decisions impacting their lives. After years of neglect and the aftermath of a destructive earthquake in November 2019, a new master plan by the Italian architectural firm Archea Associati has been approved and presented to the public through an online meeting during the COVID-19 pandemic. This plan comprises a radical transformation involving massive demolition and new construction. Kombin-Art – as the masterplan renames the area – has the ambition of creating a new image, a beautification operation that artificially imports art activities into the few existing buildings proposed for preservation, while overlooking the rich history of Kombinat and erasing other forms of life that have flourished at the mills. The project can be regarded as fetishizing the communist history of Kombinat and overlooking the social-spatial practices that enabled life in a different way.

The story of Kombinat encapsulates the essence of understanding Albania's reality, spanning from the totalitarian past through the anarchic aftermath to the transition into a new, current form of a neoliberal and oligarchic state, criticized for being at constant risk of relapse into authoritarianism.[316] The agency of the inhabitants, both individually and collectively, has been shrinking and expanding in accordance with the role of the state and, lately, the economically powerful.

Kombinat occupies an extensive space in this thesis, with two subchapters dedicated to it. The first looks into the creation of Kombinat as a state enterprise and the social, cultural, political, and spatial dynamics related to its operation. I include discourses on the role played by state collectivism as well as more subtle minor commoning dimensions and kin relationalities that unfolded during the time of operation of Kombinat. In the second subchapter, I provide a different interpretation of other ways of creating livelihood after the collapse of state socialism, looking at the spatial practices through the lens of the theory of the commons. The discussed tacit and genuine processes of the inhabitants themselves appropriating and repurposing ex-industrial buildings for dwelling and small family businesses are often perceived in the local architectural disciplinary discourse as a form of disorder and anomaly. This results in the unseeing of these processes by architectural professionals, academics, local governance, and the state. Devoid of romanticization, I acknowledge them as tangible evidence of newly arrived inhabitants' efforts to provide and improve their living material conditions unaided and in solidarity with each other, yet forgotten by the state and the city of Tirana, rendering them either invisible or subject to stigma. Despite the architectural field's aspiration for a more inclusive modus operandi, it currently appears to lack the capacity to incorporate these seemingly *disorderly processes* into its operational manner.

316 Bieber, *The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans*.

5.1 Manufacturing Glory: The Socialist Dream of Kombinat

The Sovietization of Albania is a story of machines. From spinning machinery for cotton mills, freight cars, ZIS and GAZ trucks, tractors, and blueprints to the rise of factories and worker settlements, the Soviets came to be known not by the stomping feet of army troops but through the hum of engines and the wonders of industry.

Elidor Mëhilli, From Stalin to Mao: Albania and the Socialist World [317]

After liberating Albania from Italian and German occupation during World War II, the Albanian Communist Party initially allied with the anti-fascist Eastern Bloc after receiving support from Yugoslavia during the war to establish itself and gain power. However, it soon considered itself to be under Yugoslav patronage. With the emergence of the Stalin-Tito schism, Albania opted to align with Stalin in 1948, thereby successfully extricating itself from Yugoslavian influence. Therefore, Albania's rapprochement with the Soviet Union occurred during the schism within the international Communist movement, which arose from the Soviet break with Yugoslavia in 1948.[318] Moscow was a promising ally for Albania because, in the wake of World War II and the decolonization of many countries, the Soviet Union and its ideology appeared unthreatening and appealing to a small nation struggling to assert its territorial sovereignty. It was a powerful and inspiring example of progress, but at the same time, seemingly without ambitions for territorial annexation or imperialist intentions. This led the post-war Communist Party of Albania (later, in 1948, the Albanian Party of Labour) to seek close relations with the Soviets and to open up politically and culturally toward a process of Sovietization.[319] The period of 1948-1955 is called the Soviet-Albanian Honeymoon in a CIA report.[320]

317 Elidor Mëhilli, *From Stalin to Mao: Albania and the Socialist World* (Cornell University Press, 2017), 54.
318 The Albanian leaders who created the Albanian Communist Party in 1941 were guerrilla partisan fighters, who were supported during the war by the Yugoslavian Communist Party. The latter already had a foundational organizational background as well as experience in navigating geopolitical moves. With the help of the Yugoslavs, the Communist Party of Albania was founded on November 8, 1941. The name was later changed in 1948 to the Albanian Party of Labour, influenced by a recommendation by Stalin. See Mëhilli, *From Stalin to Mao: Albania and the Socialist World*, 5.
319 The leaders of the Albanian Communist Party had not been part of the Comintern during or before WWII. The Comintern was created in 1919 as the Communist International organization advocating world communism.
320 CIA Paper, *Soviet-Albanian Relations, 1940-1960 (Reference Title: ESAU XIX-62)* (CIA Central Intelligence Agency, 1962), CIA.

In 1945, the Soviet-Albanian Friendship Society (*Shoqëria e miqësisë Shqipëri-Bashkimi Sovjetik*) was established to facilitate cultural exchange. The Society took on increased importance in the wake of the rift with Yugoslavia of both Albania and the Soviets. In effect, after the split with Yugoslavia, organizing activities and disseminating Soviet culture more widely in Albania became one of the key tasks of the Society. In essence, this meant the opening of Russian-language courses, putting in place Soviet industrial practices, arranging presentations and artistic performances, and distributing Soviet books and materials in Albanian.[321]

Stalin's influence on Albania was welcomed but unintended, given the country's geographical distance from the Soviet Union's direct control over other nations. Despite being a small and distant entity on the Balkan Peninsula, Albania became a satellite country under the radar of Moscow. Nevertheless, Albania's satellite condition was not unique among many other countries considered to be part of Global Socialism, located in the Middle East or West Africa, and open to resources and expertise beyond the West.[322] Gaining Moscow's attention became a crucial task for the post-war, ravaged Albania, although it was not achieved immediately.[323] This was in the wake of the World War II post-colonization process and the Cold War, when the Soviets' ideological positionality promised a fair way of how relations would be created among the centrality of a Soviet political economy with other countries that were seeking support.

The industrial complex known as the Stalin Textile Factory, commonly known as Kombinat (from its Albanian name *Kombinati Tekstil Stalin*), was the first major industrial investment in post-war Albania. It was inaugurated in 1951 and was a "gift" from the Soviet Union to the Albanian people with the installation of the socialist regime. A postcolonial cautiousness can be recognized in how the Soviets created "an ambiguous relationship between gift-giving and commercial exchange" throughout different corners of the non-Western world, where architectural gifts and technical expertise were important in shaping cultural relations.[324]

321 Mëhilli, *From Stalin to Mao: Albania and the Socialist World*, 74.
322 Łukasz Stanek, "Architecture in Global Socialism: Eastern Europe, West Africa, and the Middle East in the Cold War," *The Journal of Architecture* 26, no. 1 (2021): 52–55, https://doi.org/10.1080/13602365.2021.1883317.
323 Mëhilli, *From Stalin to Mao: Albania and the Socialist World*.
324 Vladimir Kulić, ed., *Second World Postmodernisms_ Architecture and Society under Late Socialism* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2019); Łukasz Stanek, "Łukasz Stanek - Gift, Credit, Barter: Architectural Mobilities in Global Socialism," 2020, https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/housing/337850/gift-credit-barter-architectural-mobilities-in-global-socialism/.

In the initial post-war years in Albania, the Communist Party, led by Enver Hoxha, was aiming to establish its rule by creating a party-state socialist regime. For the Albanian leader of the time, Enver Hoxha, industry became a priority, despite Stalin's warnings during their five meetings (between 1947 and 1951) not to imitate the Soviet example but to take it easy with the reforms. Enver Hoxha's vision for Albania did not align at all with Stalin's conception of the small, remote country. Stalin, on the one hand, because of the majority of the peasant Albanian population and the low level of industrial development of the country at the time, advised an orientation toward agriculture. He suggested being cautious by advancing an agricultural economy in Albania and making gradual reforms, discouraging a hasty embrace of Soviet-style industrialization and collectivization. Hoxha, on the other hand, sought a rapid and radical modern transformation for Albania through fast-track industrialization with Marxism-Leninism serving as a core ideological foundation.[325]

This ambition of the Albanian leader to use industry to fight backwardness meant simultaneously laying the foundation for a proletarian base that was lacking until that moment. The leadership in Albania at the time zealously implemented Soviet style reforms in the predominantly illiterate, peasant-majority country, where the working class had to be created from scratch. Kombinat was the first major laboratory to implement the vision of industrial advancement and the creation of the proletarian base.[326]

Geopolitically speaking, Stalin's cautiousness during the post-World War II period not to repeat the extractivist and colonial policies of Western imperialism can be recognized in the relationship with many countries of Global Socialism.[327] This is also noticed in the Albanian case, when he clearly stated that the Soviet Union would never intervene in internal Albanian issues. The Soviets were very careful in the portrayal of their influence in Albania.

325 Mëhilli, *From Stalin to Mao: Albania and the Socialist World*.
326 The Communist Party that was about to establish its power in the country needed to create a base, a proletarian class, where, according to the socialist ideology, it was supposed to anchor its power. Proletarization became a state project, alongside modernization and coming out of backwardness. See Mëhilli, *From Stalin to Mao: Albania and the Socialist World*, 6; See also Lelaj, *Nën Shenjën e Modernitetit*.
327 Stanek, "Architecture in Global Socialism."

The Soviet cultural authorities acted as "editors in chief" in curating the cultural material supplied to Albania and in shaping how Soviet influence in Albania appeared internationally, especially in the Socialist world.[328] Later on, Khrushchev in particular problematized the gift economy as non-beneficial for the Soviet Union and turned toward barter and low-interest credit for countries with less prosperous economies. This concern was especially relevant and present under the unavoidable pressure of competition over economic development, lifestyle, and well-being between East and West, but also among the Eastern Bloc countries themselves.[329]

The Sovietization of Albania, which unfolded predominantly through the industrial realm, permeated the political and cultural sphere as well. "The Soviet civilization stood for the bold promise of a new noncapitalist world, but these were also years of profound insecurity for the novice rulers of a small country. … [The] Soviet-style socialism [was seen as] not only a vision of a possible future but also the means to realize the country's aspirations for a place in the world."[330] As Mëhilli argues, this was a time when Soviet subjectivity was a thing, and "socialism became a form of subject-making." This happened through cultural sphere exchange, such as in the realm of literature, theater, and so on. The Albanian leaders had learned and appropriated the language of Marxist-Leninism.[331]

328 Mëhilli writes, "They [the Soviets] never disguised their authority, but officials in Moscow also obsessed over not appearing to run affairs in Albania—this before the post-Stalinist turn in foreign relations in the mid-1950s. In 1949, Soviet cultural advisers criticized an Albanian exhibition commemorating the National Liberation War for not emphasizing enough the Red Army's role. "We were not lucky enough to have the Red Army come to our country," the Albanian representative retorted defensively, "so it is difficult to include images of the Red Army liberating our country in this exhibition." But they also added the politically judicious clarification: "though in effect our country's liberation was enabled by the Red Army." Then, three years later, Soviet officials took issue with another exhibition ("New Albania on the Road to Socialism") for emphasizing Soviet involvement too much. Accordingly, the Soviet hosts rearranged some displays, edited some captions, and removed an image showing a military parade in Tirana. Responding to "comments made by foreign visitors," they also removed references to direct Soviet presence in the country." Mëhilli, *From Stalin to Mao: Albania and the Socialist World*, 74.

329 Mëhilli, *From Stalin to Mao: Albania and the Socialist World*, 132; As Lukasz Stanek shows, the case of Ghana exemplifies the exchange agreements of Ghanaian agricultural products with industrial help and expertise from the Soviet Union. This explains the intention of Stalin in the meeting with the Albanian leader Enver Hoxha to orient the Albanian economy toward agricultural production instead of industry, or at least to take it easy with industrial and modernizing reforms. Apparently, this was a policy taken toward more satellite so-called "underdeveloped" countries. See Stanek, "Housing - Łukasz Stanek - Gift, Credit, Barter."

330 Mëhilli, *From Stalin to Mao: Albania and the Socialist World*, 4.

331 Albanians had not been part of Comecon (Council of Mutual Economic Assistance) until 1949, when the Soviets enabled it. However, Albania ceased taking an active part at the end of 1961, when the country broke ties with the Soviet Union. Similarly, Albania was part of the Warsaw Pact defense treaty from 1955 and during the Cold War, until the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, when Albania left the pact in protest of this invasion and rejection of the Soviet doctrine formulated for the pact.

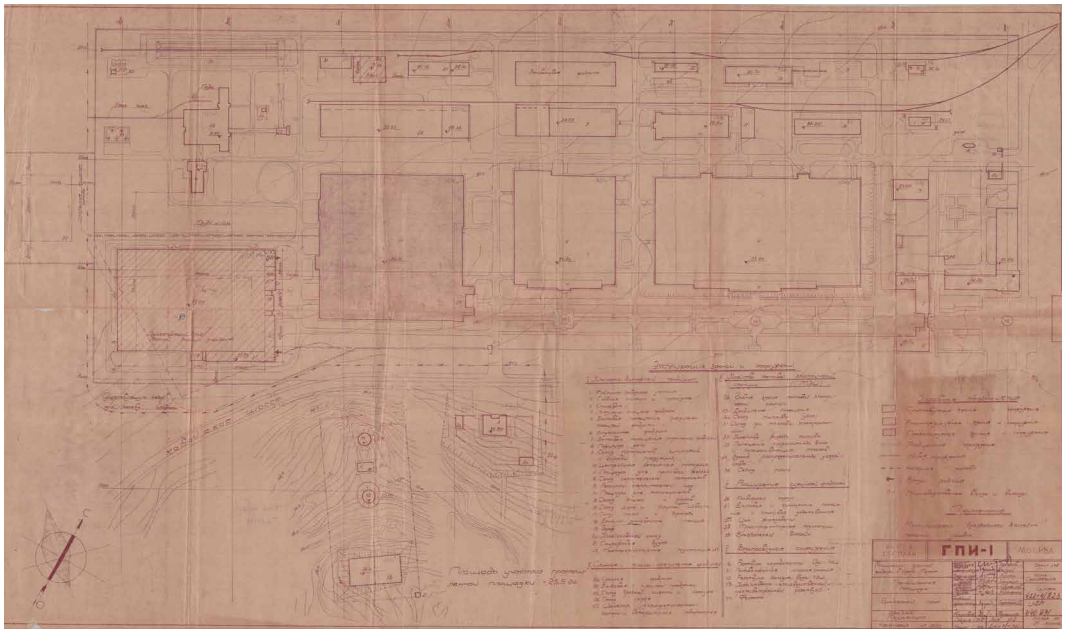


FIG. 5.2 Plan of Kombinati Tekstil Stalin produced by Soviet Architects in Moscow. Source: Arkivi Qendror i Ndertimit, Tirana, Albania.

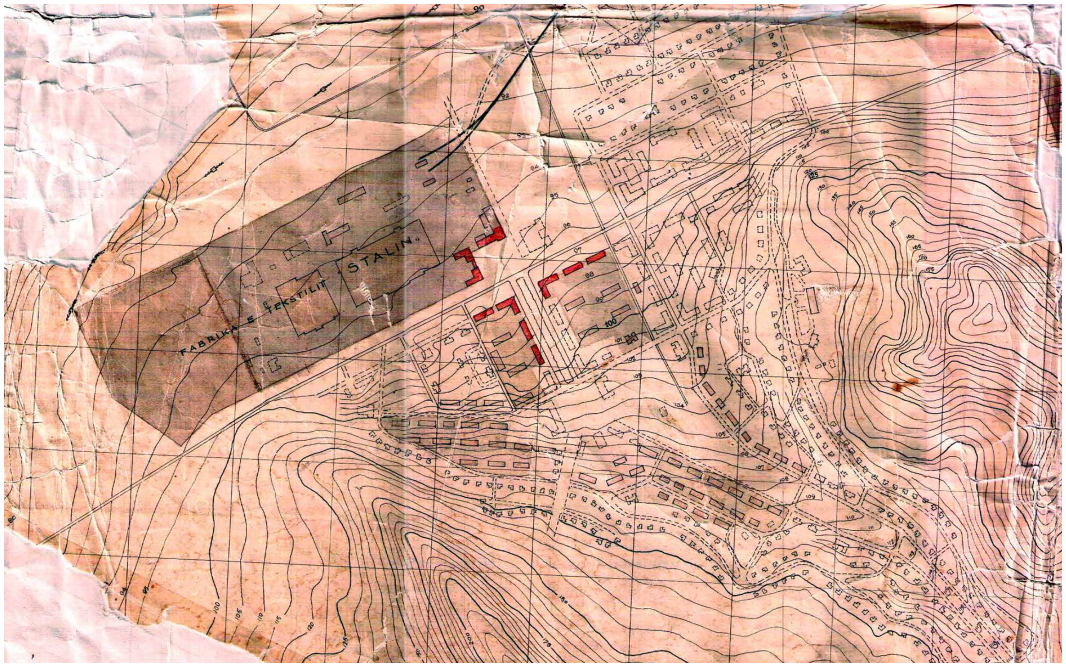


FIG. 5.3 Extract of the Kombinat area from the General Plan of Tirana of 1953. It is possible to identify the industrial area (in gray) and the working-class neighborhood. Source: Arkivi Qendror i Ndertimit, Tirana, Albania.

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As the story developed later, they would use it as a tool for navigating power relations, emphasizing the centrality of this ideology.[332].

In this context, Kombinat could be seen as an embodiment of geopolitical relationships. It began first as a joint enterprise on paper with the Yugoslavs in 1947, but that project never started, and the delays in design and construction were interpreted by the Albanians as sabotage. With the establishment of good relationships with Moscow, Kombinat's project was taken over by the Soviet Union under a contract that included assistance in developing blueprints and machines, assembling production technology, and training at all levels of the establishment's construction and production process. Alongside the construction and operation of the industrial section, the Soviets supported the creation of the neighborhood for the workers, including all the facilities required for a healthy life of a socialist proletariat in the making.[333]

During what was considered the Soviet-Albanian honeymoon period until 1961, several industrial investments were made in Albania, with the vast Soviet support in design, construction, technology, and technical assistance. The Textile Factory Stalin - Kombinat - was the main and most important for the country, not only economically but also symbolically. For the party-state, Kombinat encapsulated the showcase model of an industrial site and working-class neighborhood. Kombinat would represent the historical moment of a new era of transition from an agrarian to an industrial Albania.[334] Here, the New Worker and the New Socialist (Hu)Man were being fabricated. The Soviet machines gave the peasants, predominantly from southern Albania, a new status and identity, making them the new proletariat. They and their family members would all be called *kombinats* – citizens of Kombinat – which was a newly gained identity carried with pride.[335]

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332 The Albanian leadership used the Marxist-Leninist ideology in negotiating following political power dynamics when the contradictions and eventually the split with the Soviets happened in early 1961, as standing loyal to the Stalinist legacy and against Khrushchev's revisionism. It was the case of a small peripheral country opposing a powerful imperial center. Similarly, and with greater ease, the Albanian leaders used their rhetoric against the Chinese state, which was their only powerful aid and trade ally after the split with the Soviet Union. These dynamics against imperialism and revisionism were particularly geopolitically interesting in the time of decolonization, although they led toward a self-isolation of the country and harsher domestic politics of totalitarianism. Mëhilli, *From Stalin to Mao: Albania and the Socialist World*, 94.
333 Mëhilli, *From Stalin to Mao: Albania and the Socialist World*, 98.
334 Olsi Lelaj, "Skicë Etnografike Mbi Lagjen e Kombinatit, Tiranë," *Antropologji* 1–2 (2024): 55–81.
335 Mëhilli, *From Stalin to Mao: Albania and the Socialist World*, 99.

Far beyond its factories, Kombinat was a new centrality, a new socialist city, with special attention given to the public areas. Kombinat, as mentioned before and seen in the above map, was an industrial hub composed of two complementary functionalities. One was the area of the factories, and next to it the workers' neighborhood. Both were constructed and expanded simultaneously. There was a street that separated and connected the main working and residential areas. Later, as the neighborhood grew, the residential area expanded all the way to the eastern side of the main entrance to the industrial area. This main entrance was marked by a central square named after Stalin, where his statue stood firm with his hand extended toward the users of the plaza, mainly factory workers. Kombinat was constructed based on the residential Soviet bloc concept known as *kvartaly,* featuring schools, kindergartens, cafeterias for the workers, its own radio station, and many recreational areas, including a cinema and a *mapo* (*magazina popullore*).[336]



FIG. 5.4 Central square of Stalin Textile Factory (Kombinat), Inauguration day, November 8 1951. Source: ATSH

336 *Mapo* (*magazina popullore*) was a socialist state-controlled kind of shopping mall.

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The construction of Kombinat in the former village of Yzberisht in Tirana extensively changed the landscape of the area, which was previously a wetland. The construction of the industrial zone meant "taming of the landscape," requiring land reclamation through the draining of the Yzberisht marsh.[337] The stark contrast between before and after made the unprecedented investment appear even more impressive. Feride, a 77-year-old woman at the time I met her in 2022, relocated to Kombinat with her family in 1950 during the peak of the construction. Initially, her family, consisting of her parents and two siblings (with another sibling later born in Kombinat), lived in wooden barracks that were intended for the construction workers of Kombinat. According to Feride, some of these workers were prisoners and soldiers with no prior construction experience, besides others with the simple status of workers.[338]

After four years as a police officer in Kombinat, Feride's father decided to become a worker at the Textile factory and remained one for the rest of his life. Her mother was a cleaner in the factory buildings of Kombinat. Feride also started working very early at Kombinat, at the age of 14, after completing her 7 years of basic education. This was the case with many young women who came to Kombinat for work while simultaneously receiving training at the factory's school to become more skilled at operating the machines. Training and obtaining qualifications alongside work were among the mechanisms used to discipline the working class. Feride got married to a young worker in Kombinat at the age of 18 and had three children. She continued her education in parallel with working and taking care of her family.[339]

The spatial organization of early Kombinat reflected emerging hierarchies within the socialist project. Feride vividly remembers the marsh from her childhood, emphasizing its barrenness aside from the barracks, a small number of two-story housing units, and the ongoing construction of the mills. Describing their living conditions, she recalls a single, expansive room without partitions and outdoor toilets constructed with plywood. These barracks served as a temporary housing solution during the construction phase and were situated on higher ground than where the textile mills were being built. The two-story housing units, commonly known as *Pallatet Sovietike* [Soviet apartment buildings], were constructed to provide better living conditions for Soviet specialists visiting or living near the construction site. These buildings are still referred to as luxurious by the local inhabitants. The majority of the Soviet specialists stayed until 1954–55. Later on, these housing units were

337 Mëhilli, *From Stalin to Mao: Albania and the Socialist World*, 98.
338 "Conversation of the author with Feride, a 77-year-old woman, inhabitant and worker of Kombinat," April 16, 2022.
339 "Conversation of the author with Feride, a 77-year-old woman, inhabitant and worker of Kombinat."

given to the important functionaries of the Textile Factory and those close to the party-state. Although, on paper, in Socialist Albania, power was supposed to be in the hands of the working class —a newly constructed and socially engineered class— there were still common instances where differences in privileges were given as incentives to specific contributors to the state apparatus of the party-state socialist regime. In neighborhood chats, *Pallatet Sovietike* was nicknamed the *Blloku of Kombinat*, drawing a parallel with the privileged area where the communist leadership elite lived in luxurious villas, famously known as *Blloku,* in the center of Tirana.[340]

The construction of the first mills left a memorable and influential mark on those witnessing and participating in this fundamentally transformative process, turning the muddy swampland into a thriving industrial landscape. The creation of the first mills gave participants a sense of involvement in a grand national project of historical dimension and fostered a belief in the ideals driving this monumental endeavor for the entire country. However, besides the gloriously propagated side of the enterprise of such a far-fledged project for Albania that could never be allowed to fail, "unintentionally the mills became a symbol: of the confusion of forced industrialization in an agrarian setting, the misery of breakneck labor, of distress and disease, and also of all-consuming aspirations for a better life."[341]

Although the Soviet-Albanian honeymoon lasted only 14 years (1947-1961), the intensity of cultural exchange meant that even after the Soviet-Albanian split in 1961, the special Albanian bond with Soviet culture remained, albeit strictly surveilled by the party apparatchiks. Politically, the Albanian leadership attributed the split to the "wrong" direction of Khrushchev's politics of de-Stalinization, viewing it as a betrayal of Stalin and Marxist-Leninism. However, the Soviet reference remained culturally important, although the diplomatic and cultural relations broke completely.

For two years, Feride, along with her young family, had to share the apartment with another ethnically mixed family consisting of an Albanian man and a Ukrainian woman. The story of nearly 400 ethnically mixed marriages is quite impressive in how relations between nations can influence personal lives. Due to a lack of skilled professionals in various fields, numerous Albanian students, predominantly male, were sent to pursue their studies in the Soviet Union, mainly in Moscow and Saint Petersburg, then known as Leningrad. The subsequent break in Soviet-Albanian

340 This came out of many conversations I had for this research, as well as being common knowledge in Albanian society.

341 Mëhilli, *From Stalin to Mao: Albania and the Socialist World*, 109.

relations made the situation very difficult for the newly created families between Albanian men and women from the Soviet Union. Several of these women had already moved to Albania with their husbands or were in the process of doing so. After the split, they were forced to choose between two countries, and many decided to live permanently in Albania with their newly created families [342].

While these Soviet women[343] were seen initially as sort of "missionaries of Socialism" coming to Albania, after the rupture of the relations between the two countries, they found themselves under constant surveillance by party-state apparatchiks. Not only was their privileged position lost, but their communication with their countries of origin, families, and friends became the subject of intense scrutiny. These precautionary measures were rooted in the party's concern about potential espionage activities, leading to careful monitoring of their interactions. In 1975, when the regime became even more severe, there was a purge of these individuals along with other suspected Albanians from central locations like the capital and from important job positions in society.[344]

The geopolitical landscape unexpectedly influenced people's lives, and their stories show how they managed to keep up while maintaining solidarity with each other. Kateryna, a Ukrainian woman, was married to an Albanian student, both pursuing their studies in Moscow. Just two days before diplomatic ties were severed between Albania and the Soviet Union, Kateryna gave birth to their child. Faced with a critical decision as her husband returned to Albania, Kateryna chose to relocate with him. Settling in Kombinat, her husband was assigned the role of a textile engineer, while Kateryna was given the position of teaching the Russian language at the University of Tirana.

When Feride got married in Kombinat, she, her husband, and their children were allotted to share the two-bedroom apartment where Kateryna lived with her family. Living in modest conditions with makeshift kitchens, Kateryna played a vital role, especially during the early days after Feride gave birth very young, at the age of 22.

342 Juljana Krisafi, "Albania and the Soviet Union, a Complicated Relationship ... a Short Review," *Proceedings of International Academic Conferences*, Proceedings of International Academic Conferences, July 2015, 0100833, https://ideas.repec.org//p/sek/iacpro/0100833.html.

343 They were regarded as Soviet women, although in reality they represented a range of ethnicities and nationalities from the different republics that composed the Soviet Union. Such was the case of the Ukrainian woman, Anja, mentioned in this account by my interlocutor, Feride.

344 Artan R. Hoxha, "From Missionaries of Socialism to Spies of Imperialism: The Shifting Position of Soviet Women in Communist Albania," *Histories* 1, no. 4 (2021): 4, https://doi.org/10.3390/histories1040021.

Kateryna's care for Feride and her family extended to cooking, cleaning, and sharing parenting tasks. Similarly, Feride would extend her help with similar household tasks when Kateryna later needed help. Help, care, and solidarity were reciprocal between the two families and especially between the two women. Their children grew up as siblings. This was a form of kin-making created by the circumstances in which both families suddenly found themselves.

Besides the narrative of transnational and trans-ethnic belonging, this story is also an account of class transcendence, of overcoming class divisions, something praised in Socialist Albania. Abiding by socialist ideals of aiming toward the abolition of class privilege, these stories were good examples of the leveling of privileges of class differences, which, as mentioned before, would still manifest itself in different forms, including in the living conditions. Nevertheless, Kateryna and her husband, although holding good positions as professionals and academics, were at that moment not in a politically favored position and were probably themselves on the radar of the party surveillance. Feride, along with other interviewees, attests to the constant fear of surveillance, a pervasive presence that subtly undermined the genuineness of communal practices. This means that not only were older class divisions being overcome, but new ones were being simultaneously installed. A new class of servants and bureaucrats of the party-state became the newly privileged class, as the power of the totalitarian state was rooted in their agency to serve, rather than in the proclaimed proletariat, as it was propagated.

5.1.1 The Operation of Kombinat

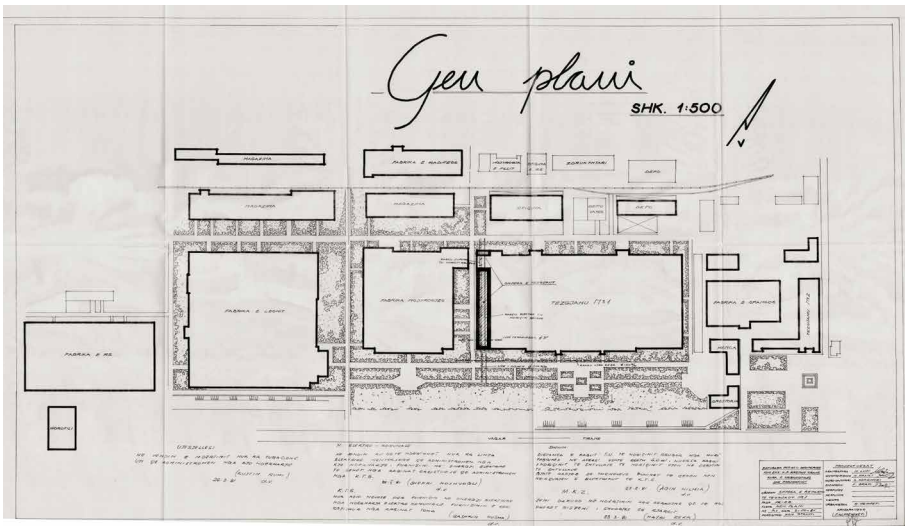


FIG. 5.5 General plan of Kombinati Tekstil Stalin. Extension of Tezgjahu 1 in 1981. Source: Arkivi Qendror i Ndertimit, Tirana, Albania.

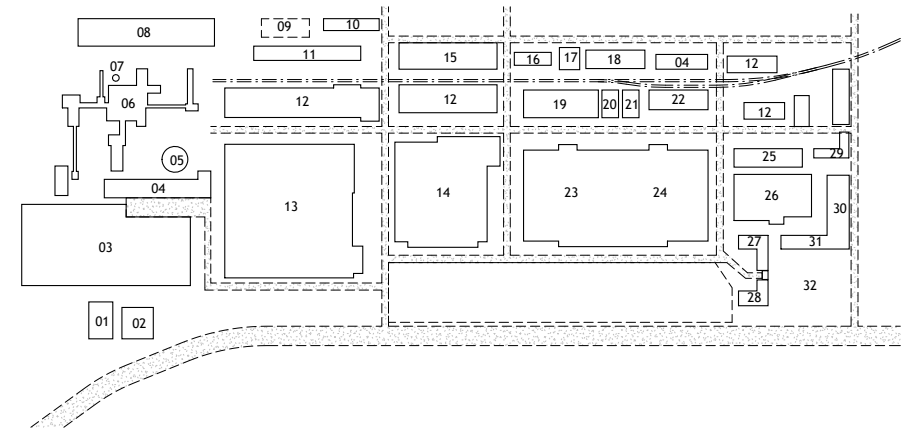


FIG. 5.6 Location of the Factories retrieved by the interview with two engineers

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The inauguration of the Textile Factory in 1951 marked the completion of one of the large buildings within Kombinat. The other buildings continued to be added until the very last ones were erected in the 1980s. Textile engineer Ilir is my interlocutor, providing insights into the operational layout of Kombinat and detailing its key features. At the entrance stood the main headquarters of Kombinat, housing the administration with specialized departments like the office of organization, HR (*kuadri*), supply, and the office of sub-directors for each factory. Additionally, a telephone station facilitated communication between the factories and the Kombinat Directorate (28).

Within the main building, immediately past the entrance, were the *Filatura* Spinning Mill (24) and the Loom (23). The spinning mill produced cotton yarn, which then underwent the weaving process on the loom. Following weaving, the semi-finished product proceeded to the Dyeing Unit (14) situated in another building west of Kombinat. Here, chemical processes were employed for bleaching, and various prints were stamped onto the textile. After dyeing and stamping, the products were packaged and sent to the state-controlled markets, including *mapos*, which were state-owned shopping malls.

To the north of Kombinat, a Velvet Factory (15) was later constructed, and in 1953, the Wool Fabrics Factory (13) with a closed cycle was established. Notably, in this factory, all raw materials were sourced from Albania, a country with a diverse Mediterranean climate and a variety of wool fibers, categorized into fine, semi-fine, semi-rough, and rough wool. Different types of wool were used for various products: fine and semi-fine wool was utilized in clothing such as suits and jackets, while rough and semi-rough wool was used for carpets or rugs [345].

A significant portion of the yarn production catered to military needs, such as soldiers' and officers' jackets and uniforms, as well as army blankets and hospital supplies. The very final stage in the textile production process involved the dyeing department for the finishing touches.

In the 1970s, China supported keeping the existing mills running and the construction of new sections of the Kombinat while providing technology, replacement machinery, and technical assistance. Around 1970, a Fine-Fabric Factory (03) was established in the western section, dedicated to finishing processing of high-quality textiles for police uniforms. Raw materials produced at *Filatura* (24) (one of the first mills) were woven in these specialized, newly built units to create fine-fabric products. Wool combing was also carried out here, with superior quality compared to the processes in the previously constructed Wool Factory.

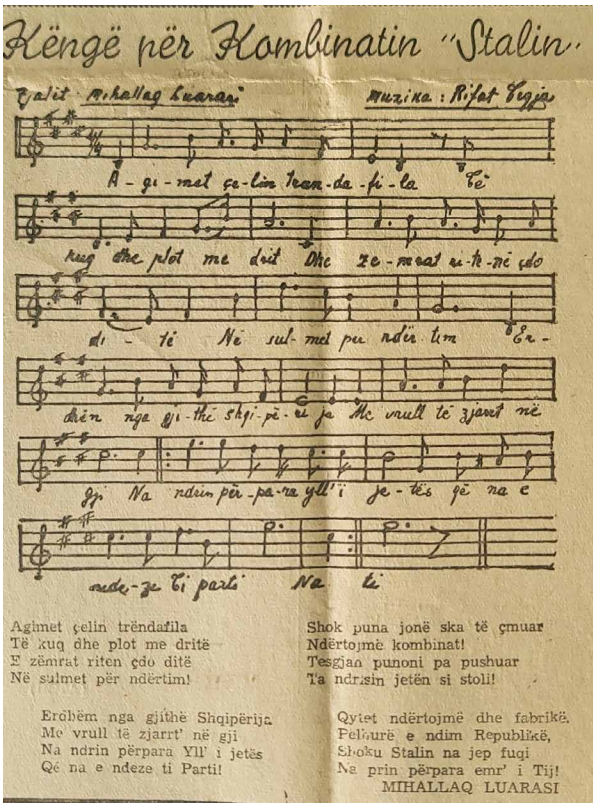
345 "Conversation of the Author with Ilir, a Textile Engineer and Manager," August 2, 2022.

In Kombinat, each separate textile mill had its own structure, director, human resources, engineers, technicians, and workers that would stick to their own plan. A central directorate would coordinate them. Materials supply was also separate and centrally coordinated. A mechanical branch, with its Machine Workshop (19), would handle the maintenance and replacement of imported machinery parts. In the last years of operation, the mechanical branch, in coordination with the Factory of Autotractors (Uzina e Autotraktoreve Enver Hoxha), has begun producing machinery parts on its own, a source of great pride for Albania's aspiration toward self-reliance. This was a great victory, as it enabled Kombinat to no longer depend on imports, and it would almost 100% satisfy the need for machinery parts through self-production. Besides the production of machinery parts, a large Carpentry Workshop (18) would be used to produce highly pressed wooden slats with a profile dimension of 6x6 cm, used as siding for machinery. The wood-curing procedures were carried out close to the TEC (thermal power plant) (06), not far from Hidrofili (01), using the heat released by the power plant to remove moisture from the wood.

Kombinat had its own fire station, one of the best-equipped and most professional in all of Albania. This was due to the high flammability risk of textiles. The station provided training to other fire station personnel across the country.

According to Ilir, Kombinat started with 6,000 workers and reached 8,113 by the end of 1989, its peak in development and production. The political upheavals in the Eastern Bloc severely impacted the trade mechanisms on which Kombinat relied, mainly on the exchange of commodities.

5.1.2 Weaving Ideals through Working Culture and Everyday Life



Song for the Textile Factory "Stalin"

Dawns bring roses
Red and full of light
And hearts grow every day
In building drives

We come from all over Albania
With fiery drive in the chest
Shines forward the Star of life
That you lit for us Party!

Comrade, our work is priceless
We build kombinat!
Work the loom without rest
To brighten up a jewelry life!

We build a city and a factory
Fabric weaving a Republic
Comrade Stalin gives us strength
His name leads us!

Mihallaq Luarasi

FIG. 5.7 Këngë për Kombinatin "Stalin" [Song for the Textile Factory "Stalin"], author Mihallaq Luarasi, published in the newspaper Rinia [Youth], Viti VII, Nr 69. (431), August 29, 1951, Source: Albanian National Library, Translated by author.

The ideological impact of the state enterprise's efforts to build socialism through industrialization and progress extended beyond those directly involved in establishing and operating the Textile Factory. The spirit of the momentum was widely shared and propagated throughout the country through promotional channels of the time, such as newspapers and magazines, television and radio, and local community committees.[346]

346 Nëpër vendin tonë. (Across our country) (No. 3). (1952). [Broadcast]. In *Kinozhurnal* (I/1-21). AQSHF Arkivi Qëndror Shtetëror i Filmit. https://aqshf.gov.al/motion_picture/neper-vendin-tone-kinozhurnal-nr-3-1952/

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FIG. 5.8 Cover of the magazine Ylli [Star] showcases the picture of happy women workers walking with the Stalin Textile Factory in the background. May 1977, Source: National Library, Tirana

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Not for nothing is the history of Kombinat considered to be one of the most documented in Albania. Reporting from the site was constant and of a diverse character, interweaving the technical and production achievements with the social impact they had on the inhabitant-workers' lives, at both personal and collective levels.

An essential part of the conception and realization of Kombinat and, more broadly, of creating a technically upgraded working culture, was the implementation of "Soviet methods of socialism," from the construction of the mills to the production process. The implementation of Soviet construction methods in Albania during the mid-20th century highlighted the symbolic importance of construction in the country's modernization efforts under communist rule. The construction industry in Albania consisted of various modest enterprises, and officials vigorously promoted Soviet industrial methods among workers, offering incentives to those who adopted them. Stakhanovism was a Soviet campaign launched in 1935 to expose the high achievements of the Donbas miner Aleksei Stakhanov and to inspire and pressure workers to surpass production norms and records. It was common for these working campaigns to use images of individuals, their faces and "exemplary bodies" to showcase their newly gained efficiency thanks to the Soviet methods. These individuals were praised as being Stakhanovists.[347]

In construction, one notable method, the Kulikov method of bricklaying, devised by a Soviet mason, increased efficiency up to laying "thirty to forty bricks per minute." "The Kulikov method involved a few simple but important steps: strategically organizing the work site before the shift and minimizing body movements. Workers also made use of a special shovel to lay the mortar."[348] This method gained popularity in Albania, with a local mason, Negri Nikolla, becoming its advocate. Nikolla, a bricklayer who applied the Kulikov method in the construction of the Stalin textile in Kombinat, traveled across the country to showcase the Soviet technique he had adopted. He emphasized the need for his peer workers to borrow more rational and efficient "semiautomatic" practices while using their "bodies like machines."[349]

347 Mëhilli, *From Stalin to Mao: Albania and the Socialist World*, 117–25. See also: "Nen Shembullin e Shkelqyer Te Stahanovisteve Sovjetike. Bisede Me Shokun Veiz Gjebero; Drejtor i Kombinatit Te Tesktileve 'Stalin'/ Per Inisiativat Revolucionare Te Rinise Se Kombinatit," *Rinia* (Tirana), June 25, 1952, Albanian National Library, June 25. Source: National Library, Tirana

348 Mëhilli, *From Stalin to Mao: Albania and the Socialist World*, 118.

349 Mëhilli, *From Stalin to Mao: Albania and the Socialist World*, 120.

This meant that knowledge transfer was not a one-way process but one shaped by local interpretation, adaptation, and embrace.[350]

In the context of desirable socialist internationalism, the achievements of an anonymous Albanian worker like Nikolla were celebrated in Soviet publications, exemplifying unified solidarity within the socialist bloc. Meanwhile, the pages of the monthly magazine of the Soviet-Albanian Friendship Society brought Soviet construction methods to a wider Albanian audience through periodicals, actual performances of the methods, and direct social correspondence with their Soviet counterparts. The framing of the narrative underscored the hardships and contradictions in enforcing Soviet methods, including issues of equipment shortages, technical mismatches, and the persistence of "old working habits." The enforcement of these methods was undertaken through twin mechanisms of party organization and government directives, all the while mobilizing direct Soviet involvement to ensure compliance and promote socialist ideals. The task was confronted with the complexities of integrating foreign techniques into local contexts and the propaganda-driven nature of socialist construction campaigns, which sometimes were met with disbelief or derision on the ground.[351]

Many video and newspaper reports were used to amplify the fervor among workers, technicians, and engineers during the inauguration and throughout the operation of Kombinat. This enthusiasm, although choreographed for the camera, especially at the very beginning, genuinely resonated with the workers and other involved individuals. The Friendship Society popularized and promoted Soviet methods, especially in publications such as the bulletin *Punëtori Sovjetik* (The Soviet Worker), which showcased biographies of Soviet workers, illustrated with images of the working process. *Kinostudio "Shqipëria e Re" (*Studio Production "New Albania"),

350 Mehilli describes the method: "Some of the Soviet terms were approximated into Albanian; the new language denoted something of the novelty of socialist planning. Most Soviet methods came to be known by their respective Soviet authors, but some names were straightforward. In masonry, for example, there were the "double" (dyshe), "triple" (treshe), and "quintuple" (pesëshe) methods, simply indicating the number of workers involved. Thus, the double (two-person) method consisted of a skilled mason and his apprentice. The lead mason would start out by laying bricks on the exterior side of the foundation, completing the first row along the whole perimeter of the building. His assistant would hand him the bricks and lay the mortar. The mason would then switch to the internal walls of the structure; both would complete the fill-in work. Everything was geared at minimizing movements. Another worker could be added—making it a treshe method—enabling two assistants to lay the bricks on the interior walls. A combination of five persons was also possible: two master masons and three assistants working as a human chain. It was not easy visualizing this. [T]he Friendship Society issued drawings, in addition to coming up with the requisite translations." Mëhilli, *From Stalin to Mao: Albania and the Socialist World*, 120–21.

351 Elidor Mëhilli, *From Stalin to Mao. Albania and the Socialist World.* (Cornell University, 2017), 121–25.

the former state-run film studio, produced video reports that were broadcast on National TV showing the enthusiasm for the friendship with the USSR, video recorded hands-on applications of construction methods in Kombinat, as well as the celebration of the arrival of the train with the textile machinery.[352]

Symbolism surrounding specific dates played a crucial role in shaping the narrative. For instance, 1951 marked the inauguration of Kombinat and was invested with considerable symbolism because it coincided with the tenth anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of Albania in 1941. For example, as seen in a report by Fiqiri Karapici in the October 1951 issue of the Rinia [Youth] newspaper, the tendency was to highlight the celebratory spirit among Kombinat's exemplary workers and to ignite a positive, zealous pathos. These exemplary workers, featured in these kinds of articles, pledged to meet the production plan and committed to surpassing daily or yearly norms by impressive numbers, such as 200-205%. In the article, one of the workers quoted made the remarkable promise to operate four machines simultaneously, demonstrating the dedication and determination of individuals who strived to exceed expectations. The mention of these workers' names signified their distinction and contributed to the perception that exceptional work could be a source of pride, honor, nobility, and even heroism.[353]

Although many of these statements and staged propaganda were perceived as exaggerated, the belief in change and progress, and the respect for the Soviets in Kombinat, were unwavering and can still be found in nostalgic conversations today. The Soviet presence was beyond the Soviets; it was about dreaming collectively of a prosperous future while abiding by the discipline of building socialism.

A pivotal role in the emergence of socialism in Albania, in general, and in Kombinat, in particular, was played by collective cultural and sports activities. One revealing example in this regard is Albania's Amateur Theater movement. It was a movement with historical roots in the Illegal Theater movement, which emerged as resistance against fascist occupation and continued after the war throughout socialist Albania. With the communists coming to power, the movement underwent a transformation, becoming intertwined with the propaganda apparatus and adhering to the party line. In his memoir, Skender Thaçi, who was a director and actor who emerged as part of and

352 *Kinozhurnal*, episode 2, "Për Lumturinë e Popullit (For the Happiness of the People)," directed by Ilia Kopalin, B.R.S.S, 1950, I/1-14, AQSHF Arkivi Qëndror Shtetëror i Filmit, https://aqshf.gov.al/motion_picture/shqiperia-e-re-kinozhurnal-nr-2-1950/; *Kinozhurnal*, episode 3, "Nëpër vendin tonë. (Across our country)," Tirana, 1952, I/1-21, AQSHF Arkivi Qëndror Shtetëror i Filmit, https://aqshf.gov.al/motion_picture/neper-vendin-tone-kinozhurnal-nr-3-1952/.

353 Fiqiri Karapici, "Ne Kombinatin e Tekstilit 'Stalin,'" *Rinia*, October 27, 1951.

contributed extensively to this movement (later in Kombinat), recounts his personal and professional journey, shaped within the milieu of talented *debatiks*, members of the antifascist organization *Debatik Djemtë e Bashkuar të Idesë Komuniste* [United Boys of the Communist Ideal].[354] He describes how the Illegal Theater movement, an essential form of resistance, was enacted on street corners, in house yards in Tirana, in fields, and in the mountains with the Partisans of the National Liberation War. He highlights the crucial contributions of political prisoners from Tirana, both men and women, who self-organized their own nomadic kind of theater groups. These theater groups staged episodes depicting everyday life under occupation, serving as a wellspring of inspiration and collective hope for the country's liberation.[355]

In Kombinat, the arts and sports activities were located in the KinoKlubi building, which was constructed at the same time as the industrial and residential buildings of Kombinat. Completed in November 1954, this structure housed a library, a games hall, an artistic circles hall, and a cinema. It was later upgraded to a theater with the addition of a stage. The establishment of Kino Klubi in Kombinat, where Skender Thaçi became the director, was a significant milestone in the collective spirit of Kombinat. As Thaçi describes in his memoir, Kombinat was both a product of and a catalyst for collective cultural consciousness. The theatrical repertoire at KinoKlubi encompassed a broad spectrum of themes, ranging from renowned Soviet productions to locally authored pieces portraying the everyday lives of Kombinat's workers. For instance, the inaugural theater production, titled "*Vajza nga Fshati*" [The Girl from the Village], written by Hysen Gjata and directed by Skender Thaçi himself, resonated with the experiences of young women textile workers who had migrated from villages to embrace new lives as operators of advanced textile machinery, thus attaining a transformed social status[356] This way, operating in Kombinat, we see a stratification of symbolic regimes of discourse and disciplining, where the aim of providing a theater is not only for entertainment purposes and cultural advancement of the population, but in a very calculated way, the theater, with the performances that it hosts, becomes part of a multimodal propaganda machine.

However, these institutions did not operate solely as a statist collective endeavor; some key figures would genuinely commit themselves fully to the projects they were assigned to take forward. In the same memoir, Thaçi recounts the crucial moment when he criticized and refused to accept the newly constructed theater because of

354 Skënder Thaçi, *Testamenti: 50 Vjet Ne Skene: Kujtime* (Mokra, 2001).
355 For an account on the history of the Left in Albania, including the dark side of the elimination of important and opposition figures in the early stage, see also Ana Lalaj et al., *E Majta: Mendimi Politik/ Profile Biografike* (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung & Autoriteti për Informimin mbi Dokumentet e ish-Sigurimit të Shtetit, 2020).
356 Thaçi, *Testamenti: 50 Vjet Ne Skene: Kujtime*, 30–31.

its small stage. He engaged in a month-long bureaucratic exchange and discussion with Veiz Gjebero, the director of Kombinat, to advocate for changes to the theater's architecture. Eventually, alterations were made to the stage dimensions, proscenium, actor facilities, and sound and lighting, a witness to Thaçi's dedication to fostering a flourishing environment for the theatrical arts[357]. In the early stages of state socialism, it still seemed possible for individuals to influence the work being produced, something that later became increasingly difficult, even punishable, amid the climate of state terror imposed on society and its professionals.[358]

5.1.3 Collectivities that Cannot Be Reduced to One

> … Kombinat is not only a symbol, but also a mirror. In its streets, squares, factories, houses, monuments, but also in its individual stories, it is possible to find something notorious, familiar, something that is similar to us. While its story has something incredible and universal, you can get lost in its meanders and find yourself facing your own life. As processes and phenomena such as industrialization, deindustrialization, internal migration, external migration, work in the factories, life in the periphery, the feminization of the work, centralized economy, privatization, urbanization, and so on, are recurring in many countries, although the singularity of Kombinat is unique.
>
> Rando Devole, Uno Specchio tra passato e futuro[359]

In Kombinat, two facets of collectivity coexisted – one on a grand ideological scale imposed from the top down by the state, and the other arising organically from shared needs and the evolving social engineering project. The state-driven collectivity functioned as an ideological tool. Parallel community structures were strategically created to control and channel the political and cultural agency of the residents, ensuring alignment with the party's directives, disciplining or purging deviations. Entities like workers' unions, women's unions, and youth organizations were all established and overseen by state-party members, functioning as extensions on the ground level of the party's overarching influence.

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357 Thaçi, *Testamenti: 50 Vjet Ne Skene: Kujtime*, 32.

358 As in the cases of architects like Petraq Kolevica and Maks Velo. See See e.g. Petraq Kolevica, *Arkitektura Dhe Diktatura* (Marin Barleti, 1997); Maks Velo, *Paralel me arkitekturen* (Librat "Njeriu," 1998); Maks Velo, *Kohë Antishenjë* (Zenit, 2000).

359 Rando Devole, "Prefazione: Uno Specchio Tra Passato e Futuro," in *Kombinat. Storia e Vita Quotidiana Di Un Quartiere Simbolo Di Tirana*, ed. Luigi Za (besa, 2012), 9–10. [translation from Italian by the author]

On the flip side, a collective dimension rooted in solidarity emerged out of necessity and in tandem with the ongoing social engineering project aimed at dismantling traditional relations. Even during the creation of Kombinat as a neighborhood eight decades ago, and within the broader state project of building socialism to overcome "backwardness," family and regional ties continued to exert influence. These ties played a crucial role in the migration process of the peasant population toward Kombinat and, consequently, the capital city of Tirana. Kinship and proximity here are very pronounced and have a great influence on people's destinies, like gaining access to good housing, better work position and conditions, education, and so on.

Positioned as a satellite neighborhood of Tirana, Kombinat gained its own political and cultural centrality. Functioning as a pressurized reality of condensed activities of work, education, and leisure, Kombinat exerted a profound influence on the daily lives of its residents, shaping their lived experiences through a combination of ideology, material conditions, and cultural activities. This enclave, which encapsulated not only workplaces but also the essential life infrastructure both during and after working hours, was a melting pot. It attracted young migrants, mostly women, from diverse regions of Albania, each with aspirations to break free from a provincial, illiterate, and traditional peasant life. For those relocating to Kombinat, the enclave offered not just employment in the factories but also educational opportunities in the training school, improved housing and economic conditions, some sort of individual independence compared to life in the village, fostering a complete social and cultural life within collective structures. Remarkably, even the reproductive cycle often unfolded within Kombinat, with couples meeting, marrying, and establishing their families in this shared geography.

The work system operated in three shifts within a 24-hour span, ensuring a continuous production process that never stopped. This required meticulous planning to cover all hours, compelling workers to adhere to a structured schedule. Because of the intensity of the work, Kombinat provided weekly extended daycare and kindergartens for workers' children. The children would be under the care of these institutions from Monday morning until Saturday afternoon, allowing one or both parents to undertake the night working shifts in the mills. The testimonials of residents and their families show how Kombinat bore witness to both distinguished and challenging epochs throughout its operational history, capturing the complexity of its existence.

Kombinat served as the factory for producing the "new socialist (hu)man," with emancipation as the overarching mission. This call, which permeated throughout the country with Kombinat being the ultimate glorious achievement, compelled its inhabitants to persistently engage in overcoming the everyday challenges linked to the material conditions of labor and housing. Besides the state's efforts to establish

welfare institutions for health and childcare, the inhabitants of Kombinat had to rely on the communities they created for direct support, based on kinship and proximity. These two features of collectivity in Albania, despite state-directed attempts to capture them, never ceased to exist or operate.

5.2 Starting Beyond the End

5.2.1 The Dreamland of Tirana

A: …E mora unë, morëm makinën – skodë i thojshim asaj. E ngarkuam në të, dollape, krevate, ato gjana që kishim. Jo të mira, s'di të gënjej, jo të mira. Marrim na, vjen makina te pallati, u bashku' i gjithë pallati. "Çfarë â ka bahet?" Dola unë, u mblodhën aty jashtë pallatit, te dera, edhe ne po nxjershim ato gjana. Më thonë mu: "Ku po shkon o Age, ku po shkoni?" "Në tokën e Tiranës!" – Unë tashi…

DP: Krenare e…

A: "Në Tiranë! Po në Tiranë ti? Ku?" "Në tokë të Tiranës jena ka shkojmë!"

A: …I got it, we got the truck – we used to call it a Skoda. We loaded it up with cupboards, beds, and the things we had. Not good ones, I won't lie, not good ones. We got it, the truck arrived at our apartment building, and all the neighbors gathered. "What's going on?" I went out, they gathered outside the building, at the door, and we were taking those things out. They say to me, "Where are you going, Age, where are you all going?" "To the land of Tirana!" – I said.

DP: Proudly…

A: "To Tirana! But you, to Tirana? Where?" - "We're going to the land of Tirana!" [360]

360 "Conversation of the Author with Age, 67-Year-Old, Inhabitant of Kombinat from 1996, Moved from Fierza, Fushë-Arrëz," October 2, 2023.

As explained in Subchapter 4.5 on *Internal Movements*, the systemic political change in Albania in 1991 was associated with massive demographic shifts, in the form of an exodus from the country and within the country, from rural and small towns toward central Albania, including Tirana, Durres, and the lowland areas near them. Following the long-held myth of the urban, especially the capital city, moving to Tirana was perceived as going to a dreamland, far away, a place of light, prosperity, and opportunities. On the other side, in Tirana, the remote Northeast land was perceived as a bewildering place. Not only the mountainous land but *them*, the people living up there, in the far north, for Tirana were humans that had embodied within their being the wilderness of the mountainous landscapes. Their arrival in Tirana was portrayed as exceptional in the turbulent times the country was going through.[361]



FIG. 5.9 Former industrial building of Filatura 1 repurposed for dwelling, Photo taken in June 2021

361 Malaj, "Bathorja Në Shtypin e Përditshem Gjatë Viteve '90 Dhe 2000"; Vullnetari, "Albanian Migration and Development: State of the Art Review"; Vullnetari, *Albania on the Move*.

Kombinat was already struggling with production in the last years of the regime, and after the big change, very few factories were still operating. Many lost their jobs, and the uncertainty started to linger. The dysfunctional state was still operating. Guards were supposed to safeguard the mills. Members of the bureaucratic caste created during state socialism were the first to profit from the dismantling of public property as the state collapsed.

The first wave of new arrivals in Kombinat was after the mills had stopped working in 1992. My interlocutors, old and new residents of Kombinat, describe the situation as chaotic. They mention the conditions of negotiation, opportunism, exercise of power, strength, and confidence. Although it had been dependent on the party-state's strict central planning in organizational terms, Kombinat, as described before, had some level of autonomy in social terms. The condition of anarchy was the declaration of the end of Kombinat in the media and conversations within the communities. It was seen as the tragic moment of destruction and decay of the glorious industrial organism. Especially those living and working in Kombinat for generations have experienced the condition as painful, a wild and monstrous moment of degradation. However, there has been a lack of observation and curiosity on the ground about what really happened. Even research on the architecture of the buildings was limited to this very moment in time, when they were pronounced dead. But what did this moment and place mean for some of the protagonists, who had decided to start a new life in the ruins of Kombinat? What is the perspective of the arriving inhabitants, a perspective rendered unseen and unrecognized? Was what happened totally anarchic and unprecedented, or was there some organizational logic that guided subjects to act in a certain way at a time when agencies were unleashed in Albania?

While the dominant narrative emphasized the destructive aspect of the moment and blamed the situation on migrants, a closer conversation with former workers and managers of Kombinat reveals the presence of multiple layers operating on the grounds at the time, like state officials of various levels, from deputies to guards that were supposed to protect the buildings. This is a fact rarely discussed in the media. There was a privatization process that did not go through without speculation. Apparently, the story of demonizing the newcomer as an uncivilized figure who exposes the wilderness and cares nothing for what civilization has already built, seemed to stick better with the public as a scare tactic during turbulent times.[362]

362 Malaj, "Bathorja Në Shtypin e Përditshem Gjatë Viteve '90 Dhe 2000."

The state, led by international institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, pursued liberal policies to transition the country toward a so-called market economy. One of these policies was the privatization of state property, including the premises of state-led enterprises, among which were industrial buildings like those of Kombinat. These reforms aimed at a reversal of collectivization, enabling the dismantling of state/public property in Albania, as a transition from a statist totalitarian regime that eradicated private property toward a liberal regime in which state property would be privatized and placed in a liberal market. This meant that, through directives and laws issued from above, workers, managers, and other interested actors would receive parts of the factory buildings as their private property. As Albania was coming out of a state-bureaucratic regime, people with good connections to old and new politicians managed to secure chunks of the buildings. They operated opportunistically, using their positions to grab as much as they could. Some of the privatized ex-industrial buildings were repurposed for manufacturing activities, this time for activities other than the production of textiles.[363]

Dismantling and selling the machinery was the first speculative act, the first step toward closure once and for all to the textile production activity of Kombinat. When in operation, every piece of machinery in Kombinat was scrupulously documented, every single piece was inventoried, and all transactions involving bringing in or repairing new pieces were documented in technical folders. This did not matter at this moment of anarchy. Witnesses confirm that looting and speculative selling of this machinery were carried out by people in positions of power. During conversations with the old inhabitants and former employers in managerial positions in Kombinat, the deputies of the area in the Albanian Parliament were mentioned as having been involved in the privatization process, indicating the presence of state figures and higher-level politicians in the process.[364] Auction was used as one of the tools in the privatization process, often selling the buildings at very low prices, paid for with so-called "valuable papers" (*bono të privatizimit* or *letra me vlerë*), which were a sort of currency issued by the Albanian Bank at the time to enable the privatization process. Government officials from previous state socialist times and the newly elected government would both actively engage in clientelism and bribery to offer preferential treatment to their circles.

363 "Conversation of the Author with Ilir, a Textile Engineer and Manager."

364 "Conversation of the Author with Ilir, a Textile Engineer and Manager." Looting of factories and politically connected asset transfer are phenomena that happened during regime change in countries in the region. For an example of how the collapse of socialist industry as a process shaped by privatization and speculative entrepreneurship in Serbia, see Milos Milicevic, "Stolen Futures: Place-Making at the Periphery of Global Capitalism" (Central European University, 2021).

In these exceptional conditions, under the shadow of a dysfunctional state reduced to the banality of opportunism, not only were higher-ups corrupting the process, but even the guards who were supposed to protect the buildings started to see an opportunity in their role. They would readily accept bribes in exchange for access to the abandoned buildings or machinery they were supposed to safeguard. From protectors of the buildings, they became, in some sense, sellers of state property, facilitating the squatting process. This way, simultaneously with the privatization process, squatting by the migrating families mentioned earlier had begun. They were coming to find shelter as they needed to locate with their families.

This is how a first wave of squatters managed to enter and claim large parts of the buildings. Subsequently, they either gifted parts to people from the same place of origin, extended family, or kin, or, pragmatically and opportunistically, sold them to families that had just arrived and needed immediate shelter. Most of the families in the buildings say they paid to have access to them. The physical negotiation and oral agreements were still important in Albania, and written contracts were either nonexistent or there were no mechanisms in place within the state that would recognize these buying and selling transactions. While not only in Kombinat, but certainly also here, the customary rules played a role in the process. As some of my interlocutors mentioned, the families occupying the buildings were aware of the rule on ownership claims and used it as a compass in the process to avoid conflicts and taking someone else's property. The rule says that the person who wants to claim an empty piece of land or property must wait for a certain period of time to see whether someone comes forward to claim it as theirs. If there is no claim of previous ownership, they could claim use rights. In the case of Kombinat, it was common knowledge that the area had been a swamp before the factories were built; therefore, the only owner would be the state. In the case of privatized buildings, the new owners made it clear when that was the case, and therefore, the buildings were prevented from being squatted. This is mentioned in the conversations I conducted with the previous employees of Kombinat, who stated that the buildings that were privatized were "saved," meaning that the new ownership was functional and no one managed to enter those buildings.[365] However, in these times, nothing was guaranteed. One of my interlocutors, who had previously worked in Kombinat, mentioned that he intended to privatize part of the building where he had worked and set up a small textile production line, as that was his expertise. He had temporarily left the country and, upon returning, had found the building partially stripped of its roof tiles and bricks.[366]

365 "Conversation of the Author with Ilir, a Textile Engineer and Manager."
366 "Conversation of the Author with Ilir and Arben, Managers in Kombinat," August 2022, voice recording.

People were in urgent need of shelter, having come from faraway places in Albania, they needed a place for their families. The squatter-inhabitants describe the buildings they were located in as having no doors or windows. Rukije, who lived with her family of four in the building of *Filatura 1*, one of the most important buildings of Kombinat, located right past the entrance, shares that she had to put curtains in place of windows and doors. She described the arrival as an exceptional time when many people had moved to this place and were trying in some way to improve their living conditions. Moving from the northeastern city of Puka, and as a woman whose husband was paralyzed, she had to take family matters into her own hands. They had two small children when they moved here. Like most of the people around her, the main reason for coming to Tirana, even more than finding work, was access to education for their children. The aspiration to support them to have a better life, with the hope of education and honest hard work, was what pushed them to move. She had to work several jobs, starting as a waitress, then as a moderator with a microphone in a bingo club, and afterwards with a little shop at the very entrance of the industrial area of Kombinat. Rukije recalls struggling with misogynistic and sexist comments from clients, but always kept working with pride and dignity. Albanian women who had already spent some years in adulthood and with work experience during state socialism have a noticeable confidence. It is true that the women's movement in communist Albania was top-down, but at the same time, it is possible to identify a sense of nerve and self-assurance that these women, regardless of their rural or urban backgrounds, had gained from the propaganda promoting the improvement of women's position in society.

Rukije mentions how people were moving things and materials around a lot in Kombinat. Some could take bricks from abandoned buildings to reuse them to build their own houses inside the ex-industrial buildings. At first, in her makeshift apartment, Rukije used concrete blocks to make the partitions with the neighboring apartment and to create the rooms of the house. Those partitions soon collapsed as they were not stable, and they had to be rebuilt with bricks. She also bought cheap, second-hand doors and windows, to then replace them with better ones after she had managed to save a bit of money. The floor of the building was leveled with material that she managed to secure from trucks that were transporting inert materials from construction sites in Tirana, transporting them to the dumpsite of Sharrë, passing through Kombinat. She recalls that she had to pay a little money to the drivers to have the material left at her house, often negotiating the payment time in good faith with the drivers, depending on when she would get paid from her job.



FIG. 5.10 Graffiti reading “KUJDES KA TROPOJAN” (“Beware, there are Tropojans”), reclaiming and reversing stigma attached to people from the region of Tropoja, stereotypically associated with Albanian ruggedness. July 2021

This way, the grounds of Kombinat became a terrain of big and little money economy, where many figures were involved, from corrupt state officials, to guards, former workers and employees, squatters, and foreign entrepreneurs interested in opening new manufacturing businesses inside. The grounds of Kombinat, meaning the machinery, the buildings, their space and components, and even the smallest elements like windows, doors, and, became subject to this exchange and opportunistic economy, where power relations would still play a role in how some of the actors of these shifts were involved. This wide spectrum of people involved ranged from those engaging out of greed to those just trying to improve their living conditions, with the aim of grasping the momentum of speculation and others to anchor a bigger hope for their families and the future of their children, close to a dreamland – the promised land of Tirana.

Besides what was happening on the grounds, there were also observers from a distance. There was an entire discourse being built upon what was happening, the othering narrative of the newcomers.[367] It is understandable that the former workers experienced traumatic despair over witnessing the looting and dismantling of machinery and factories they had operated for long hours. These workplaces had given them a sense of pride and community, alongside hardships and physical pain. As observed in conversations with both new and old inhabitants of Kombinat, a sense of supremacy coexisted with instances of solidarity and acceptance. For example, there were examples of donations of second-hand clothes for children, support with a little assistance here and there to find a job, as well as friendships that were extended through kids in schools. After all, Kombinat was established as a place created by and for newcomers. The *kombinats* knew how important community and solidarity were, but nevertheless and simultaneously, the pride and subcultural autonomy, even provincialism if you will, of the so-called old-kombinats could not escape the *othering* of the newcomers. These two sides coexisted in the same place.[368]

The Soviet industrial buildings of Kombinat, and those that were subsequently constructed in their example, were the pride of the party-state and of the community of workers and engineers, amateur artists, families, and caretakers. They gained a new role after production ceased and textile weaving halted. Beyond the nostalgia for the old community of Kombinat, and for the heritage architecture scholars who considered them lost, these buildings actually acquired and accommodated a new life. They became the frame for new inhabitants to intervene with their amateur skills to anchor their houses together with their dreams for a better life. The structures accommodate new businesses, predominantly of Italian entrepreneurs who made use of cheap labor and provided survival jobs to hundreds of thousands of women in manufacturing firms, such as assembling buckles, producing cookies, garment production, paper printing, and warehouses. These business enterprises, recognized in Albania as *fasoneri*, relied on cheap, feminized labor power, something also reminiscent of the former Kombinat's textile mills and machinery, operated predominantly by women with long shifts and in hard conditions. In the post-1990s, migrant women who located with their families to these buildings continued to work for extremely low salaries for decades, without unions or syndicates. However, these salaries accounted for a substantial share of migrant families' income in Kombinat. In the houses I studied in Kombinat, I noticed equipment used for assembling buckles in the courtyards. Many of these women would work overtime and take on extra work at home, where their children would help them after school.

367 Artur Bega, "Nëpër Udhët Dhe Baltën e 'Geto'-s Me Emrin 'Kombinat,'" Sociale, *Koha Jonë* (Tirana), February 9, 1999.

368 Dylbere, a resident of Kamza, who initially lived in Kombinat, where she still worked at the time of the conversation with the author, September 30, 2023.

Another source of income for these families is remittances. Emigration in this area, as in general in Albania, but especially in these urban margins, works in two ways; as a source of survival and improvement of material conditions, but at the same time as a corrosive phenomenon that drains the most energetic part of the families and communities, that is, the youth. There is no family in Kombinat that does not have members abroad. In the last three decades, the younger generation that arrived as toddlers or who were born in Kombinat now make up a new generation of parents. Very often, the males leave the country while their wives are left behind temporarily in the same house, engaged in reproductive and care work for the youngest and the elderly. When the young wives and kids join their husbands in the host country where they have immigrated, the elderly are left on their own. The oldest generations are struggling to live on their own, having so far lived in a society where the extended family would always accommodate the elderly. Even during state socialism, family played the most substantial role in the care of children and the elderly, predominantly carried out by women.

5.2.2 The Operation of Hidrofili and the Fluff Factory

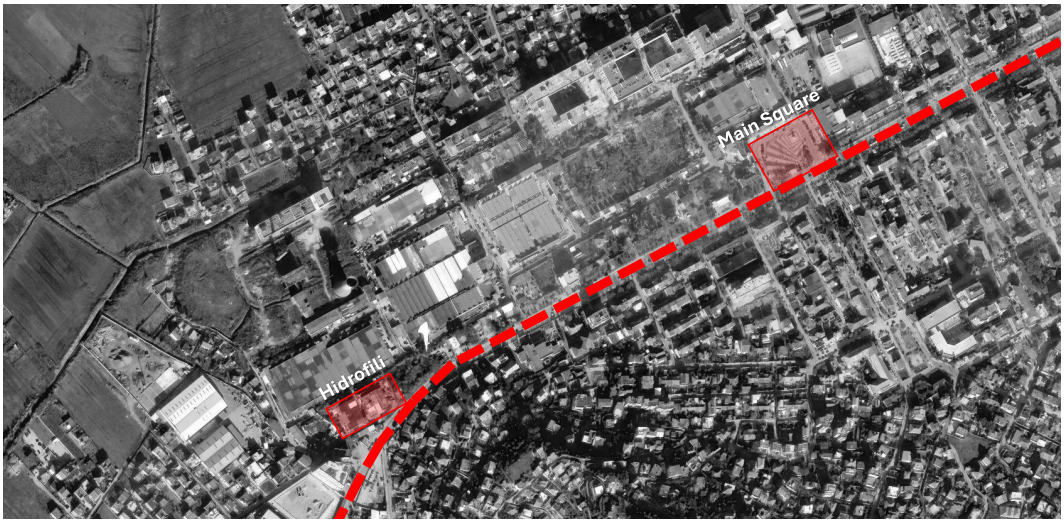


FIG. 5.11 Location of Hidrofili and Fluff Factory in relation to the main square and other textile mills. Aerial view of 2025, Source: e-harta AKPT, Reworked on top by the author

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Hidrofili and the Fluff Factory are located at the very last southern edge of the industrial part of Kombinat. They are the last two industrial buildings visible from the main street. However, they are not easily distinguishable because their base levels are lower than the main street. Their area is contoured between the Fine Fabric Factory, constructed in the 1970s with the help of the People's Republic of China, and the main street of Kombinat. Compared to the entire industrial establishment of Kombinat, these two lastly constructed factories are a tiny part of the whole, but represent an important achievement as the buildings were designed, constructed, and operationalized entirely by Albanian engineers and technicians, speaking for a long-lasting aspiration of autarchy that characterized the state-socialist regime, especially after the breakup with China. However, the technology of Hidrofili, i.e., all the machinery, came from Eastern Germany. The production line was from the 1970s-1980s and was a recent technology compared to the other machinery operating in the other textile mills, like, for example, the Looming Factory (*Filatura*), which was a technology from before World War II, imported from the Soviet Union.

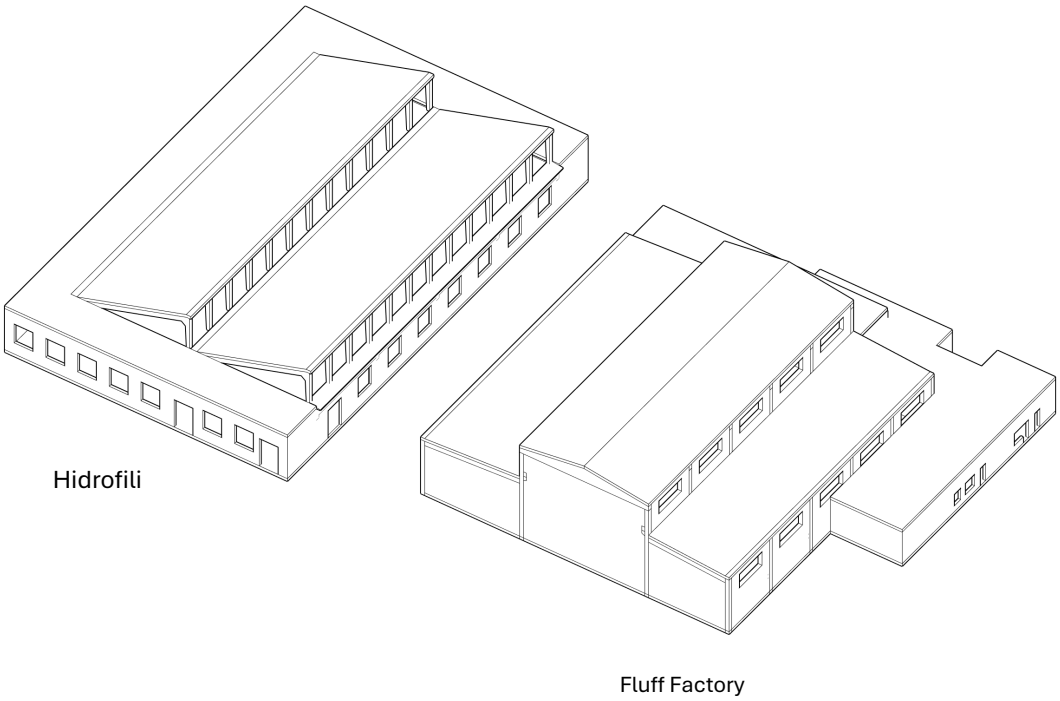


FIG. 5.12 Acsonometric view of buildings of Hidrofili and Fluff Factory during the times the industry was operating. Drawing by author based on archival material and on-site survey

TOC

Hidrofili and the Fluff Factory were two entirely separate mills. They were constructed one after the other, first Hidrofili in 1982 and then the Fluff Factory a year later. The Fluff Factory's aim was to use leftover material coming out of the production processes within and outside of Kombinat, like other textile factories, such as the ones in Berat, Korça, or Shkodra. Here, the leftover material would be processed into fluff with improved burning properties, to be used in the military industry for rapid combustion or to produce gas masks. The process in the fluff factory involved chemical treatment in large tubs, such as bleaching with caustic soda, followed by loosening in machinery to achieve higher-quality fluff. The product would be packaged and sent to the military department in either Mjekës, near the city of Elbasan and close to another heavy industrial site, the Metallurgical Plant (*Kombinati Metalurgjik*), or in Poliçan, near the city of Berat, where there was a large military warehouse.

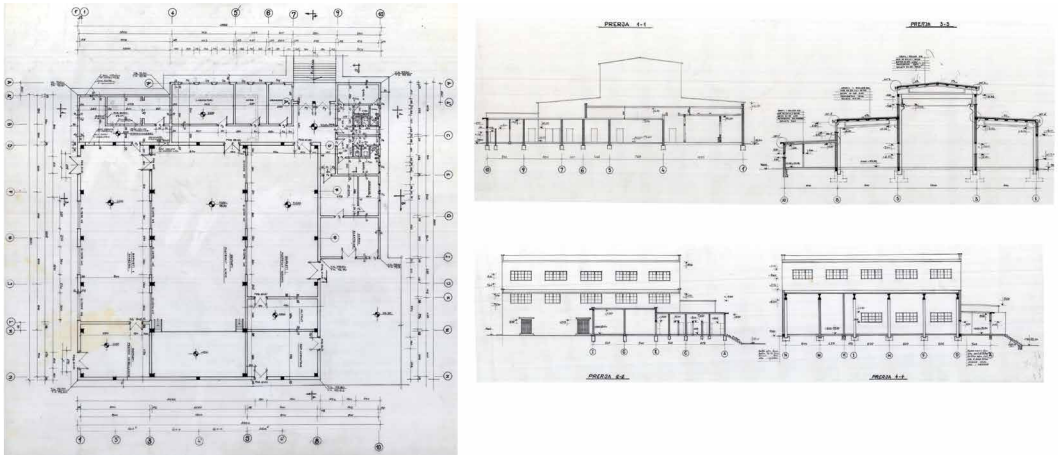


FIG. 5.13 Fluff Factory Plans and sections, Source: Technical Archive Tirana, Albania

Hidrofili was created to produce cotton for the medical and pharmaceutical sectors. The product would meet domestic needs, while 80% would be exported. It was exported in sterile packaging, packed in bigger bundles. The mills operated for only 10 years, as Hidrofili stopped production in 1992. As one of the mill's technical managers, Arben, explains during our meeting in Hidrofili, the production line was more complex than that of the Fluff Factory, yet considerably smaller and simpler than those of larger textile plants. By the time we met, I had already secured the archival plans of Hidrofili and had previously encountered another manager who joined our conversation. I had also entered nearly all the houses built inside these two buildings after 1990.

What I am curious about, however, is how these buildings functioned when industrial production was still in place. The operation of the Fluff Factory remains a mystery to me, though the industrial remnants still present in the building indicate that there were overhead cranes for transporting materials within the vast space, as well as chemical treatment vats. About Hidrofili, Arben recalls every detail vividly, the production lines, the placement of machinery, and, with shining eyes and enthusiasm, insists on sharing episodes from the production process alongside glimpses into the everyday lives of the workers' community. As he speaks, I find myself assembling pieces of a puzzle, tracing how particular houses were positioned in relation to specific machines and industrial operations. Fragments of earlier stories from the inhabitants begin to make sense, such as, for instance, the account of a house with direct access to water, which now appears logical when considered alongside the former locations of toilets and water supply infrastructure.

As Arben explains to me, the process would start with the material called *agregat,* which would be put into a machine that loosens large bundles of pressed raw cotton as it arrived from the fields where it was collected. Two big bundles of *agregat,* each weighing 230 kg, were processed in one shift. The raw cotton was not of high quality with long fibers, as high-quality cotton was used to produce cotton fabric. Instead, medium-quality cotton was used at Hidrofili. After passing through the loosening and combing machinery and a powerful fan with air passing through tubes, the material would go into a sterile room called *llabaz*, with communicating doors that closed or opened once the room was full. From this room, the cotton would be transferred to a worker, who would then place it in a pressing machine. The heavy, pressed blocks, weighing around 200 kg each, would be lifted by a crane hook and placed in a boiling machine, then a whitening machine. This was a chemical process lasting 8 hours under high pressure. Afterwards, the chemically treated material would be sent to a washing machine to remove the chemicals, and then to a centrifuge to remove the water. From the centrifuge, the material was transferred to a long drying machine, which passed through varying temperatures, starting from 10 and then gradually up to 90 degrees Celsius, and the other way around, with the temperature lowering back to 10 degrees Celsius again. Coming out of this machine, the material was put in another sterile room, also called *llabaz*. From there, the material would shift into the loosening and cotton carding process. The next room was a combing room with six combing machines that produced a sort of cotton veil. This veil was put into another machine to be folded. When it came folded out of this machine, it was time to wrap it into little bags, done manually by women workers. While Hidrofili initially produced mainly sterile cotton, in 1989, a new process was added to produce cotton gauze, which required basic weaving. To make this product, a very basic loom was added to the production line, and 10 new women were employed for this new process.

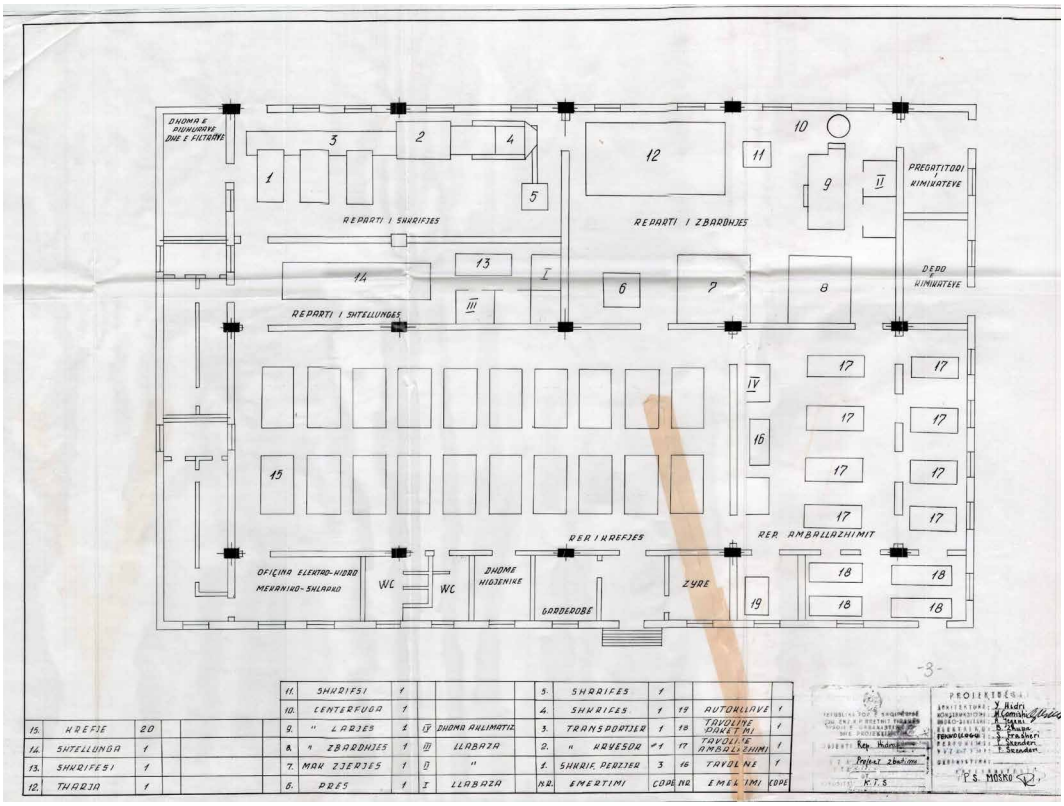


FIG. 5.14 Operational plan of Hidrofili. Source: Technical Archive Tirana, Albania

Two of the hardest work processes, as located in the plan in the figure 5.11, were wrapping the final product in small bags, which required long hours of standing, and preparing the chemicals, which posed a risk to workers' health. There was a dedicated door in the building for the supply of the chemicals, which were administered and operated by one person only. The worker handling the chemicals would receive a slightly higher salary and extra milk due to the work risks.[369]

From Arben, I learn that Hidrofili was a small factory and that, compared to other mills, its workers were somehow privileged. The production line operated in two shifts (6:00–14:00 and 14:00–22:00), whereas other factories ran continuously around the clock in three shifts. Arben describes Hidrofili as "a little family," a place

369 Obtaining milk was an issue in Albania at the time. The early morning milk lines are a famous symbol of the scarcity during Communist Albania, but also of a political place where people standing in line would chat for hours, where these chats were surveilled and often an excuse for persecution.

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where everyone knew one another and participated, to some extent, in each other's lives. Work positions were often assigned to women who had personal connections within the human resources department or at higher levels of Kombinat or the Party. Arben himself tells me that he obtained his position through an acquaintance of his cousin. Kinship thus emerges once again as a crucial mechanism for securing a more favorable life, even as the ideological foundations upon which the socialist state was constructed clashed with forms of privilege in state socialist Albania.

The widespread practice of seeking privileged positions, such as the right to pursue university studies, secure a more desirable workplace, or obtain housing authorization, through personal connections rather than merit, did not go unnoticed by the party-state. Various corrective measures were introduced to address what was considered a problematic phenomenon, including propaganda films produced by Kinostudio, such as *Tela për violinë* (*Strings for Violin*, 1987) and the comedy sketch *Kunati i shokut Xhemal* (*Brother-in-Law of Comrade Xhemal*, 1986). The state apparatus was clearly aware of the issue and sought to regulate it, with film serving as a key medium for communicating normative behaviors to the masses. These productions not only depicted the problem but also proposed models for correcting the exchange of privileges rooted in positions of power. Yet kinship and friendship increasingly functioned as a form of social currency in the circulation of favors, an entrenched practice that the party-state ultimately failed to eliminate and, at times, appeared compelled to turn a blind eye to.

Beyond securing a leadership position as a technician in Hidrofili, Arben shares that his connections managed to save him from getting into trouble politically. At some point, he was accused of "agitation and propaganda," a serious accusation that could have resulted in years of imprisonment. Kinship and friendship circles had an interest in protecting an individual's political reputation, as any stain could extend to those associated with them. Having a "bad biography" carried consequences not only for the individual but for the entire family. Such a designation could restrict access to higher education, limit professional advancement, and prevent family members from being placed in secondary jobs and political positions, with the extent of these disciplinary measures depending on the perceived severity of the biographical "damage." Kinship and friendship, therefore, functioned both as mechanisms for acquiring privilege when one of their members was well positioned within power hierarchies and as vectors of punishment, as the political deviance of a single member could affect the life chances of the entire circle.

5.2.3 Hidrofili, More than a Place of Refuge

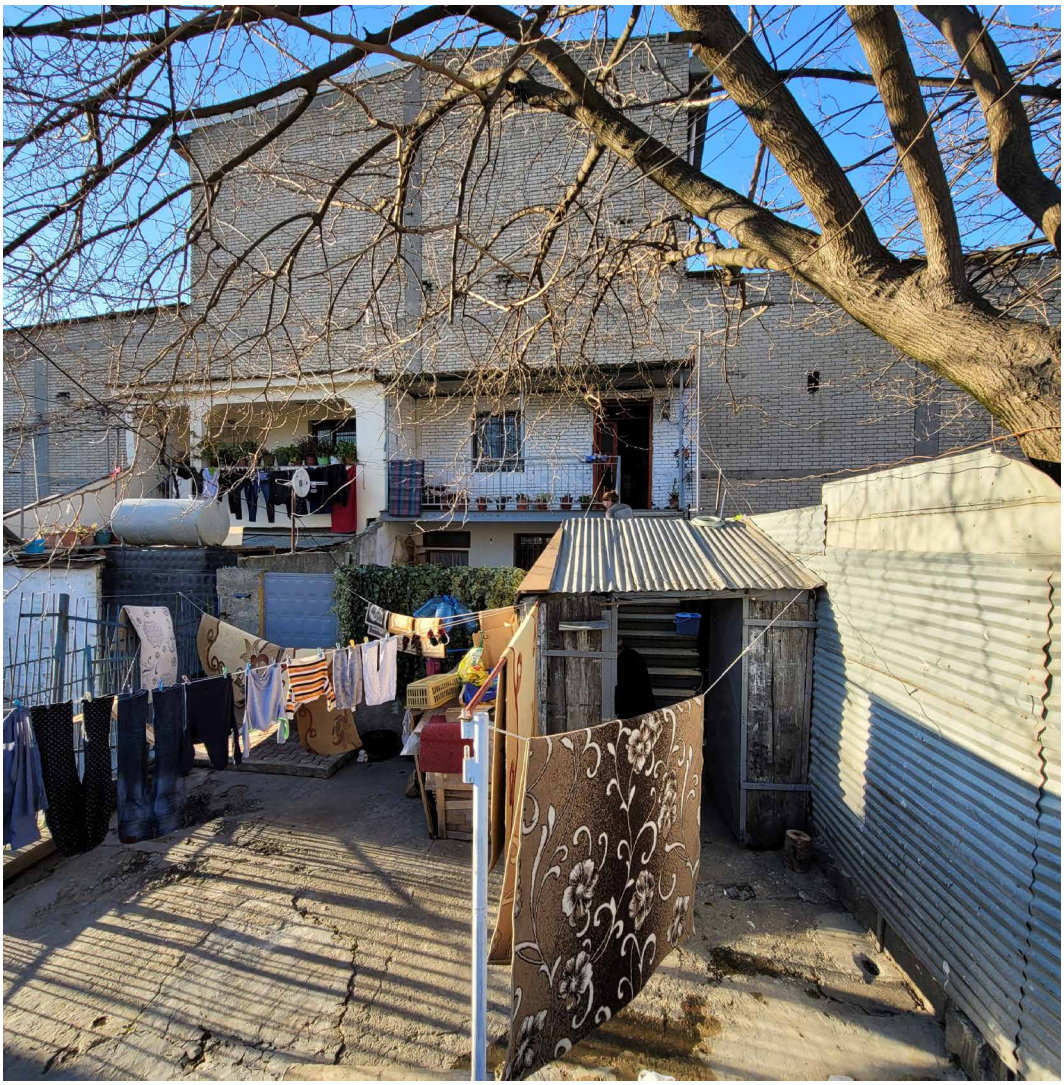


FIG. 5.15 Former industrial building of Fluff Factory repurposed for dwelling, February 2022

I visit Hidrofili for the first time with Drita in November 2019. She was born there in 1998, one year after her family moved into the building, at a time when Hidrofili had already ceased operations (1992) and migrants were in the process of appropriating its structures. She spent the first fourteen years of her life here,

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largely in the care of her grandparents, uncles, and aunts, while her parents, first her father, and later her mother (and brother born abroad), emigrate to Italy in search of better employment. When I first met her, she was a master's student completing her graduation thesis. In our later encounters, she explained that after graduating, she frequently changed jobs as she searched for a career path. She was the first person in her extended family, and among the few of her childhood peers, to attend university, an opportunity she attributes to the sacrifices made by her parents and the extended kin in Hidrofili, those still living there and those who had left.

After learning about my interest in Kombinat, she tells me with a gleam in her eye that I must see the house where she grew up. Accompanied by my architect partner, we follow her. We walk through Kombinat, stopping here and there, where her aunt once lived, or along the way as she pauses to greet old friends. This walk marks my first encounter with Hidrofili, one that is followed by many others over the course of four years, during which I have the chance to meet most of its inhabitants, enter their homes, and speak with them both individually and collectively. Along the way, characters unfold, and pieces of puzzles connect. The buildings are always present in their stories, sometimes in the background and sometimes at the fore, as stubborn characters in the life stories of the community of Hidrofili.

Although Hidrofili and the Fluff Factory are positioned next to one another and were constructed at roughly the same time, nowadays only Hidrofili has stood the test of time as a toponym. No one knows or talks about the Fluff Factory. The community inhabiting these two adjacent buildings is known as the community of Hidrofili. Situated at the most southern edge of Kombinat's industrial area, the two buildings occupy a clearly demarcated position. The terrain itself reinforces their relative spatial autonomy, allowing them to function as an intimate entity distinct from the rest of Kombinat. The buildings lie close to the former Factory of Thin Fabrics, now one of Kombinat's large privatized buildings and currently operated in parts by various firms, most distinctly an Italian manufacturing firm that produces metal buckles for bags. The entrance of this firm is on the path that borders Hidrofili. Many residents of Hidrofili, predominantly women, once worked there, and some continue to do so. The former Factory of Thin Fabrics, an elongated structure with a saw-tooth roof, acts as a physical boundary that helps define the Hidrofili area while simultaneously dominating the landscape with its pronounced industrial character.

Upon our arrival at Hidrofili with Drita, we have to take a few steps down from the main street and soon find ourselves in a narrow alley with walls rising roughly three meters on either side. This is the liveliest part of Hidrofili, where inhabitants stay and chat with each other on a sunny day like this one, where kids play safely riding their little bikes, running, or playing soccer.



FIG. 5.16 Photo taken from the rooftop of Hidrofili looking toward the former Factory of Thin Fabrics

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FIG. 5.17 Photo taken from the Fluff Factory toward Hidrofili and the narrow alley



FIG. 5.18 Photo taken from the rooftop of Hidrofili looking toward the Fluff Factory

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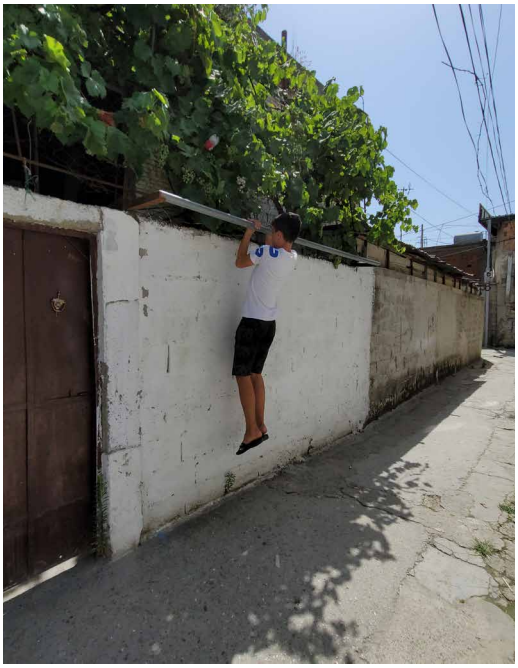




FIG. 5.19 Children playing in the alley.
FIG. 5.20 Metal tubes in the walls of many houses serve a dual purpose: residents hang carpets to dry while children simultaneously use them as an improvised exercise bar.
FIG. 5.21 Walls that surround the buildings on the right side of the picture and a house without the front wall on the left side.

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As a pattern of appropriation all over Kombinat, here at Hidrofili, it is easy to distinguish again the walls that line the fronts of the houses and accompany one's walk through its streets and alleys. Constructed roughly three and a half meters in front of the industrial façade and typically built of concrete blocks, these assertive walls establish a clear threshold between public, private, and community realms. They provide an effective screen for privacy while simultaneously functioning as a shield for what is commonly understood as an illegal act of occupation. Beyond them, when passing each of the front doors, distinguished domestic worlds suddenly appear. The space enclosed between these walls and the former industrial façade becomes a front yard, an outdoor welcoming introduction to the home. Here, one encounters colorful tiled floors, plants, construction tools, laundry hung out to dry, improvised open-air kitchens, and often a toilet. Frequently, a staircase is located here that leads to the upper floors or to a terrace.

Many of these spatial choices are made based on pragmatic needs, particularly the placement of the kitchen, toilet, or stairs. The toilet is typically detached from the main domestic nucleus, often installed as one of the first functional elements of the new shelter, a configuration that facilitates connections to sewage and water infrastructure. Many housing units that have invested in improving their arrangements have managed to move the toilet indoors. Similarly, the outdoor kitchen, usually consisting of a sink and a basic cooking surface, would meet immediate practical needs and is often moved indoors at a later stage in the transformation of the house. However, the outdoor arrangements are not purely utilitarian. In Albania's Mediterranean climate, such semi-open domestic settings sustain a continuous relationship with the outdoors. The makeshift character of these houses seems to remind and affirm the everyday life unfolding beyond sealed interiors, subtly challenging the enclosed characteristics of many contemporary domestic spaces.

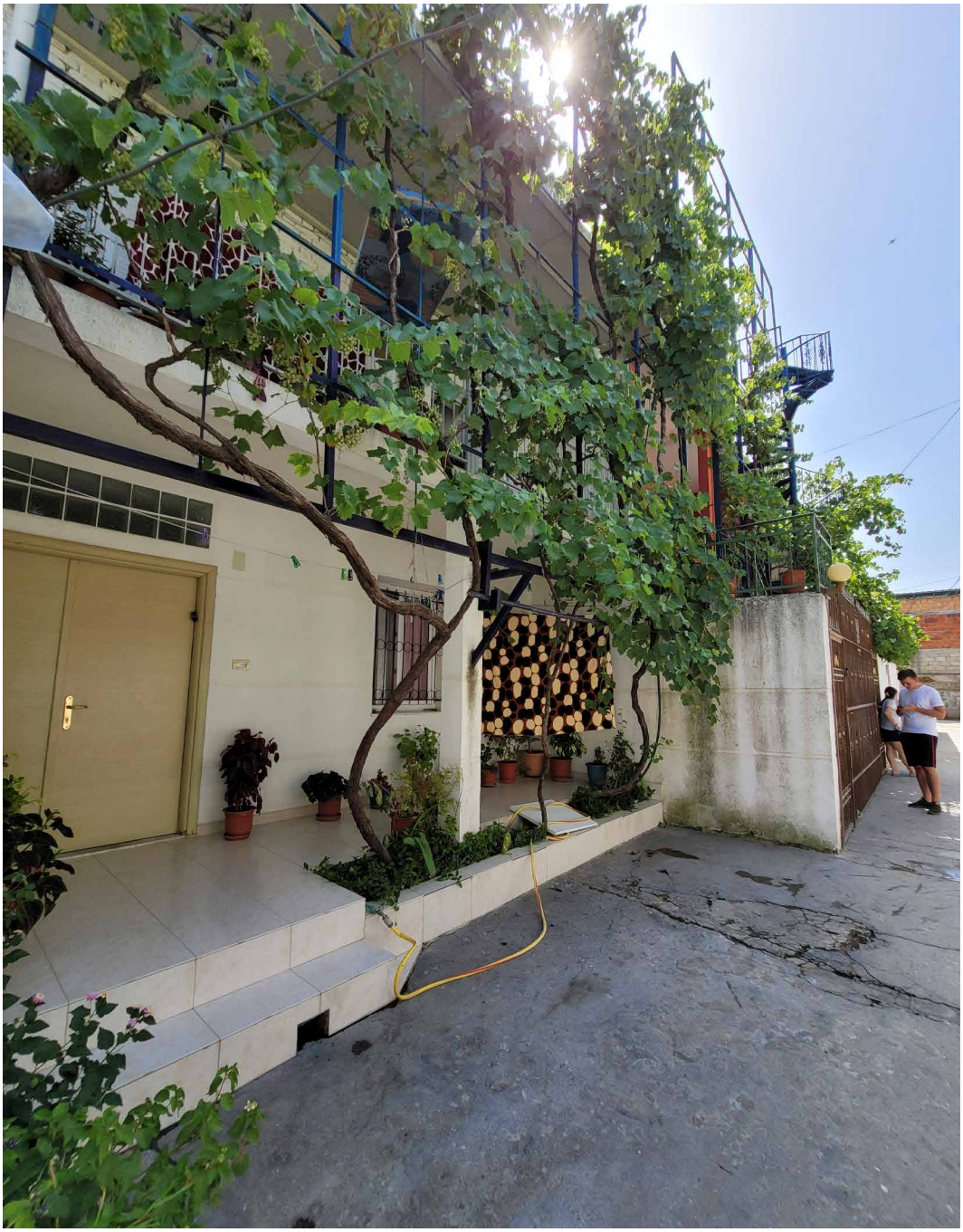


FIG. 5.22 On the left side of the image, a house lacking a front wall can be seen as a spatial expression of trust and perceived safety in community life.

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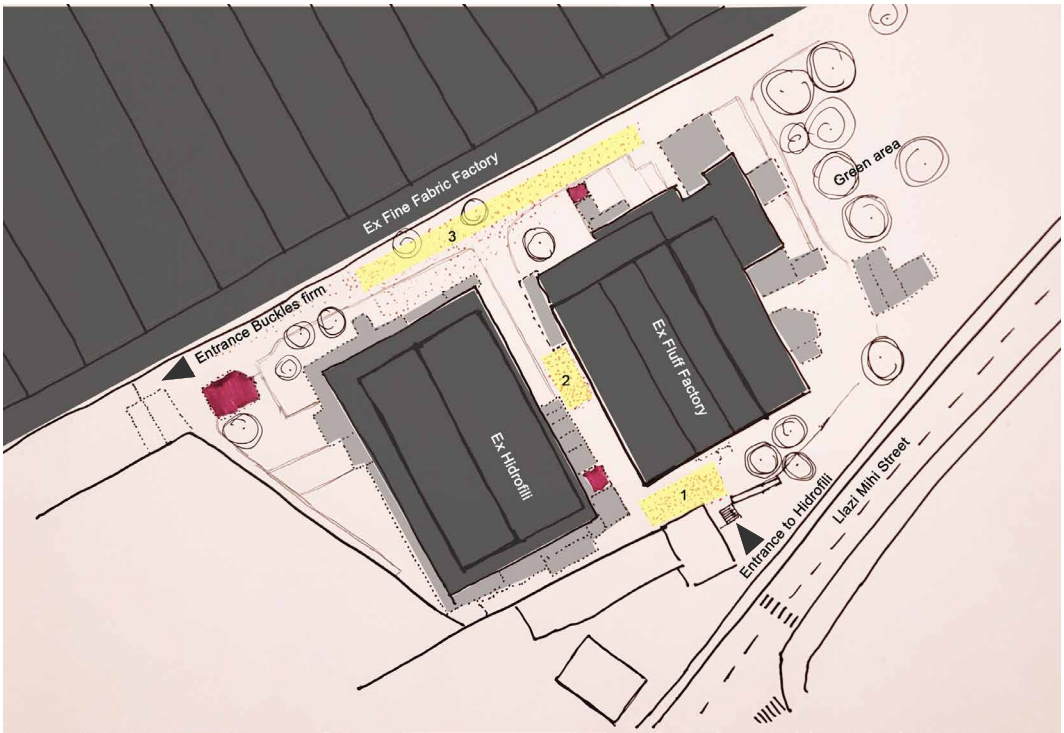


FIG. 5.23 The outdoor spaces surrounding the buildings function as collectively used terrain for the community. Red spots indicate small businesses, two shops (only one still operating), and a bar close to the entrance of the buckle manufacturing firm.

Something that immediately attracts my attention in Hidrofili is the presence of episodic segments where the perimeter walls are no longer solid and opaque but instead composed of transparent metal fences. Although still high, these fences fully expose the front yard to view. I had not encountered such configurations in other appropriated areas of Kombinat. An even more striking instance is one in which the wall is absent altogether. The owner, also a relative of Drita, tells me that keeping the frontage open was a deliberate choice, one that clearly reconfigures the boundary between private and collective space, signaling trust and a willingness to participate in community life.

The outdoor spaces between and around the buildings were once actively used, though less so today as the community shrinks and becomes increasingly atomized through emigration and more individualized lifestyles. From my conversations with residents, I identify three main areas that functioned as spontaneous gathering points. The first is located at the entrance to Hidrofili, reached by a set of stairs descending from the main street. Drita recalls this space as one where both children and adults, regardless of gender or family affiliation, played more physically

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engaging games. It also served as a place of everyday gathering for women, who would sit on the steps or on improvised stools to knit, chat, and spend time together in a chill way. At times, a volleyball net was set up across the narrow alley between the two buildings, transforming the area into an inviting place for the broader community. Along this same alley, smaller groups of men gathered to play board games such as dominoes, chess, or mancala.

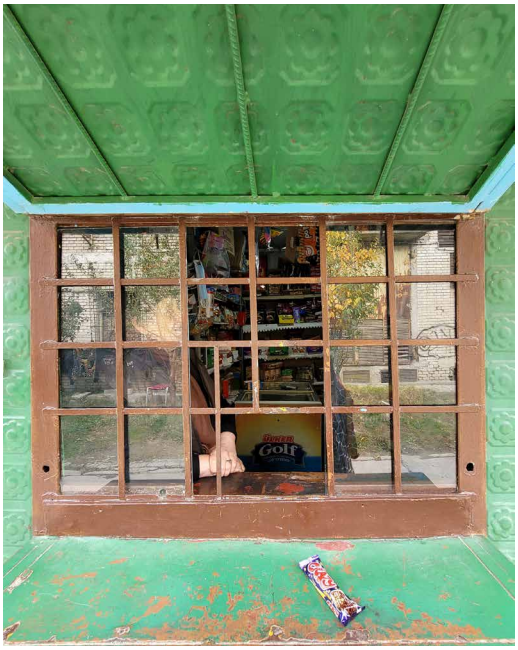
A second spontaneous gathering point is further along the alley, in front of the house without a front wall, belonging to the family of Drita's father's cousin. This open frontage, which still has no wall in the front, hosted a variety of celebrations, including birthday parties and weddings. Weddings, in particular, were celebrated in a traditional manner, often extending over a week of dancing, singing, and continuous visits from members of the extended community and beyond.

The third gathering area is located at the end of the narrow alley that runs parallel to the façade of the former Fine Fabrics Factory. Slightly wider than the other passages, this street has its daily temporal rhythms shaped by the activities of the buckle manufacturing firm, whose main workers' entrance is positioned at its far end (see map). In the mornings, during lunch breaks, and again in the afternoon, waves of women move in and out of the gate, animating the space with cyclical intensity. A small, often-empty coffee bar is located right next to the entrance door. About a decade ago, this area (3) hosted a variety of communal events. Like the previously described gathering points, it accommodated weddings and birthday celebrations, yet its greater openness also enabled other forms of collective activity. Among the most memorable to Drita is *Miss Lagjia* (Miss Neighborhood), a staged event particularly popular in Albania during the late 1990s and early 2000s. Organized in the spirit of a block party, the beauty contest invited neighborhood children to compete for the title of the best-looking participant. These were playful activities echoing beauty spectacles broadcast on television, which, prior to the 1990s, would have been inconceivable because they were considered morally corrupting Western imports and a degradation of society. Now an adult, Drita recalls with admiration how deeply the grown-ups were fully engaged in organizing these events, including forming committees and taking the votes seriously, all to entertain the kids in the community. Participants and neighbors contributed a little money to buy a crown, typically a plastic tiara adorned with some fake gemstones, transforming the object into a shared symbol of celebration. Drita always won the *Miss Buzeqeshja* (Miss Smile), because of her charming smile and positive attitude. Once she won Miss Lagjia, which was an exceptional moment for her. The outdoor staircase of the corner house's front yard served as the starting point for the children's parade, temporarily converting the domestic threshold into a performative collective stage.

Within and along with these common outdoor areas were small shops, a bar, and ambulant sellers. One shop is still run by an old woman, living on her own after her family members left or died. Her son, who lives with his new family in the same building but a few units further, helps her with the supplies. For her, this activity is very important, because, although it might not be very profitable, keeping the shop open allows her to stay in touch with the community. She longs for the time when the community was vibrant, and there were many activities on the street.

Drita recalls childhood memories of growing up at the heart of a community with open doors, where children moved freely, playing from one house to another. Her memories are of a carefree upbringing, yet she describes places that now appear unusual and unsafe for kids to play. Among them was a military tunnel discovered by the kids of the community, which they had quickly adopted as a place of refuge from the adults' suppression.[370] She also mentioned episodes that hint at the area's territorial autonomy, such as a member of her extended family being chased by the police after taking refuge in the buildings of Hidrofili, and its intricate spatial layout rendering his capture nearly impossible. There was a sort of territorial oversight operating within the community, people who were unknown or unfamiliar had to give an account for their presence here. This suggests a collectively maintained sense of boundary and belonging. There was also a sort of rivalry between groups of children from different sides of the Kombinat factories, expressed through distinct subcultural identities.

370 This was common in Albania after 1997 when the military had lost control of its places. The state socialist regime had covered the entire territory with small survey and refuge bunkers. News of that time reported children being injured from military remnants, like old weapons found in these places. As mentioned, after the fall of the regime and the anarchic year of 1997, the area of Kombinat was abandoned and left outside of any attention, therefore the risk for these kids was higher.



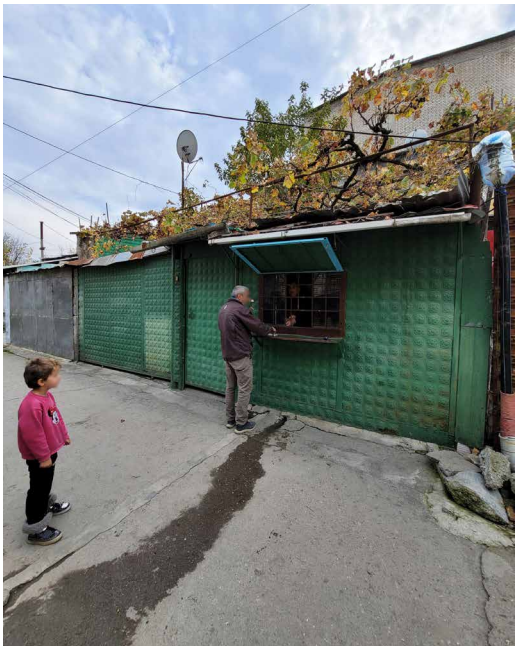


FIG. 5.24 Small shop in its open hours

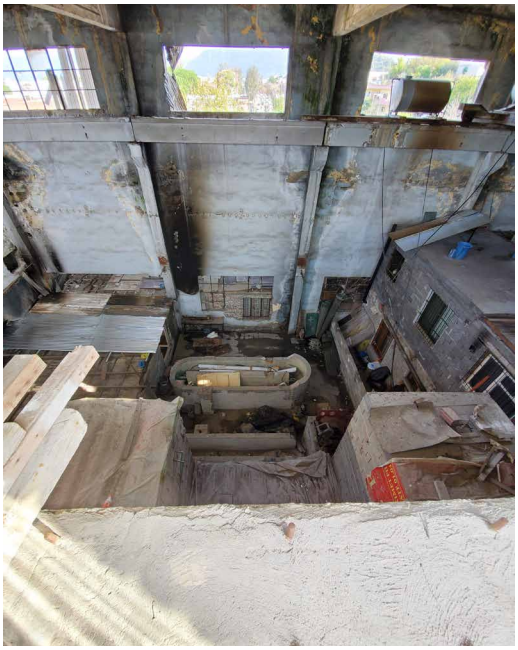


FIG. 5.25 Main hall (salla) of the Ex Fluff Factory, repurposed mostly for storage. November 2019

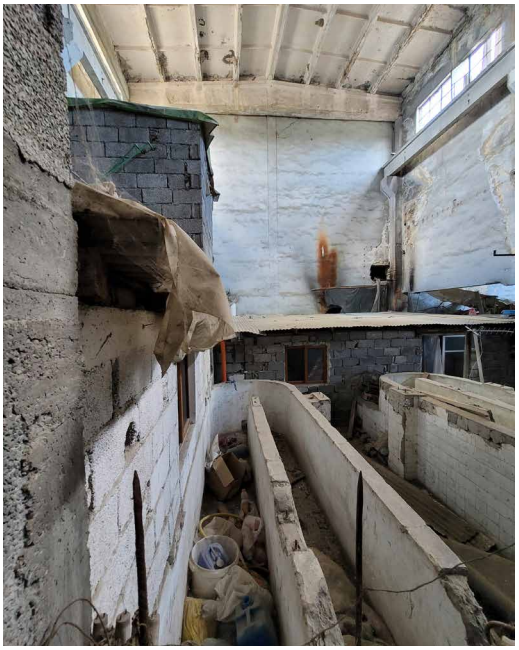


FIG. 5.26 Main hall (salla) of the Ex Fluff Factory, used for light and air. November 2019

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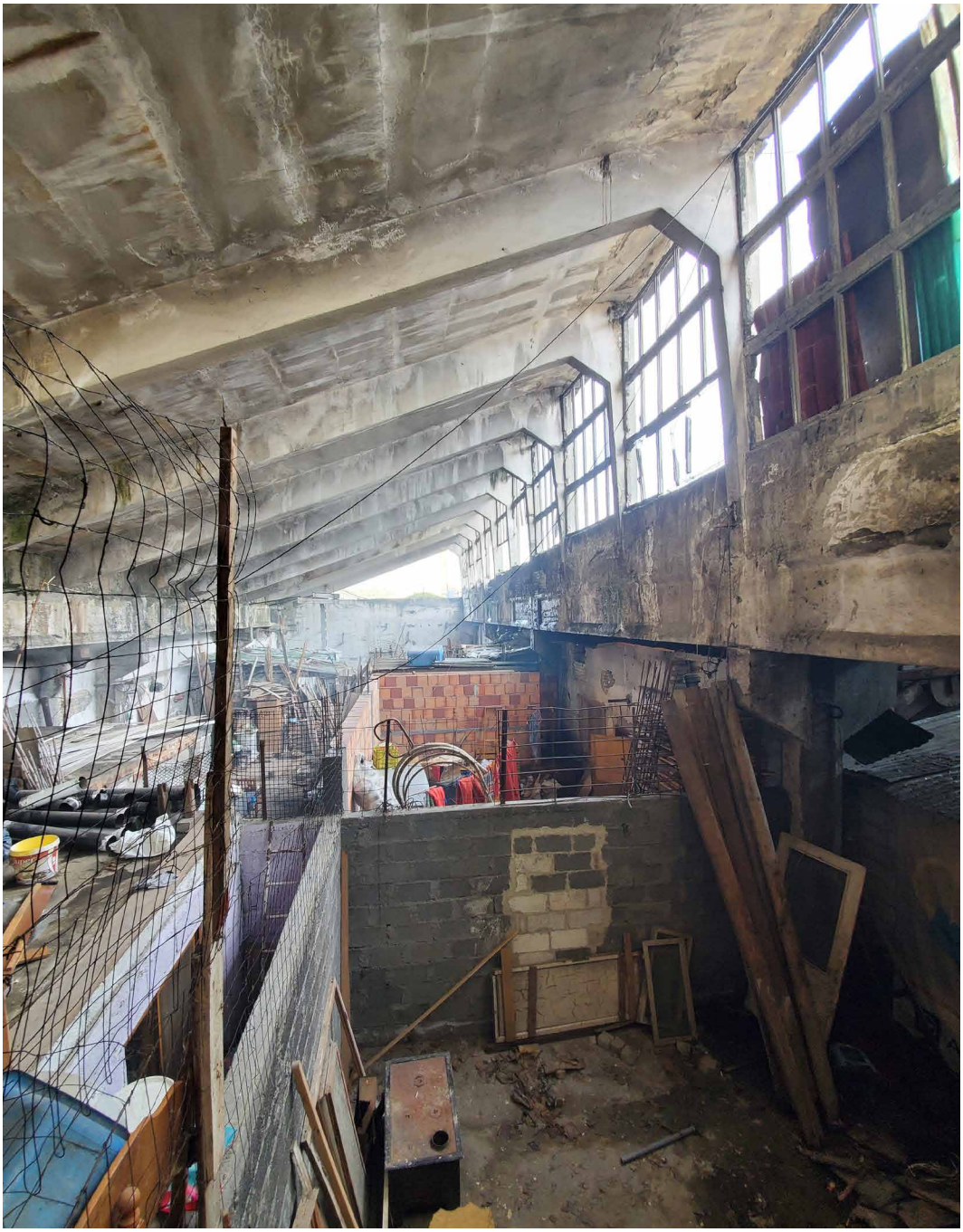


FIG. 5.27 Main hall (salla) of the Ex Hidrofili building, November 2019

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Perhaps the most impressive spatial experience of visiting Hidrofili is seeing the vast interior halls of both former industrial buildings. Drita shows me the big hall, *salla* in Albanian, accessible from her house, which serves as a shared, covered backyard, although fences have started to appear.

"In these big halls we played improvised games as kids, we cook fli (traditional dish) often, and it is not risky to light a fire in there as the space is huge and ventilated. Also, lots of construction materials are left in this hall in case we need to use or reuse them. Houses here have always been in constant transformation when a couple gets married or a child is born. I have had the most incredible childhood in this place."

Shares Drita as we are looking at the hall.[371]

This large hall, now functioning as a covered backyard accessible only through the houses, appears to have accommodated a wide range of activities such as celebrations, clandestine love stories within the community, the storage of construction materials and old furniture, water tanks, stoves, equipment used for buckle assembly, and even livestock. Drita recalls that her family kept a cow there. Each morning, her grandmother Fatime would walk the cow down the corridor and out toward a nearby lawn to graze, which had been a park for industrial workers prior to the 1990s. During the winter months, the cow remained inside the hall, where bales of hay were also stored as food for the cow.

The practice of keeping animals within these former industrial settings was not exceptional but rather part of a small-scale domestic economy of these families who had relocated to a new place. Such practices reveal how rural lifeworlds were not left behind but instead entered into the urban-industrial setting, producing a rurban (rural-urban) spatial condition in which the boundaries between countryside and city became increasingly blurred. The rural material culture migrated with the families, quietly reshaping the meaning and use of these structures.

While keeping livestock is no longer common in Hidrofili, remnants of rural practices persist. The practice of beekeeping is very present. Colorful wooden beehives stand on terraces or within façade lodges. Chickens occasionally are present in the front yards, while grapevines climb across façades, providing shade and intimacy. These vegetal and animal presences soften the architecture's industrial rigidity, suggesting an ongoing domestication of space through practices more commonly associated with village life than with the planned socialist city.

371 "Conversation of the Author with Drita, 21 Years Old," November 14, 2019, voice recording.



FIG. 5.28 Plans showing the inhabitants' spatial interventions to transform the former industrial buildings into housing. Drawing based on archival plans and survey by author.

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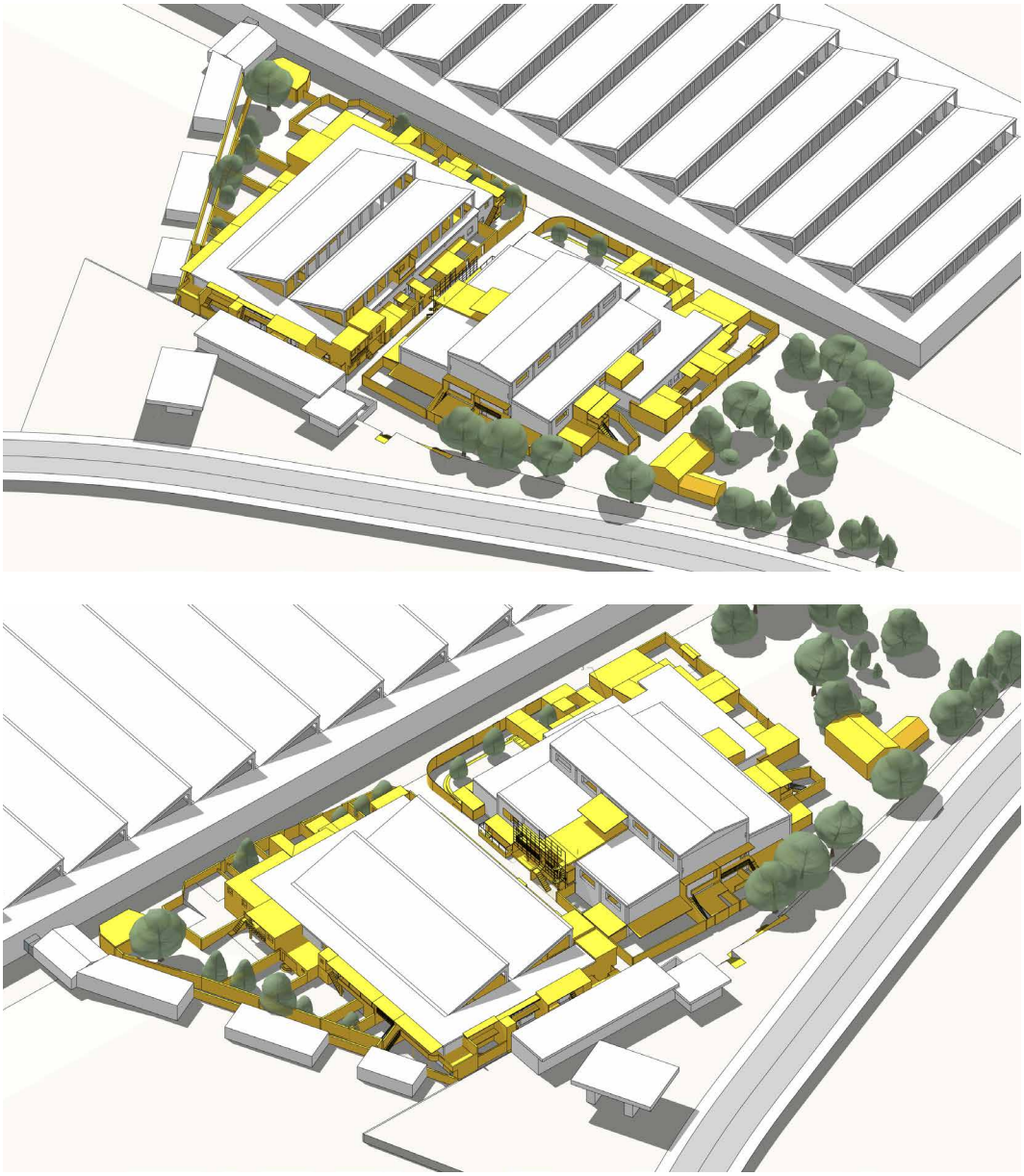


FIG. 5.29 Drawings of spatial interventions in Hidrofili

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As illustrated in the diagrammatic plans, spatial interventions within the two industrial buildings primarily involve attaching housing units to the interior façades to secure access to light and ventilation. From there, the dwellings extend inward toward the expansive halls. Although these transformations were largely carried out by master builders rather than formally trained architects, the units are strategically positioned to optimize environmental conditions in the interior rooms. Certainly, in a few cases, the ideal conditions of light and air are not met. Although no professionals have been officially involved in the construction, within the community, a civil engineer who moved into the ex-Fluff Factory with his family often shared structural knowledge with the builders.

As reflected in the spatial arrangements, residents negotiated boundaries so that each dwelling could maintain independent access while still participating in shared community spaces. This process reflects a form of situated spatial self-governance, in which everyday practicalities were balanced with the need for coexistence. The resulting layout reveals an incremental reorganization of industrial space into a habitable environment, with some dwellings remaining on one level and others reaching second or third levels. The following section delves deeper into the story of one extended family, who incrementally constructed their home as a process entangled with life events. It highlights how kinship, kin-making, and proximity served as supportive mechanisms throughout the building process.

5.2.4 A Community Built on Kinship, Kin-making, and Proximity

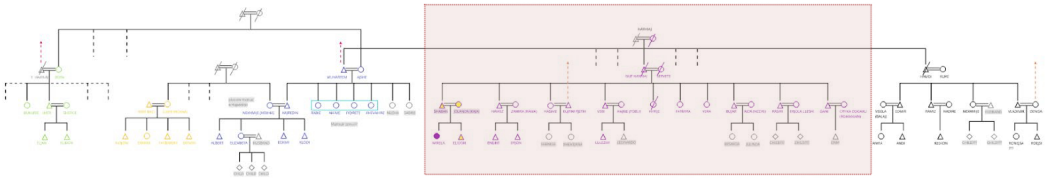


FIG. 5.30 Kinship diagram of the Krasniqi family showing blood and marriage relations, including extended-family members who lived in Hidrofili. Triangle = male, circle = female, a line on top indicates deceased. Genders in the diagram treated as binary, as identified by the informants. Names blurred for anonymity.

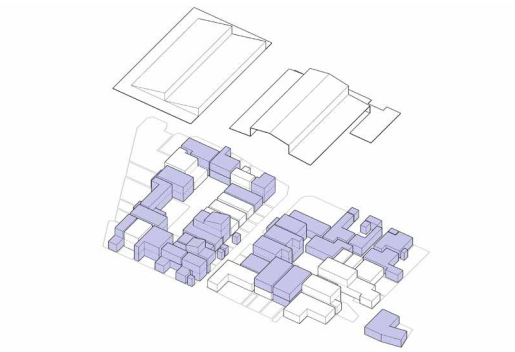


FIG. 5.31 Level of participation. In color are indicated the houses I visited, surveyed and engaged in conversation with.

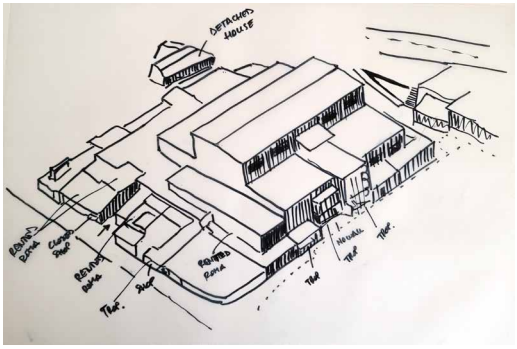


FIG. 5.32 Fieldwork sketches of former Fluff Factory

I am indebted to Drita, who introduced me to Hidrofili. After several visits that I conducted on my own, she sat down with me and shared a detailed account of her nuclear and extended family, the community, and her exceptional experience of coming of age at Hidrofili. She mediated my encounter with other members of her family and community. Mentioning her was always key to establishing trust relations with the community. The initial difficulty relating to the inhabitants and the subsequent ease of access made possible through Drita is indicative of the strong bonds within the community through ties of kinship and proximity.

The conversations I had with individuals and groups created a mosaic of what Hidrofili means across different generations and genders; whether a child, a woman, a man, or the elderly, they each had their own perspective. Drita's stories are characterized by nostalgia and a certain romanticization of the place and her extraordinary childhood. She attributes her lively and energetic character to her upbringing in Hidrofili, which underscores how the environment indeed participates in the formation of our subjectivities.

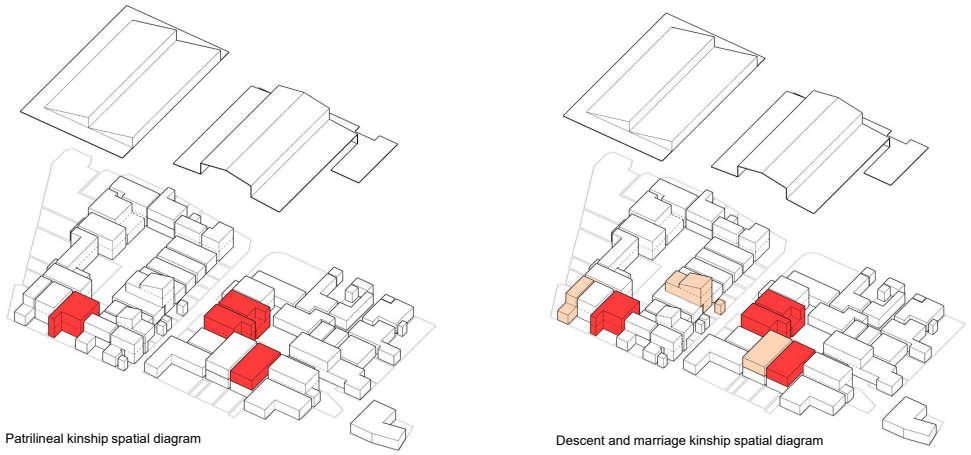


FIG. 5.33 Spatial distribution of genealogical kinship of Drita's extended family.

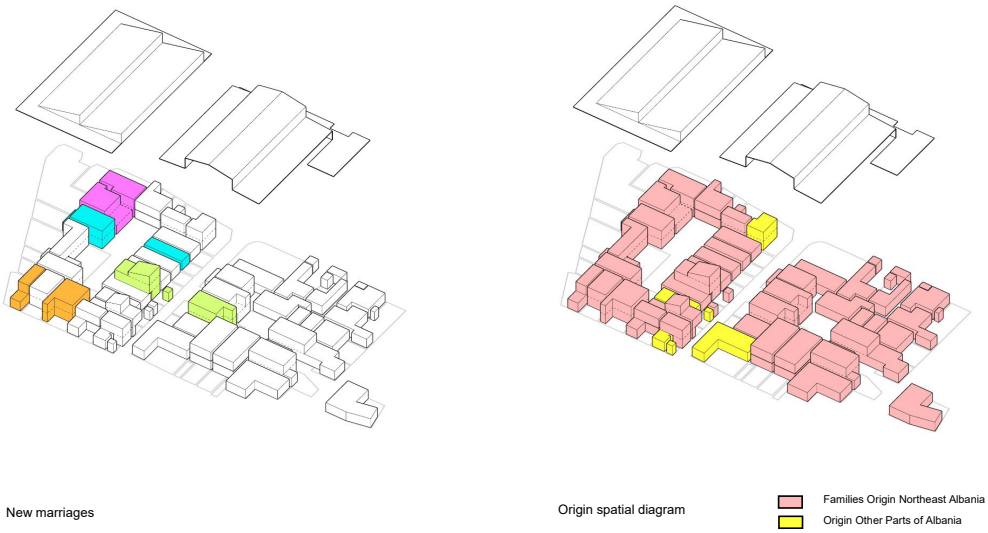


FIG. 5.34 Spatial distribution of relations.

While for adults, conversations revolve more around practical concerns such as improving their living conditions or fulfilling daily tasks, for the children, Hidrofili was an exceptional playground and a place of freedom of exploration and adventure. These different accounts reveal a layered meaning of Hidrofili not only as a living place but also of an affective character.

Particularly significant moments for me were meeting Fisnik and Valbona, a couple from an extended family I will refer to as the Krasniqi family (anonymized name), who relocated to Hidrofili in 1997. The encounter with Fisnik took place in the lively alley between the two buildings, where his cousin and uncle also joined us. Passersby, members of the community, occasionally commented on the moment. The conversation thus became semi-public, reflecting the alley's function as a social threshold between private and collective realms. In contrast, the meeting with her mother needed to take place in a more intimate setting, away from the public eye. I was invited to join one of their gatherings at their new house in Sharrë, when Valbona and four other women from the same extended family were getting together and were willing and in the mood to talk to me. This shift from the exposed alley to the protected interior of the home signifies the spatially mediated and often gendered conditions under which trust is negotiated in ethnographic fieldwork.

Equipped with information on the inhabitants by Drita, including their names and characters, I was able to return to the community more confident. Until I mentioned Drita, people were surprised by my knowledge of their names and stories, details that a first-time visitor would not normally know. Building trusting relationships is quite a delicate matter in Albanian society, due to the harsh experience of surveillance and spying during state socialism. Nevertheless, I felt welcomed and well-received most of the time. However, some families had left their dwellings at Hidrofili or were unwilling to participate in the research, and as noted in the methodology chapter, I learned to respect their autonomy.

In the community of Hidrofili, there are two large extended families (spanning three generations that include siblings and cousins) distributed across the two former industrial buildings. These are families originating primarily from *Tropoja* and *Mirdita*. Smaller extended families from *Puka* have also been part of the community. All these places of origin are located in the Northeastern part of Albania. Smaller families composed of a nuclear family, including often one or both grandparents, are also scattered throughout the buildings, and their places of origin are from other parts of Albania, such as *Pogradec*, *Tepelena*, *Gramsh*, *Korça,* and a village near Tirana. At the time of my study, approximately 45 families lived in these two buildings.

Over the past three decades, some of the first inhabitants have left, and several of the vacated units are now rented. Hidrofili, like other similar communities, is shrinking due to emigration, which has unfortunately led to a decline in the community's vitality. A growing Roma community of seven families has come in as renting tenants in some of the houses. Their arrival revealed underlying social issues, exposed as forms of prejudice toward Roma people and toward others positioned at the lowest levels of the social hierarchy. This remains perceptible in everyday

discourse and interactions, as expressed in the conversations I also engaged in. Social vulnerabilities are also evident in households, such as a single mother raising two children alone and an unemployed man who survives by collecting recyclable waste. As observed while visiting the dwellings, the material conditions combined with information shared during conversations point to some of the families living in very good conditions, while others live in extreme poverty. Families in these precarious conditions are mostly the above-mentioned tenants, who often are not among the first inhabitants and usually do not have family members who emigrated. They are also the most excluded from community life, which, as mentioned before, is shrinking. These observations are ethnographic impressions that highlight the layered economic socio-spatial inequalities coexisting within the same buildings.

I focus on one branch of the Krasniqi family and their kinship ties to other inhabitants. Two additional extended branches of the family, descendants of two brothers, are located in the former Fluff Factory building and were among the earliest arrivals. I will refer from now on to the Krasniqi family in relation to the branch that I studied more closely and who lived in one dwelling in Hidrofili. I will refer to the configuration of the three branches altogether as Krasniqi kin. As explained to me, the Krasniqi family was possibly the largest not only in their portion of the building but also across other areas where cousins were positioned. This numerical presence translated into a stronger voice in decision-making processes, revealing an internal hierarchy within the community. This means that Hidrofili is therefore not a fully horizontal case of commoning, and instead, influence was unevenly distributed.[372] Likewise, the organization of both the extended family and the broader community largely followed patriarchal structures in terms of gendered roles. At the same time, everyday discourses and practices occasionally suggest subtle yet meaningful challenges to these patriarchal norms, as will be discussed in the coming sections.

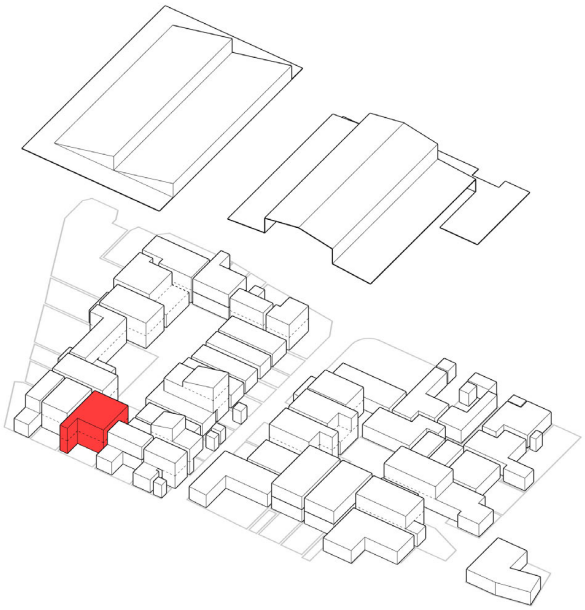
372 Horizontality is often described in commons theory as an ideal condition in which collectivity and individuality coexist in balance.

As noted earlier, the community has undergone a significant transformation. Roughly one-third of the families who initially moved to Tirana in the 1990s and constructed their dwellings in Hidrofili later relocated and moved out of these buildings. The Krasniqi family, which I will focus more on, left Hidrofili about ten years ago and moved a short distance away to the area of Sharrë, where this extended family built single-family houses for each of the male siblings and their nuclear family. They managed to do so with remittance money from emigration. Not all of these houses are currently inhabited, as several family members continue to live abroad. Nevertheless, they are carefully maintained with the hope of a future return. Fisnik points to the striking contradiction at the heart of the drama of emigration, expressed in the need to pay rent for small apartments abroad while a large family house remains empty in Albania. In his words: "Which Albanian would want to leave behind his place if they has economic chances to live here? You can see how we constructed the houses but keep on paying rent all over Europe and the world, while the houses remain empty here!"[373] This is a condition that reflects the lived reality of many families on the outskirts of Tirana and in Kamza. Also, in Hidrofili, dwellings and rooms often stand empty, as do many houses built across Albania over the past three decades, symbolizing the physical absence of loved ones while expressing an enduring hope for their return.[374]

373 "Conversation of the Author with Fisnik and Other Male Members of His Kin," December 11, 2021, voice recording.

374 Dimitris Dalakoglou, "Migrating-Remitting-'Building'-Dwelling: House-Making as 'Proxy' Presence in Postsocialist Albania," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 16, no. 4 (2010): 761–77.

5.2.5 Entangled Living and Building of the House



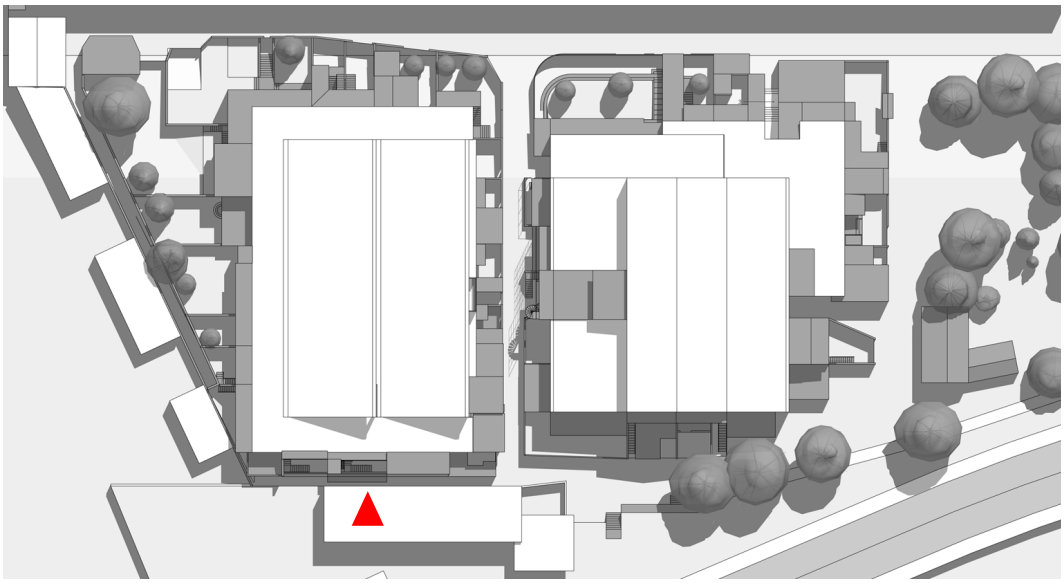


FIG. 5.35 Currently empty dwelling unit of Krasniqi family located inside the ex industrial building. .

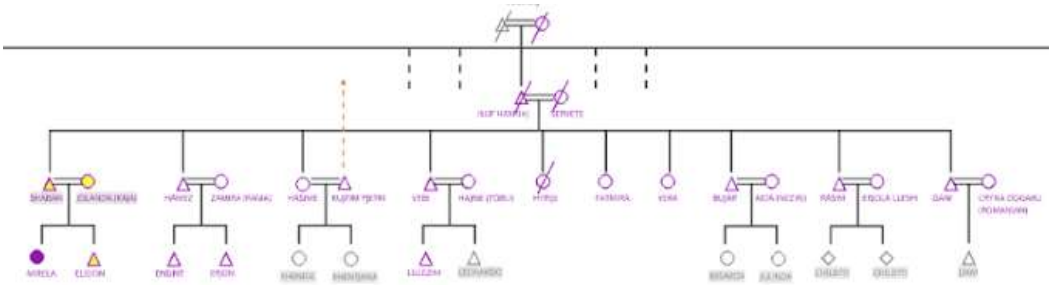


FIG. 5.36 Zoom in on the kinship diagram of the Krasniqi family that lived in the dwelling unit analyzed in this section. Triangle = male, circle = female, a line on top indicates deceased. Genders in the diagram treated as binary, as identified by the informants. Names blurred on purpose for anonymity.

Kinship at Hidrofili is not just a word or concept to be discussed. It is *the* phenomenon that weaves the logic of unfolding of space and the community. Because of the central role it plays, it pushed me to reflect on how extended families have traditionally been important in Albania, including the tribes of the North, which, as elaborated in Chapter 4, sometimes have been dressed with a mythical aura by the anthropologists. Nevertheless, for this dissertation, my knowledge of the traditional tribes is limited, as it was not the scope of this study. What is curious and relevant to me is how the role of kinship has been transposed into the present day as a spatial logic, and the intersections it has with the discussion of the commons.

In a very contemporary moment of Albania's modern history, after different (ideological) waves of dismissing tradition for the sake of becoming modern, and of bringing it back to attention in an artificial manner after the 1970s during the times of autarchy, kinship remains instrumental in societal organization alongside urban spatial configuration. It becomes particularly relevant in a time when the state loses its power of territorial control, and kinship appears as the traditional commons are revived, this time transposed to the city rather than in a remote area. For as much as an anachronistic phenomenon this might sound, kinship became the main logic of spatial configuration when the state collapsed after the 1990s, therefore, when the state is absent and sometimes even hostile. It is not only the malfunction of the state that enabled the kinship-based formation of entire areas in the city, but also the autonomous character of the newly situated peoples moving in and close to Tirana. Voell argues that customary law was crucial in the process.[375]

375 Voell, "The Kanun in the City. Albanian Customary Law as a Habitus and Its Persistence in the Suburb of Tirana, Bathore," 2003.

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I try to reconstruct the story of the arrival and the locating of the Krasniqi family, through the conversations I had with the couple and their children, as well as with other members of the more extended kin. Fisnik arrives at Hidrofili together with two siblings. They see the available space in the building of Hidrofili, and he finds it appropriate to modify it into a house for his extended family. At the time, the family is composed of 10 siblings, 4 male (Fisnik being one of them) and 6 female, their two parents, and their grandmother, so 13 in total. Fisnik is the eldest of all the siblings and feels the responsibility of taking care of the entire family, organizing roles and the decision-making process within the family, while engaging everyone in their contribution.

"At the time we left Tropoja, our family was composed of our grandmother, our two parents, 10 siblings, some of us married and with kids, but all living together. I am the oldest. Initially, I came with one brother and one sister to Tirana. A cousin of ours who had already located his family here showed us this part of the building as an opportunity to turn it into our home for the extended family that we had at the time. I had some experience in construction and immediately had some ideas on how to transform it. The little money we had with us was gone very quickly, and we had to start random jobs, whatever we could find. We lived here, which at the time was a huge building without dividing walls. First separations were made out of hanging blankets. We managed to improvise a toilet and four rooms in total. The toilet was outside and there was no kitchen, but we cooked on a stove we had positioned in the big hall and washed the dishes in a sink we had located outside near the restroom, where there was access to a little water. After these arrangements, the entire family could join us."[376]

376 "Conversation of the Author with Fisnik and Other Male Members of His Kin," December 11, 2021, voice recording.

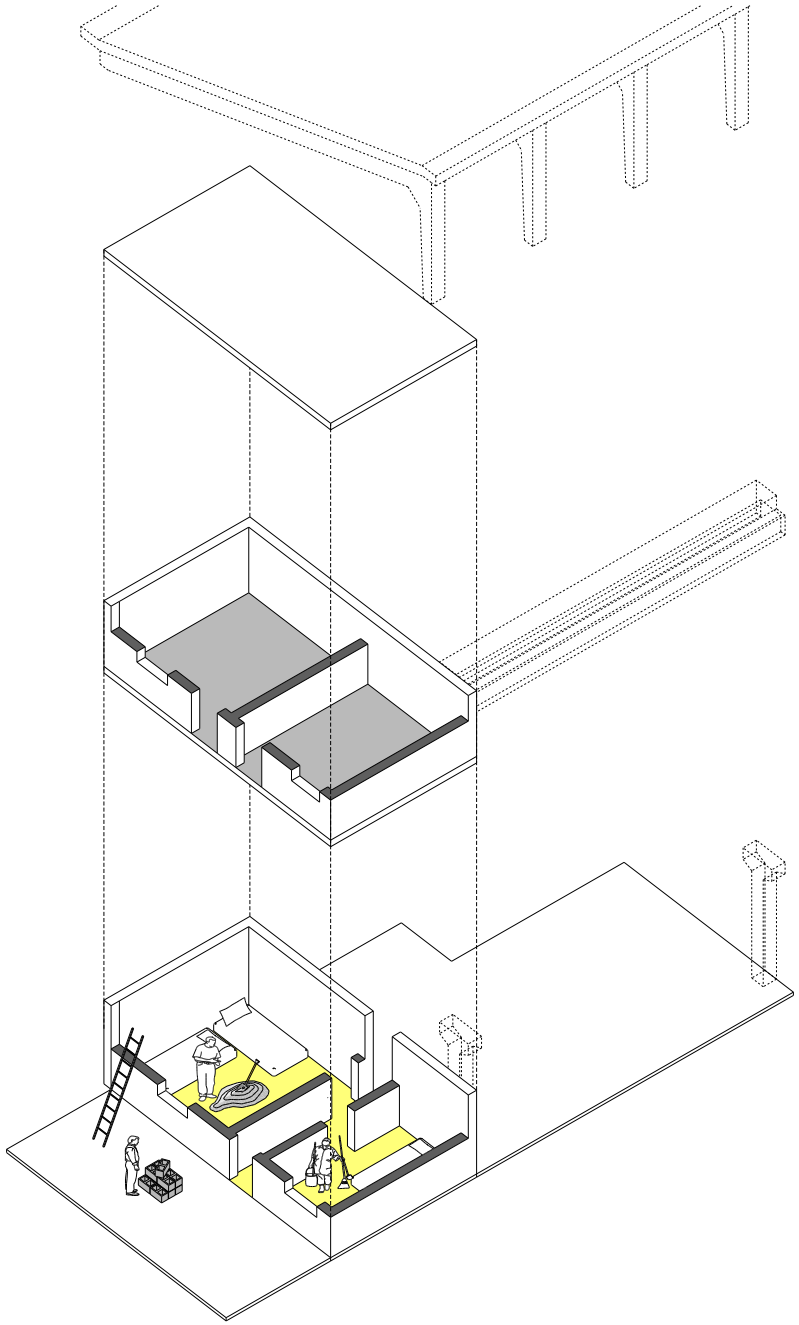


FIG. 5.37 Phase 1, First arrival at Hidrofili. The drawing shows the existing conditions of the segment of the building where the siblings are located and begin to arrange the space. Initially, they stay in the yellow-colored area. A wooden stair gives access to the upper floor to be prepared for future use.

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Fisnik describes his first encounter with the building of Hidrofili as a *kaush* – an ice cream cone – meaning a totally empty space. They bought it for two million lek from the person who had already occupied it initially.[377] They secured the money by selling assets such as land and livestock in their place of origin.[378] As in most cases in the area, the purchase was based on an oral agreement, and no documents were provided because there was no ownership documentation. Proving ownership to a chaotic state was not an issue at a time when the meaning of ownership, as explained in subchapter 5.2, had turned spatial and physical more than juridical. As he states, the place was only a shelter; it provided protection from the rain, and the rest was all to be constructed. He recalls sleeping inside next to piles of sand, cement, and mortar (see drawing of phase 1). It took them a few months to improvise some livable conditions, setting up a living room and three bedrooms. At this point, the rest of the family could move in (see drawing of phase 2).

The money is short, so they start taking random jobs they can find to make enough to sustain themselves. It is not enough to make changes in the house and support the extended family's common economy, where everyone has to find a way to contribute. As mentioned before, 1997 was associated with political unrest, economic hardship, and chaos in Albania after the collapse of the pyramid schemes, otherwise known as Ponzi Schemes.[379] This devastated the country, and many people had to find a way out of the desperate situation by migrating abroad. However, in July 1997, amidst the turbulent situation in Albania, Fisnik gets married, and his wife Valbona joins the family in Hidrofili. A few months later, Fisnik decides to emigrate to find better economic opportunities. His wife is already pregnant with their daughter. He, together with one or two brothers, makes several attempts to leave the country, some successful and some unsuccessful. At that time, the visa regime was extremely strict on Albanians; therefore, the only way to leave the country was to try illegal ways, like crossing the border on foot for four to five days through the mountains to Greece or by crossing the Adriatic Sea on a boat to reach Italy. These were risks that many Albanian emigrants took and that were somehow normalized amongst Albanian youth of the time.

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377 2 million Albanian Lek at that time was a considerable amount, as the country's minimum wage as of January 1997 was 4,400.0 ALL, equal to $29.5. Today, in 2026, the minimum wage in Albania is €517 https://countryeconomy.com/national-minimum-wage/albania

378 The existence of a monetary logic again is a reminder that this is not the case of ideal or emancipatory commons often portrayed in the theory of the commons, but could be closer to the concept of fugitive undercommons coined by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney. See Chapter 2 for the theoretical tracing of these concepts.

379 Musaraj, *Tales from Albarado: Ponzi Logics of Accumulation in Postsocialist Albania* (Cornell University Press, 2020).

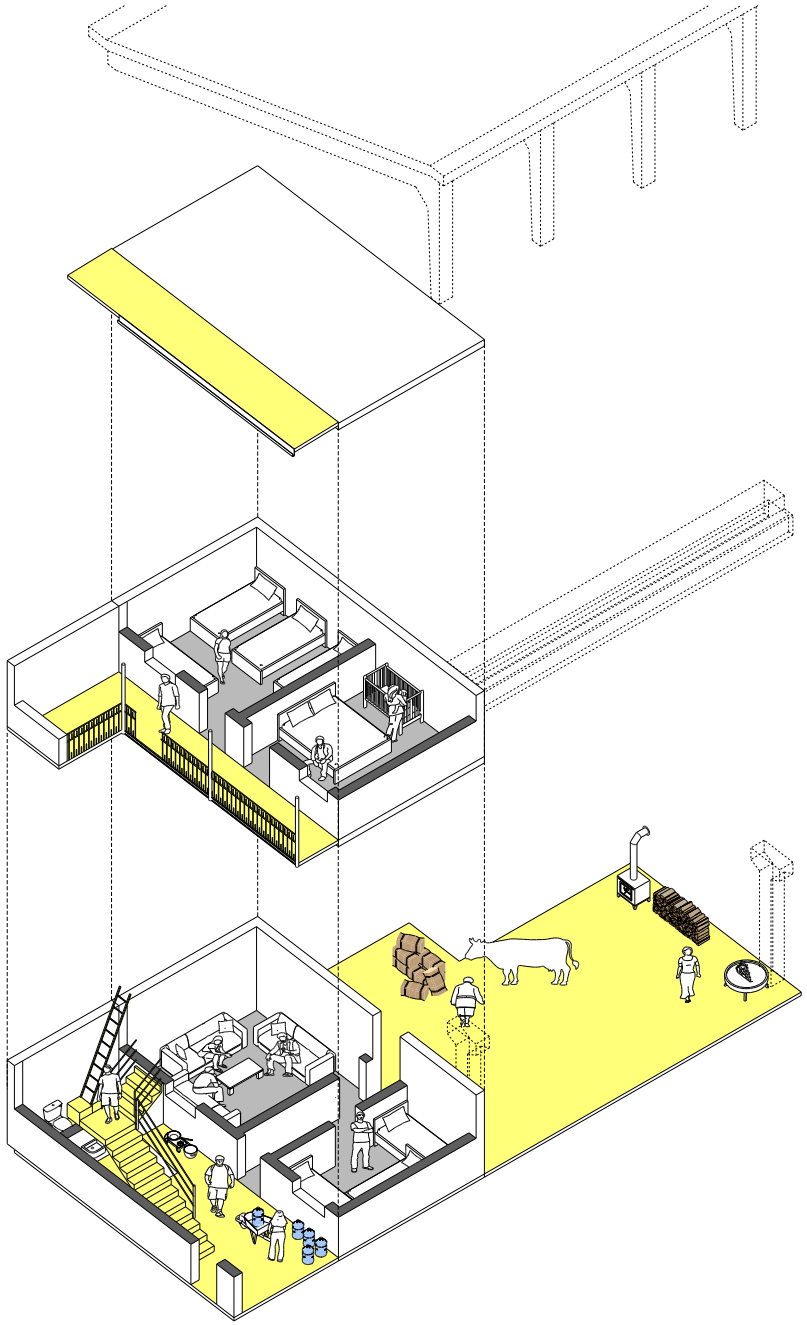


FIG. 5.38 Phase 2, construction of the toilet on the first floor, the stairs, and the front balcony that leads to the second floor. The added arrangements for this phase are shown in yellow.

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Fisnik tells how the most impressively frightening experience for him was being on an inflatable rubber speedboat, a dinghy, crossing the Adriatic Sea to reach Italy. On the same boat were men, women, and children. In my presence, he describes this experience to his cousin who had never gone through that: "Without having tried it, you wouldn't believe it."[380] He describes how during this night trip the waves of Otranto rose like a black hill in front of his eyes, as the dinghy lifted into the air, and how the human bodies would get slammed down forcefully after every wave, holding tightly to each other to avoid falling into the sea, to become, as he himself said, "food for the fish."[381] He tells me how this experience sounds so unreal to his children and the new generation, but it was so common in Albania in the late 1990s.

As in many families in Kombinat and across Albania, emigration has played a crucial role in improving material conditions through remittances. The extended family becomes a supportive infrastructure of care, particularly for childcare, enabling parents to seek work abroad. This is the case in Krasniqi's family. Fisnik left the family before his daughter was even born, and his wife, Valbona, later joined him in Italy, where their son was born. Between the ages of three and a half and seven, the daughter grew up without her father nearby; between the ages of seven and eleven, both parents were abroad. In their absence, grandparents, aunts, and uncles assumed caregiving responsibilities as substitutes for their absence. This arrangement profoundly influenced the daughter's emotional world, as well as her special relationship with her grandmother and other members of the extended family. She recalls being deeply loved and cherishes the way she was taken care of, even as her nuclear family remained physically distant during the formative years of her upbringing. Yet the parents' eventual return revealed the complexities of reunification, when rebuilding intimacy, particularly of mother-daughter, after a prolonged separation, was neither immediate nor effortless. The mother repeatedly complained that her daughter was spoiled by the rest of the family, making it difficult to restore her authority.

380 "Conversation of the Author with Fisnik and Other Male Members of His Kin."

381 "Conversation of the Author with Fisnik and Other Male Members of His Kin." The Strait of Otranto (or Otranto Channel) is a narrow body of water that separates the southeastern coast of Italy (the region of Apulia) from the western coast of Albania. It is the shortest sea route between the two countries and was the path utilized by most of the illegal crossing boats to Italy, starting from the southern Albanian city of Vlora. One of the most significant and tragic events linked to desperate and dangerous attempts of Albanian migrants crossing the Otranto Channel to Italy is the Tragedy of Otranto on March 28, 1997. The boat *Katër i Radës*, carrying around 120 Albanian migrants, was hit by the Italian naval ship *Sibilla*, which was patrolling the waters to prevent illegal migration. Approximately 81 people drowned, including women and children. This incident, followed by outrage and grief in Albania and Italy, led to significant legal and political debates regarding the responsibility to care for the lives of migrants. The Tragedy of Otranto was one of the deadliest migration-related tragedies in the Otranto Channel and became a symbol of the broader Mediterranean migration crisis.

The daughter seems to have gained self-confidence and freedom over her own life decisions, and attributes this to her grandmother, who, surprisingly enough, as the coming examples will show, seems to have been a character who reinforced patriarchal structures, especially with the wives of her boys. The episode underscores how migration, while materially sustaining the household, can reconfigure emotional attachments and power dynamics.

An interesting event that the daughter brings up in our conversations was the way her father, Fisnik, managed to visit them on two occasions, like when she was born, and on another occasion to celebrate New Year's Eve. She shares that her father looked very much like his closest friend; they were like doppelgangers. This friend lived in another part of the ex-industrial area of Kombinat and had already obtained the legal Italian papers, meaning a residence permit. He was originally from Mirdita and a Catholic, different from Fisnik, who was from Tropoja and from a family of Muslim origin. The two close friends managed to take turns using the same official residence permit, for example, he would visit his family for Easter and Christmas, and Fisnik on other occasions, to be close to his family. The use of the documents was not without risk, and Fisnik managed to visit his family only twice and return to his place of work. The interesting fact is that they did not know each other before, and they met in Kombinat because he was the neighbor of Fisnik's sister, who was married and lived in another area of Kombinat. This is how not only genealogical kinship but also kin-making beyond biology plays out an important role in Kombinat, where people become close, empathize, and offer solidarity to others in similar critical conditions, up to exchanging personal documents when useful. The two families continue to be very close in Albania and Italy.

With the passing of the years, the house was modified depending on life events, like marriages and newborns. The members of the family continued to emigrate and return, bringing income to bolster the extended family's common economy and to invest in improving the house's spatial conditions. Some of the members, mostly women, continued to work in manufacturing businesses in the area. In 2007, a comprehensive kitchen with proper equipment was added to the house on the ground floor. A second bathroom was added on the second floor. At this point, three nuclear families (couples with one or two kids) and five unmarried adults (one sister died young), in total around 20 people, have the base in this house in Hidrofili, with some arriving and some leaving abroad (see drawing of phase 3). As mentioned before, the idea of returning is very influential in the lives of migrants and those left behind. They are always present and occupy space that is waiting for them, for the potential return.

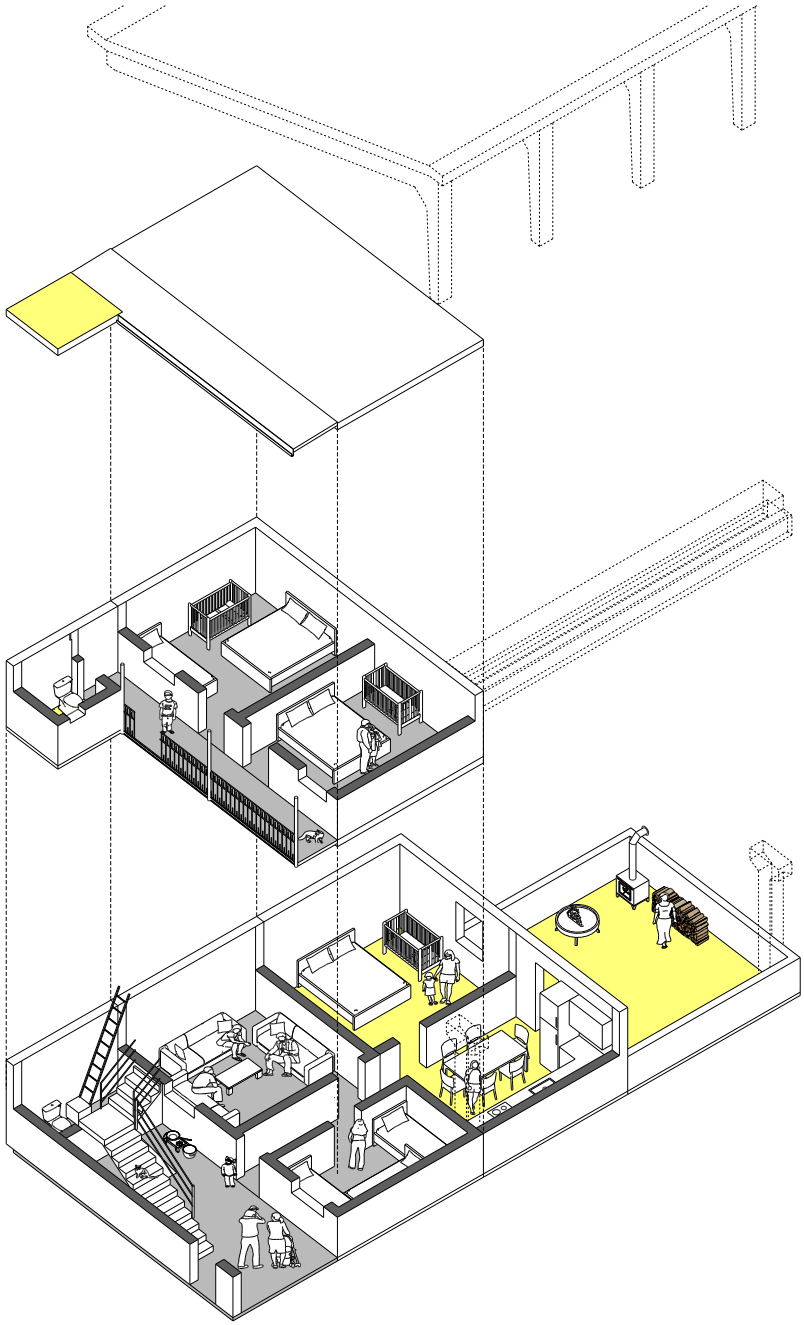


FIG. 5.39 Phase 3, construction of two rooms in the back toward the large hall, one bedroom, one kitchen on the ground floor, and one toilet on the second floor. The added arrangements for this phase are shown in yellow.



FIG. 5.40 Accessibility improved in Hidrofili.

In 2008, Fisnik had an accident in the workplace at a construction site in Italy. He spent months in a coma in critical condition. Fortunately, he woke up from the coma but is paralyzed from the waist down. His wife Valbona and their son were with him in Italy. Their daughter was at Hidrofili with the rest of her extended family and experienced this from a distance. Eight months after the accident, Fisnik, Valbona, and their son returned to Albania. The grandmother was ill when they arrived, and after two weeks, she passed away. At such a moment, spatial proximity plays a greater role. The neighbor next door offered their house for visits. As is customary in Albania, people pay their respects to the deceased and their family by visiting them at home extensively.[382]

Upon his return to Hidrofili, Fisnik had to modify his house to make it wheelchair accessible by smoothing architectural barriers on the ground floor. He added ramps to access the toilet, the rooms, and the backyard. These were not always even because of the makeshift arrangements made to the ex-industrial building over time. Besides making his own apartment wheelchair accessible, he added a ramp outside

382 Only in the last decade have funeral homes been introduced, mainly in central areas of Tirana. It is very common in Albanian culture, not only at Hidrofili, for neighbors, even in apartment buildings, to offer their homes so the space can be used to receive visitors. That happens on the day of the funeral and afterwards, for three days to one week, when the family receives many visitors.

the entrance of Hidrofili from the main street. As mentioned before, the buildings are located on a lower level than the main street, and the only way to access them is via the stairs. The added ramp is now useful to the entire community, including parents with strollers, the elderly with wheeled grocery bags, and bicyclists and skateboarders. Similarly, it is useful to people transporting construction materials and other heavy items that need to be put on wheels.

One year later, in 2010, Fisnik's youngest brother was planning to get married, so another room was needed. By that time, the brothers had extensive experience in construction, especially Fisnik, who is always at the lead of the construction of their house. They considered several options, such as extending a room toward the large hall, going higher with a room on the third floor under the roof of the ex-industrial building, or constructing a room above the kitchen. The last option was considered the best, as the hall was still useful for cooking activities like *fli* (traditional dish), storage, and the like. Although a few other neighbors had done it, going higher to extend a third floor was more complicated, as new stairs were needed and the waterproofing of the industrial building's roof was not guaranteed. The new room constructed above the kitchen had to be accessed via the newly installed steel stairs in the back hall. The solution was not ideal, but it was determined to be the best arrangement in terms of timing (see drawing on phase 4). However, the new room was better constructed than the previous ones because the brothers now had quite some experience in construction. As is common in Hidrofili, new construction is a testing ground to bring in new knowledge, not only into the dwellings but to the community of master-builders through discussions and actual applications. Upon moving out of Hidrofili and relocating to their new house, the steel stars were also relocated and found a new placement.

Kinship through affinity-based connections, and therefore marriages that challenge customary norms, is also visible in the spatial organization of Hidrofili, particularly in the proximity created through women's lineages. Under the customary laws of northern Albania, women's kinship ties were not encouraged as a basis for locating households near one another. As a patriarchal system invested in dispersing potential female alliances, which were often perceived as destabilizing to male authority, spatial continuity was typically reserved for male lineages, resulting in brothers and male cousins building or, in the case of Hidrofili, occupying homes in close proximity. Hidrofili presents a notable departure from this model. Here, spatial arrangements reveal how everyday necessity and the search for trust could override inherited rules. Houses connected through daughters, sisters, and maternal relatives appear within short distances of one another, reshaping the micro-geography of the community.

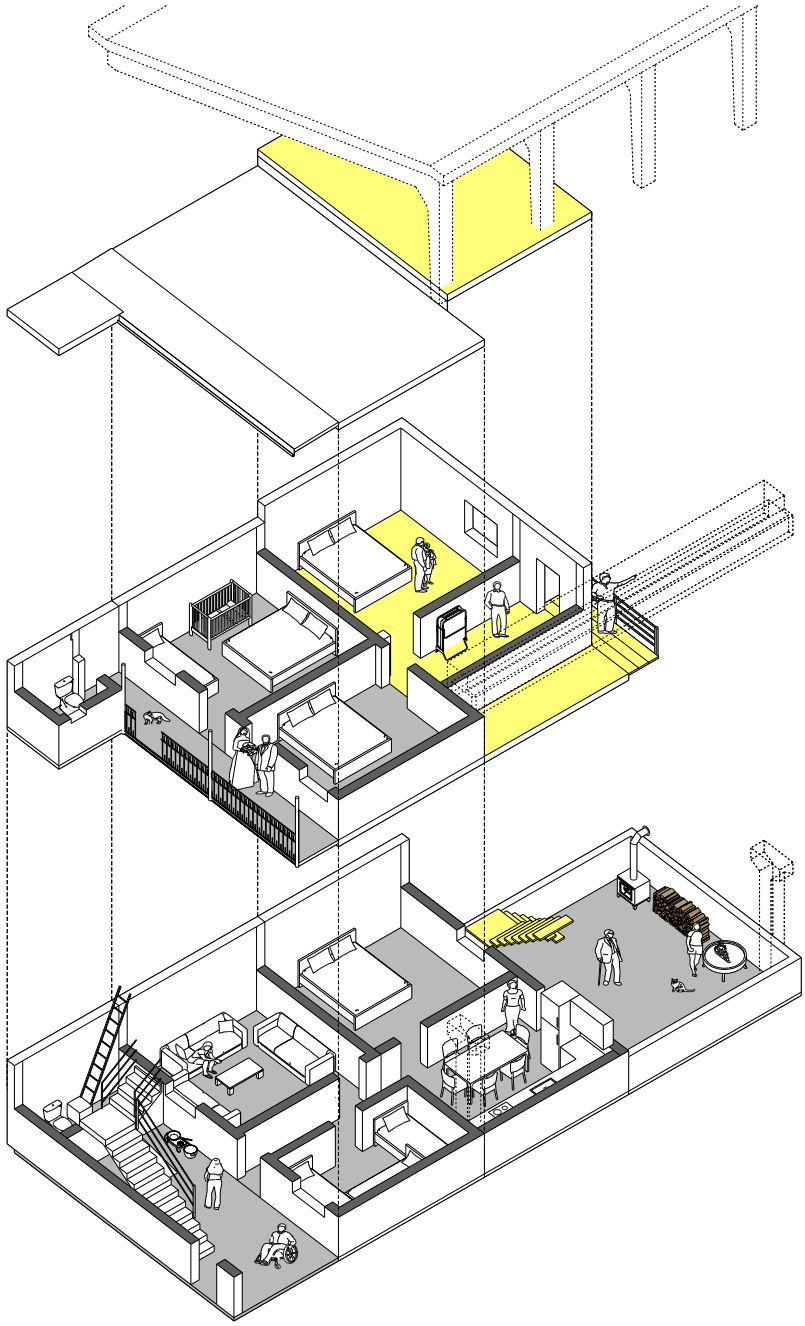


FIG. 5.41 Phase 4, construction of a room on the upper floor and the addition of stairs in the hall (salla) for access from the back side of the house.

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Proximity, in this sense, becomes both a social and spatial strategy, as what matters most is not adherence to patriarchal prescriptions but the reassurance of being surrounded by familiar people who could lend a hand in times of need. Similar patterns observed in Kamza suggest that, in contexts of rapid urban transformation and uncertainty, the spatial logic of kin-making could become more flexible, allowing women's relational networks to materialize physically in the built environment.

In Hidrofili, two sisters, Mimoza and Shpresa are located close by in the same building. Mimoza was married to the cousin of Fisnik. Her sister Shpresa arrived with her husband first, then drew in all the others. Shpresa says that, together with her husband, she was among the first to squat in the Fluff Factory building. Finding them becomes especially important for my study, as it means having the testimony of the first squatters and therefore getting to the roots of the phenomenon. Their experience contributes to understanding how the empty buildings and what was left inside were appropriated, seen as resources, and used pragmatically to provide solutions.

As she describes, the building seemed like a miracle to them. Until now, they were paying rent, whereas here, "half of the walls were already built," so they can continue to build the rest.[383] They see it as a very good opportunity. She explains that what they do first is to clean up the space, which was full of leftover material from the industrial process. Then they sell large stainless-steel tanks that they find in the building, making some money to invest in building their new house. Since they occupy a large part of the building, they can also give it to her sister and the family, as well as sell it to other future inhabitants. Amid the conversation, she promised me, in front of the other women, that she would be happy to receive me as a visitor to her house to show the spatial arrangements. However, after several attempts since that day, I have not yet managed to pass her front door. I continue to believe that my enthusiasm for listening to her stories resonated with her enthusiasm for telling them, and maybe one day I will talk to her about those days again.

383 "Conversation of the Author with a Group of Women from the Krasniqi Kin," March 22, 2022.

5.2.6 Arms That Build, Arms That Care: Construction, Reproductive Labor, and the Defiance of Gendered Roles

As previously noted, the decision-making process within the Hidrofili community was not based on horizontality. Instead, a form of hierarchy was in place, with larger extended families holding a stronger influence due to their size. Among the most challenging and pressing issues faced by the community were initially those related to common infrastructure, such as sewage and water systems. Furthermore, the persistent problem of moisture and dampness in the former industrial buildings made roof waterproofing a recurring collective issue. Addressing these challenges required coordination across households, and such efforts were often complicated by differences in financial resources among neighbors, revealing how material limitations shape the possibilities of a community to act collectively.

Here, the role of the community is to come together and find solutions. As Fisnik tells me, this situation required "not democracy or total consensus, but common sense." He continues by saying: "[Not the easiest task], but we have always managed to find the common language. Water supply and the sewage system within a building are not individual problems. All of this was totally unplanned, and in one way or another, the issue had to be resolved for all 20 families living in this building. Even those who did not agree at first eventually had to accept the community's decision. After discussing all the options, they reached the awareness that there was no other way [than by acting together] if one wanted to cohabitate in the same community in the conditions that we were in."[384] Understandably, this is engaging in commoning not as a choice but as a necessity, while simultaneously practicing and training the collective act and building a community.

The community would mobilize to support not only common issues that were of mutual benefit, but also single-family issues, such as constructing the dwelling. The most common construction practice, as explained by Fisnik and the others, was to join forces to assist the family whose turn was to construct. As described in the previous section with the example of Krasniqi's family, the incremental construction of the house was entangled with life events, such as marriages, births, or some extra money from remittances. This meant a difference in temporalities of the various households. Because of the common condition, solidarity and reciprocity stand at the core of commoning practices of construction, as described by the inhabitants.

384 "Conversation of the Author with Fisnik and Other Male Members of His Kin."

Regardless of whether the construction was for common areas or for single households, the mobilization was always present. Days were dedicated to shared labor, such as pouring concrete slabs, building stairs, walls, and windows, and repairing common infrastructure.

The first form of support in the construction process was knowledge, since, as already mentioned, there was a group of master builders and construction workers in the community. Those who were better equipped with construction knowledge shared it with both the household and the group gathered to assist. "People would start constructing their houses even without any knowledge or experience, as they had people around to share ideas with them."[385] This is a form of situated knowledge that comes out of practice, hard work, experience, as well as passion for construction.

Besides the exchange of knowledge, support came in the form of actual physical labor. As Fisnik recalls, there would be seven to eight men who were particularly skilled and handy in construction, who would gather to help during the construction days. Their presence was especially crucial during the preparation and pouring of concrete, when it was necessary to transport construction materials and mix cement, sand, and gravel by hand. The Albanian expression of *me ndihmu me krahë* (lending a helping hand/arms) is literally related to this kind of support system, which, after all, is also reciprocal and therefore, as maintained by Fisnik, people were never thinking of acting alone, but always with the support of other helping hands/arms.

Although the construction work is typically attributed to men's power, gendered roles were not so strictly respected in Hidrofili. Women and children, as also seen in Kamza, were also involved in these construction processes of mixing concrete and transporting bricks. However, patterns of culturally expected gendered tasks were certainly reproduced at Hidrofili as well. For the gathered "helping hands" to support the construction, their bodies needed to be fed. Cooking and eating, often taking place in the yards, were essential parts of the construction practice during these mobilizing days, and women were predominantly in charge of this task. In Albanian culture, it is customary to offer the meals of the day to the workers on-site. Commensality, therefore, sharing meals, and constructing are practices that go hand in hand and signal forms of relatedness, or kin-making, as theorized by the anthropologist Janet Carsten.[386]

385 "Conversation of the Author with Fisnik and Other Male Members of His Kin."
386 Carsten, *After Kinship.*

Another expression of solidarity was lending money when construction costs exceeded the household's budget. This assistance with cash operated entirely outside of any formal setting, when there were no mechanisms of bank loans or subsidies of any kind. Lending money was grounded in goodwill and mutual trust between the person in need and the one able to help at that moment. Temporalities played an important role across all these forms of support, knowledge, physical labor, and financial help. Reciprocity was the logic of these temporalities, in the awareness and belief that we all will eventually need support at some point in life. The support given is therefore a support that will be returned in time. In this way, reciprocity functioned as a sort of credit within the community.

The children of Hidrofili were also present during these construction days, moving from one family's house to another. They were also involved with helping. "Everyone was happy to contribute, even if bringing one brick," Drita would say when explaining how they perceived the construction as kids.[387] For the grown-ups, as much as they were happy to have little helpers, they were also concerned about their safety, as accidents, luckily minor ones, had happened. This way, in Hidrofili, construction sites were a playground and space for practical learning for children, who were involved in the actual physical and sensory experience of construction. This was not a romanticized experience, as the actual hardship of construction work was not polished, but the joy of making collectively was present as well. Observing parents dedicated to improving spatial and material conditions and engaging in helping is a sort of generational transfer of hands-on homeschooling.

In the Krasniqi kin, patriarchal gendered roles were more pronounced. Certainly, patriarchal pressures are imposed on all genders and in different forms; however, women struggle with them more as the subordinate subject. Wives were expected to cover reproductive and care work, while some worked outside the house, such as in manufacturing firms, to help support the family's common economy. However, stronger expectations, as expressed by them, were mostly in the domestic sphere. Men, on the other hand, were pushing boundaries to earn better, including crossing literal state boundaries to emigrate for work. If there was a sense of stability on the other side where they had emigrated, their wives could join them to find better-paid jobs, as is the case with Valbona. From the women's group conversation, one could grasp that their challenges were not only the poor material conditions, but also the patriarchal setting they were expected to adhere to and accept. Valbona was the

387 "Conversation of the Author with Drita, 21 Years Old."

cook of the family, not only on an everyday basis when she had to cook for around 20 people in the household, but also with every party, gathering, marriage, or death. She mentioned how this heavy load was something she was trained to bear while she was growing up. Her biological family had taught her to serve the husband's family, which in patriarchal families is an issue related to honor, therefore reflecting the way in which the family educated their daughter to be a good wife. Although this was challenging for her, she still speaks with joy about her life within the Hidrofili community, being part of many activities and joining alliances with other wives.

While explaining the struggles they have gone through, as in charge of domestic care in houses without proper water supply, without a proper kitchen, or a washing machine, and so on, they reflected on how they see their daughters being liberated and having more control over their own lives, sometimes even regretting having perpetuated similar patterns of control and discipline over them. Valbona mentioned how immigration had influenced her in having a wider perspective, looking into another country and culture.

Silvia Federici and other feminists argue that keeping women apart and encouraging competition among them is a tactic employed by patriarchy to undermine their relationships. When women come together, communicate, and support one another, they become powerful and pose a threat to the patriarchal system. This collective solidarity challenges their subordination and enables them to liberate themselves.[388] I am reminded of these dynamics from a seemingly minor example regarding the tendency of older women, who sometimes act as guardians of patriarchal norms, to exercise control over younger women, such as their daughters, but especially their daughters-in-law. The wives of the Krasniqi kin shared how the mothers-in-law did not really like them being in the company of each other. Mimoza, one of the wives of the Krasniqi kin living at the former Fluff Factory, invited Valbona over for fried potatoes after Valbona, who was pregnant, mentioned craving them. In a gesture of care and solidarity, Mimoza immediately returned home to prepare the dish. Yet when Valbona left to eat the potatoes made for her, her mother-in-law reacted with disapproval and called her immediately back.[389] While closeness among women is treated with suspicion, what is expected from men is brotherhood (*vëllazëria* in Albanian), which is often materialized in the spatial organization of self-built houses, replicated according to the number of brothers within the same family intended to live close to each other. Biological sisters, or women forming bonds of sisterhood, are usually discouraged.

388 Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*, with PM Press (Oakland, CA : PM Press, 2020).

389 "Conversation of the Author with a Group of Women from the Krasniqi Kin."

Their alliances are frequently perceived as potentially disruptive to the established patriarchal order. In *Revolution at Point Zero*, Federici makes clear that women's reproductive labor, childcare, housework, and care work are a fundamental means by which they are isolated. Confined to the domestic sphere of the house, performing unpaid, undervalued, invisible work, women are removed from the wider field of social struggle, while their labor remains invisible.[390] However, regardless of the attempts to disrupt it, the women's alliance at Hidrofili has been highly influential in building community and sustaining livelihoods.

At Hidrofili, there were cases of childbirth at home. While home births are not unusual in contexts where there are networks of midwifery services to avoid complications, in Albania in the early 1990s, as a legacy of state socialism, women gave birth in hospitals. In the group conversations, one of the wives of the Krasniqi kin shared her story of giving birth at home, as this was required by her husband's family's customs. The birth took place in a room with an improvised plastic roof in the dwelling within the former industrial building during their early years of moving there. With her pregnant sister, who had no midwifery experience, by her side, she set up the maternity bed. Having been through childbirth before, she knew the process. She warmed the room with a makeshift furnace, boiled water to sterilize the scissors for cutting the baby's umbilical cord, and prepared clean clothes for the newborn baby. She experienced a slight complication in the end with the placenta, but luckily, it all went well.[391]

Although larger kinship structures meant more support, as the previous paragraphs suggest, when viewed through the lens of gender, genealogical kinship reveals downsides and constraints. Women appear to have less space for agency within larger genealogical kinship structures, particularly when compared to smaller family constellations or to relationships in which kin is shaped more by choice than by biology. Age's story is particularly telling. She was the one who took the initiative and insisted on migrating to Tirana, while her sister and brother-in-law, who had already moved to Kombinat, helped her find a place for her family in Hidrofili. In Fierza, where she and her family had previously lived during the state socialist regime, she worked as a gardener at *Ndërmarrja e Gjelbërimit*, the state enterprise responsible for maintaining public greenery. She mentioned, among other things, in her vivid storytelling style, that on the *Skoda* truck they hired to transport them to Tirana, besides furniture and a few belongings, she brought her working tools, the hoe and the shovel.

390 Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero*.

391 She told this story confidently and asked that it remain anonymous.

These tools, on which she could always rely and feel empowered by, were of immediate use upon arrival at Hidrofili, as the entrance of the building needed to be opened and cleared of bushes and garbage that blocked it. She offered encouragement to her husband when he was shocked by the condition of the abandoned building they were about to inhabit. She enthusiastically told him that this is the "land of Tirana" and that she was hopeful that they would improve the situation: "We will work, and we will fix everything. We will work in the [garment] factory. The work is ready [and waiting] for us!" She soon began working at the nearby buckle manufacturing firm, and later as a street vendor with a little cart next to the entrance of the buckle firm. At the age of 63, when I talked to her, she remains remarkably energetic, selling second-hand clothes in the central market of Kombinat. Step by step, and with the support of their children, the family has improved their living conditions, adding a proper bathroom, a functional kitchen, and therefore a better dwelling unit after so many years of struggle. She now travels on her own in Italy and France, where her children have emigrated, continuing to sustain them with optimism and encouragement while also contributing to the upbringing of her grandchildren.[392] At some point, this entire life experience feels like an intergenerational pattern of reproducing struggles, as her children, too, are part of a global immigrant working class now, facing challenges that are at once different from and deeply resonant with those faced by the generation of their parents.

392 Julie Vullnetari, "Older People's Contribution to Development Through Carework: The Role of Childcare by Grandparents in Migration and Development," *Progress in Development Studies* 23, no. 4 (2023): 444–60.

5.2.7 Conclusion: Commoning Amidst the Anarchy

This chapter follows Kombinat's spatial transformations through the stories of the community of Hidrofili, which occupied two former buildings in the early 1990s. It takes life remade in the ruins of state socialism's industrial terrain as its point of departure, following through multimodal spatial ethnography to raise questions of how and why these spaces were reconfigured. This ethnographic account of Hidrofili reveals that this place is not informal, a slum, or a ghetto, as it has been labeled. Instead, it is a place where kin is negotiated, where migration, gendered norms, and spatial tactics remake the social and built environment, and where these dynamics converge into a distinct form of situated commoning.

During the demographic shift after the collapse of state socialism in the early 1990s, migrant populations relocated to Tirana. Kombinat, and Hidrofili as part of it, became home to families who moved from rural areas and smaller towns, mostly from northeastern Albania. Arriving with uncertain futures and the barest resources, they rebuilt life in empty industrial buildings through labor, remittances from emigrants abroad, and an interim hope for a better life. They constructed a livelihood through pragmatic reterritorialization practices, existing and newly created kin relations, and the reinterpretation of customary rules carried over from their places of origin. As they initially sheltered in the former industrial buildings, they slowly turned them into homes while building a community. Extended families operated as central units through which everyday life activities and temporalities of construction and care were negotiated, relying on forms of relatedness beyond strictly biological notions.

The appropriated former industrial buildings accommodated hybrid domestic-communal and rural-urban spaces, blurring the boundaries between private and communal spaces and negotiating accessibility in the city alongside the conditions of temporality and permanence. Kitchens extended outdoors, celebrations spilled into common spaces, and makeshift infrastructure emerged through collective effort within material constraints. Proximity-based relationships of kin-making among non-biological kin neighbors gained a crucial role through shared labor of construction, care of children and the elderly, and mutual aid in everyday life, as well as during life events like weddings, births, and deaths. Hidrofili's spatial transformation bears improvisational intelligence and communal negotiation. These conditions created ties that literally held the place together. However, as understandable in the context of Albania after state socialism, when belief in collectivism was damaged, these practices of kin-commoning were not rooted in ideological commitments to collectivism but were practical responses to uncertainty in the absence and failure of formal institutional support.

Gendered dynamics were central to all of this. Life in Hidrofili was ordered through patriarchal gendered norms, especially, though not exclusively, within larger genealogical kin groups. However, gendered norms were also bent, stretched, and challenged. Women also migrated, worked outside the home for wages, formed social alliances with other women and their daughters, and challenged intergenerational practices of patriarchal control. Sisters living side by side, a direct challenge to customary codes, speak for subtle but meaningful transformations. Despite the endurance of patriarchal structures, women's stories revealed the fractured nature of these norms and the everyday acts of resistance that slowly unsettle them.

In this chapter, therefore, Hidrofili can be considered a microcosm of marginalized realities in the context of Albania's after state socialist transformation. It exposes how spaces are repurposed in the wake of industrial decline, how kin-making and proximity are reactivated as social infrastructure, how gendered roles are both reinforced and contested, and how kin-making and commoning, as situated and imperfect practices, can become a mechanism of urban spatial formation. This is a missing piece of the history of Kombinat, and of the aftermath of state socialism in Albania. It reminds us that even in marginalized conditions, declared dead by the mainstream narrative, communities can engage in deeply meaningful, tacit political acts to make and sustain their livelihoods. Hidrofili, with all its contradictions, stands as a testimony to a collective life amidst systemic and structural cracks.

6 To Make Place in History[393]

Fragmented Collectivities of Kamza



FIG. 6.1 Bathore, neighborhood of Kamza in 1993, Photo credit: Hans Peter Jost, Panorama assembled by author.

In my mind's eye, the memory of Kamza is inextricably linked to the train trips with my mother, one of the yearly summer rituals of my childhood. These trips took us from my hometown, Lezha, to Tirana, where part of my maternal extended family, including my grandmother, lived. I must have been around seven or eight, and the trains, although a relic of their former selves, were still running along the tracks. The old cars carried the scars of popular uprising and statal neglect, but they were the only trains I had ever seen, so I never questioned their worn-out looks. When I think about it, even today, it seems like I can still smell the scent of the old heavy metal. Yet amid the rhythmic audible cracks, the simple act of sticking one's head out the window was one of the joys of those long, never-ending trips of only around 60 km.

393 Parts of this chapter have been published in an earlier form in Dorina Pllumbi, "Me Ba Vend n'Histori: Përbashkime Të Fragmentuara," in *Njerëz Të Kamzës*, Nyje (Kamza, Albania), July 6, 2025, https://nyje.al/me-ba-vend-nhistori-perbashkime-te-fragmentuara.

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When approaching or leaving Tirana, Dajti Mountain formed the backdrop to the tableau, with its undulating contours and the solid presence of rocks amongst the greenery. The nuances of light on the mountain were a natural timekeeper, marking the passage from dawn to dusk. Beneath it, the first residents who had arrived from afar had constructed their little shelters, resembling the primordial hut made of light materials like wood and plastic.

I remember groups of children who apparently had their homes near the tracks, running to greet the train. The horn blaring from the locomotive forcefully cut through the rhythmic *chuff-chuff* that would otherwise lull one to sleep amid the monotony of the journey. Of course, the loud horn was clearly a warning to anyone lingering too near the unguarded tracks with no side barriers. Yet it also seemed as though that same horn marked a routine moment of everyday life along that stretch of railway. It was an invitation to exchange greetings between travelers and residents, a reciprocal greeting full of joy, with waving hands and euphoric shouts accompanying the powerful echo of the train's horn in the air. Just like in the movies. And to push the playfulness even further to a whole other level, one of the kids would sometimes throw stones toward the shaky train. This was followed by such loud laughter that the sound of it seemed to merge with the horn, crash against Mount Dajt, and rush back toward the train, shaking the windowpanes that no one ever bothered to replace.

This was the vision that came to mind when I looked at the photographs of the Swiss photographer Hans Peter Jost, taken in 1993 during his visit to Albania.[394] In these images, one can notice wooden houses, the outlines of the first newly established plots, the shaping of a city, both rebellious and persistent. They reveal, over time, the marginalization of a population that had been forgotten or kept at a distance, immobilized in its ability to move, unauthorized to approach the center, and which had now taken its first courageous step, convinced of its right to be there. A population that, after the collapse of the controlling superstructure of state socialism, exercised its right to pursue the dream of Tirana, in the hope of a better life.

For many years, I did not have the chance to stop in Kamza, as if I remained aboard that disoriented train with broken windows that merely greeted the city from afar. During my architecture studies in Tirana, followed by several years of teaching, Kamza, along with other areas and neighborhoods similarly built by their inhabitants, was considered an anomaly, destined only to be erased, wiped from the map to make way for new construction sites.

394 I came into contact with the photographs during the Laboratory of Urban Anthropology 2023: *Përvijime të Kamzës*, organized in September 2023 by Grupi ATA and IAKSA. See Chapter 3.4 of this dissertation for a more detailed account of the activity.

Despite its remarkable spatial expansion, the phenomenon of the architecture constructed by the ordinary people across the territory was viewed through the selective, authoritative lens of the term *informal*, which excluded these spaces from professional discourse while at times legitimizing bulldozer politics. Within the local institutions of urban and architectural knowledge production and reproduction, there is almost no interest in understanding the building culture of urban centers like Kamza. What continues to dominate, instead, is the effort to align with something distant, something seen in magazines and presented through the flamboyant gestures of often kitsch projects by star architects who arrive like missionaries to "save" us from ourselves. In this way, a language of neo-coloniality is cultivated, exercised by Tirana's political, economic, and cultural elite, and reproduced by imported visionaries. This language effortlessly erases realities of survival and local self-building efforts, dismissing them as non-existent, temporary, or anomalies to be corrected and removed to project a false image of Europe.

Nowadays, I stop in Kamza whenever I can, coming and going. I am no longer a passenger on a rickety train, but sometimes I feel like I am at home, and at other times, I am a guest who both observes and is observed. Because of my study of the commons, I am drawn to the microhistories of this city, those that were silenced for many years. I join the city's activists in a shared effort to understand and learn from what took place during these years, when people created a city, full of hope in their hearts, both unified and fragmented, in the absence or presence of a problematic state, "we continue to fear."[395]

Kamza is a place that challenges everything learned within the narrow frameworks of the professional canon in architecture, which has been passed down through generations. It challenges what is called the power of knowledge, professional authority, and claimed expertise. It exposes the limitations of the codes of reading and understanding, and especially of design intervention in the territory that the profession claims to control. Kamza is a living laboratory of another kind of city-making, where the human material action reaches its fullest expression, intertwined with the desire for life.

Mount Dajti stands there as the most faithful witness to the houses of Kamza. These houses are materializations of dreams, often unfinished, inviting the imagination to envision scenarios of continuation. Water tanks on rooftops and terraces, emblematic of infrastructural challenges, have now become part of the city's landscape. The intertwining of the urban and the rural makes one feel closer to nature. The place

395 Bardhoshi, "Shteti Qe i Druhem."

still retains a certain territorial autonomy, but also a tension between resistance and surrender to the greed of capital. The replicated model of Tirana's apartment blocks, referred to in Kamza as *tiranizim* (tiranization), is replacing the collectively-built city here as well, especially along the main axes and around the administrative center.[396]

And yet, the impulse to know and understand the city is far stronger than any mere reading of its urban landscape. Kamza, a geographical space mistakenly defined as a periphery of Tirana, is a centrality in its own right. It was born as such. It is a living archive of material traces of social, political, and cultural struggles of anarchic and hopeful times.

396 The term *tiranizim* ironically encapsulates the power dynamics between the centrality of power of Tirana and its aim to tyrannize what it considers peripheral. At the same time, this articulation by Kamza activists expresses resistance and a claim of their own autonomy from the centrality of power. See Ronald Qema, "Kamza Nën Pushtetin e Betonit," *Citizens.Al*, June 16, 2025, https://citizens.al/2025/06/16/kamza-nen-pushtetin-e-betonit/.

6.1 Before It All Started: Kamza as “Ylli i Kuq,” The Red Star Agricultural Center



FIG. 6.2 Farm of Kamza. Image taken as part of the field expedition of the anthropologist Aferdita Onuzi, Photo: Gjergj Martini, Source: IAKSA archive

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During state socialism, Kamza was home to the state-run agricultural enterprise called the Red Star – *Ndërmarrja Bujqësore Ylli i Kuq*. This enterprise, along with a livestock farm, served as the primary source of grain crops, dairy, and meat for the capital city of Tirana. Established in 1946, shortly after World War II and the rise of Albania's state-socialist regime, *Ylli i Kuq* underwent significant expansion in 1969-1970, when it absorbed neighboring agricultural cooperatives and villages, expanding its arable land to 4,540 hectares. The Valias coal mine was also located here.[397]

This expansion coincided with the state's "proletarianization" project, which, as elaborated in the previous chapters on Kombinat, involved relocating a substantial portion of the population from rural areas to new industrial sites, mines, cooperatives, and other locations.[398] This period aimed to create a new working class, firmly aligned with the ruling party's agenda of improving the living standards of this newly created proletariat. The party-state sought to anchor and solidify its power among the newly constructed proletariat. The main objective propagated was the transformation and improvement of material conditions through a deterministic agenda. A portion of the Kamza area housed the Valias mine. According to a 1979 ethnographic report by Aferdita Jonuzi, the mine workers and industrial workers were regarded as the most progressive segment of the working class. Their influence was expected to contribute to the emancipation of the entire working class, including agricultural workers. However, it is important to note that reports of this kind need to be read critically because, as mentioned by the author herself in an interview, the propaganda machine of the party-state influenced their writing. The ethnographic text could not only be descriptive but had to be performative as well. The described conditions did not always match the workers' factual living situation, but the deterministic and constructivist state investment had to be portrayed as successful.[399]

397 Aferdita Onuzi, "Ndryshime Ne Menyren e Jeteses Se Klases Punetore Ne Fermen 'Ylli i Kuq' Kamze," in *Etnografia Shqiptare* (1982).

398 Lelaj, *Nën Shenjën e Modernitetit*.

399 "Afërdita Onuzi: Të kthehet sa më parë vëmendja shtetërore ndaj institucioneve të kulturës, artit dhe trashëgimisë kulturore", Conversation with Aferdita Onuzi, nyje.al, 23.08.2019 https://nyje.al/aferdita-onuzi-te-kthehet-sa-me-pare-vemendja-shteterore-ndaj-institucioneve-te-kultures-artit-dhe-trashegimise-kulturore/

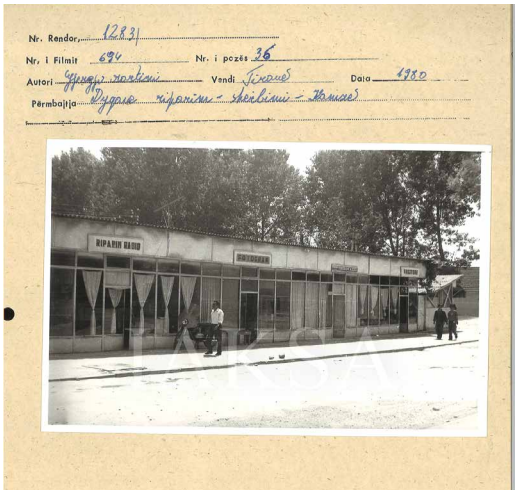


FIG. 6.3 Repair-servise shops, Kamza. Field expedition of Aferdita Onuzi, Photo: Gjergj Martini, Source: IAKSA archive

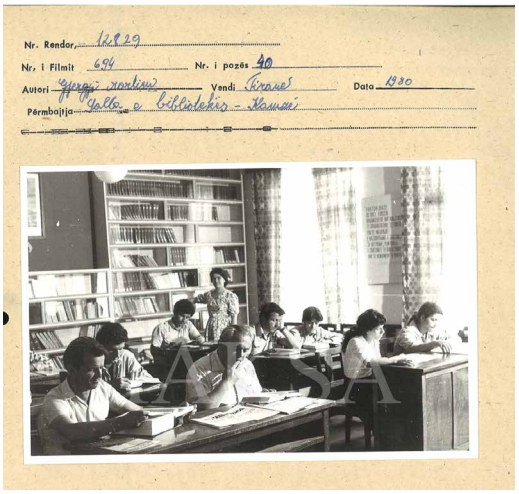


FIG. 6.4 Reading room of the Library of Kamza. Field expedition of Aferdita Onuzi, Photo: Gjergj Martini, Source: IAKSA archive

The prevailing motto was to bridge the urban-rural divide, striving for an equivalent quality of life in both villages and towns across Albania. This intention was, for example, encapsulated in the motto of the time, *turning the village into a city*. This did not mean that the party-state intended to urbanize the village; on the contrary, as discussed earlier in subchapter 4.3 of this dissertation on the spatial politics of state collectivity, urbanization was restricted, and living in urban centers required special authorization. Instead, it was about providing services and features of social and cultural activities to peasant workers.

As part of the collectivity project set forward by the party-state, Ylli i Kuq not only focused on agricultural production processes but also established central cultural hubs within each village it encompassed. These hubs, created in every village of Ylli i Kuq, featured educational, healthcare, and cultural facilities. As in every city, town, or village, particular attention was given to the center, which would be an instrumental state-created community center. These were places aiming to foster community life and, simultaneously, control it. They served as centers for producing and spreading propaganda, as well as areas for monitoring the communities and individuals. This functioned as part of the state apparatus aimed at maintaining control.

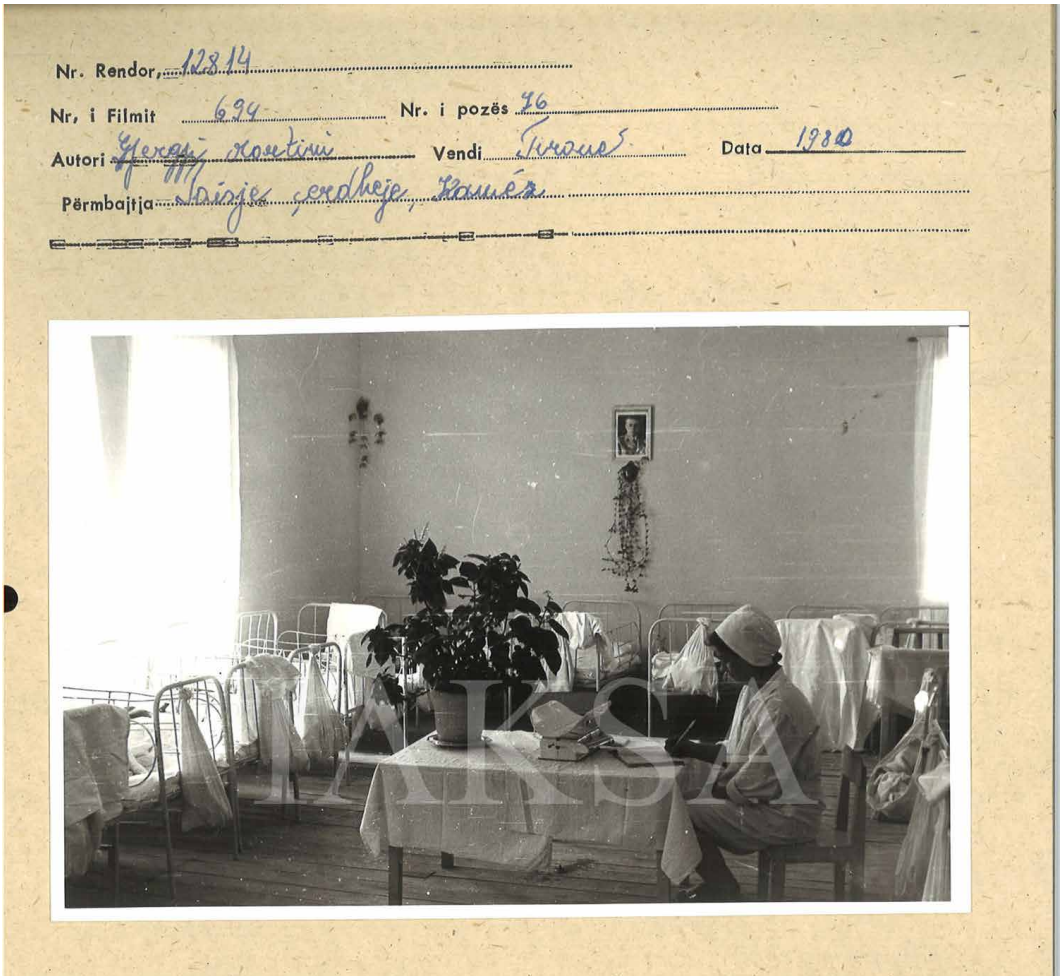


FIG. 6.5 Daycare in Kamza. Field expedition of Aferdita Onuzi, Photo: Gjergj Martini, Source: IAKSA archive

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FIG. 6.6 Typical apartment buildings of the state socialist era were constructed in Kamza. Field expedition of Aferdita Onuzi, Photo: Gjergj Martini, Source: IAKSA archive

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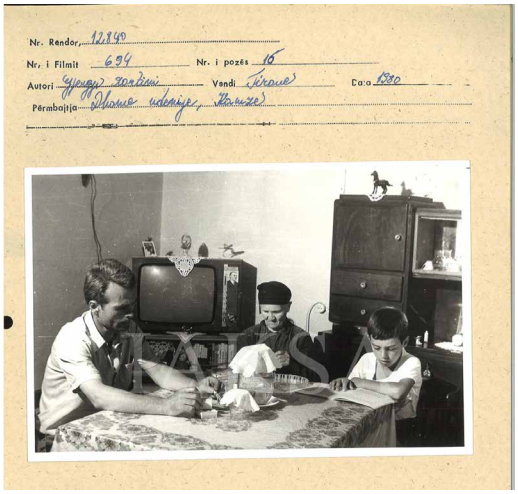


FIG. 6.7 Living room, apartment in Kamza. Field expedition of Aferdita Onuzi, Photo: Gjergj Martini, Source: IAKSA archive

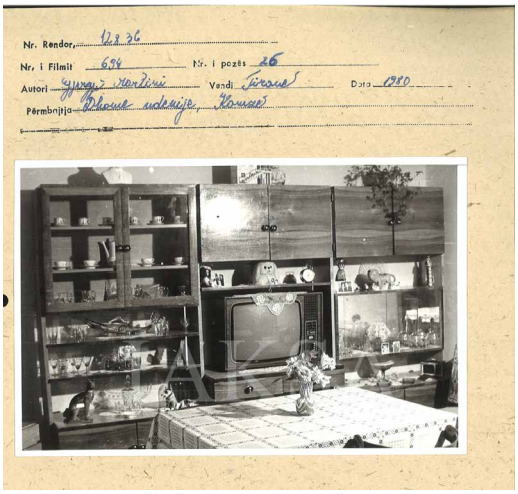


FIG. 6.8 Typical furniture (bufe) placed in the living room, apartment in Kamza, Fieldwork expedition of Aferdita Onuzi, Photo Gjergj Martini, Source: IAKSA archive

The heart of Kamza, the main village, boasted an urban-like center comprising a house of culture with a cinema, a hospital, two daycares, two kindergartens, a high school, student housing, repair shops, a restaurant, a bar, public amenities, and the typical four to five-story socialist collective housing and green spaces. A *yellow line* on the plan marked the boundary between urbanized and agricultural areas, curbing unplanned construction beyond that line and designating agricultural land.[400] Although planning was presented as a powerful tool, the events that unfolded after the fall of the regimes revealed that it also created a desire to escape from it. This was largely due to its perceived excessive control over the population.

The reports from anthropologist Aferdita Onuzi's field expeditions featured pictures of these state facilities and the interiors of newly built apartments, intended to demonstrate how life under socialism had progressed, and material conditions had improved. Again, the images in this report, some of which I have included in this chapter, are obviously staged, but they bear this dilemma of how much the inhabitants in the picture were forced into them or willfully participated in them. This is a dilemma often raised when discussing this kind of material produced during that time. Although the propaganda apparatus was undoubtedly powerful, and those photographed were likely expected to take part, it would be reductive to portray them merely as subjects without agency.

400 Onuzi, "Ndryshime Ne Menyren e Jeteses Se Klases Punetore Ne Fermen 'Ylli i Kuq' Kamze." Despite several attempts, I was unable to obtain an archival map from that time showing the yellow line. However, the term "yellow line" continued to be used by urban specialists even after the era of state socialism.

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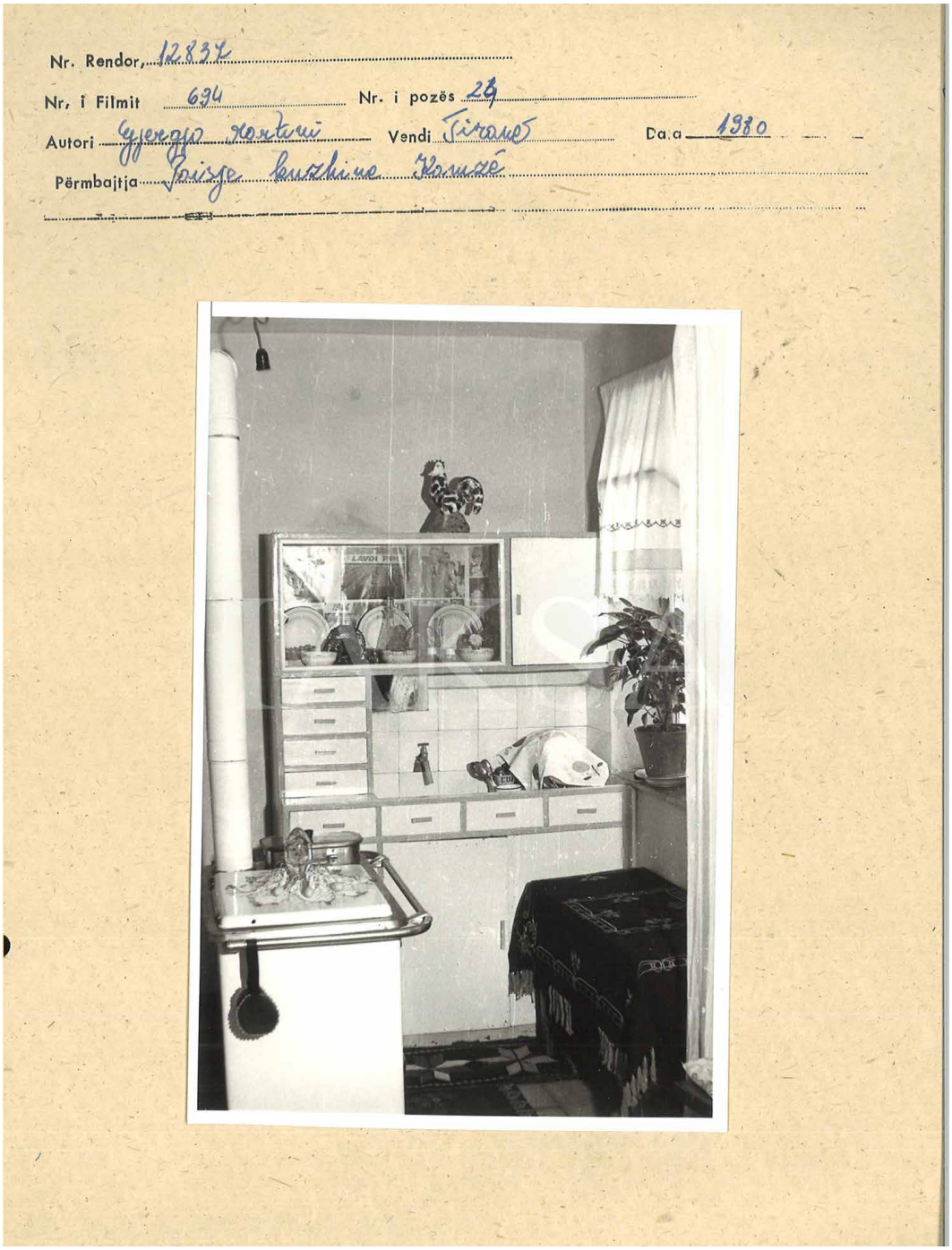


FIG. 6.9 Kitchen, apartment in Kamza. Field expedition of Aferdita Onuzi, Photo: Gjergj Martini, Source: IAKSA archive

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6.2 Co-Constructing of Kamza from Below

6.2.1 Stigma and Othering: With or Without the Architects



FIG. 6.10 Walking in Kamza, October 02, 2021, LAU 2021

Situated 7 kilometers from the center of Tirana, Kamza was massively popularized during the 1990s and 2000s. It is the epitome of entire urban and proto-urban territories created anew in central Albania during this time; a spatial manifestation of the significant wave of internal migration that unfolded after the collapse of the state-socialist regime. In 1996, Kamza was officially recorded as a municipality, and today, following the territorial reform of 2015, it has a total area of 37.18 km^2. According to the 2023 census, the population of the municipality of Kamza is 96,137.

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Walking the streets of Kamza, the landscape strikes you with unfinished houses, a becoming landscape that invites the imagination to envision future scenarios of partial continuation of one house or the other. The presence of water tanks, a symbol of infrastructural challenges, is ubiquitous and integrated into Kamza's scenery. This scenery of an inhabited under-transformation terrain is evident not only in the city itself but also in its architectural expressions, especially in its incremental houses. The in-between urban-rural character of one-family houses prevails, while Tirana-like apartment building architecture has begun to expand along the main axes and in the administrative center of Kamza.

Kamza has been a recurring subject in the national and local press throughout the three decades of its existence as a city. The portrayal in the media of Bathore, the foundational neighborhood of Kamza's urbanization, mirrors the deep political divide between major political parties, combined with marginalization and stigmatization of the migrant population. This population was unjustly characterized using derogatory and dehumanizing terms, such as "barbarian highlanders" (*malokë*), "cave dwellers" (*shpellarë*), "primitives," and "septic tank inhabitants."[401]

This stigmatizing language was produced in the media and reproduced in everyday life. One of my interlocutors who lives in Kamza and works in Kombinat shared a story of someone refusing to travel in the same work bus with her.[402] While her story referred to the initial years of the wave of migration movement, another more recent episode that was turned into a film, occurred during one of the fieldwork days of the training school we organized in Tirana and Kamza, as elaborated in subchapter 3.4.[403] The driver hired to transport the working group throughout Kamza, upon learning that there were foreigners in the group, assumed they were tourists and raised the question: "What kind of tourists would want to visit Kamza?" The conversations that took place inside the bus between the driver and local activists revealed the stigma surrounding the city. The driver refused to recognize the existence of Kamza, and in particular, the urban existence of the neighborhoods of Bathore and Paskuqan.[404]

401 Malaj, D., "Bathorja Në Shtypin e Përditshem Gjatë Viteve '90 Dhe 2000"; Novas and Pllumbi, "Observing the Architectural Stigma of the Ugliness: The Cases of Albania and Galicia."
402 Dylbere, a resident of Kamza, who initially lived in Kombinat, where she still worked at the time of the conversation with the author, September 30, 2023.
403 Pllumbi et al., *Training School Report: Tirana and Kamza: The Planned, the Unplanned, and Everything in Between.*
404 *The City That Was Not Supposed to Be on the Map — Qyteti Që s'duhej Të Ishte Në Hartë*, short documentary, directed by Klodiana Millona and Diana Malaj, with Büşra Dilaveroglu et al., 2023, 11min 14 sec, https://dokufest.com/en/festival/2023/film/the-city-that-was-not-supposed-to-be-on-the-map/.

As a new city in formation, a continuous and lasting process, Kamza remains between the urban and the rural, which is otherwise recognized as the rurban condition. The stigma that has accompanied Kamza is related to the presence of another urban, which is read as foreign and judged accordingly, especially by the ruling cultural and political elites of Tirana, which has created a center-periphery relationship. Kamza is an emblematic case of a city built from below, without the presence of the state or the design professionals like planners or architects. In Kamza, the communal sphere takes on an essential role. It is based on community ties and kinship, outside the framework of what is known as formal.

In 2006, self-building was banned by law in Albania, and a process of legalization started.[405] The qualification as informal by the institutional elites in Tirana has reduced the understanding of Kamza as a place with agency. As argued by many authors, the use of the term informal is unproductive and very problematic. Already in 1968, John Turner saw squatter settlements not as problems but as a resource.[406] Arjun Appadurai looks into these realities as models of deep democracy and pragmatic examples of urban governmentality.[407] Ananya Roy coined the term *subaltern urbanism* as an invitation to explore the ways in which the urban disenfranchised populations, often referred to as the subaltern, experience and shape their city. Roy argues that traditional urban theories often neglect these complexities and fail to capture the subaltern's agency in shaping urban development. Subaltern urbanism seeks to draw attention to the minor economies and daily struggles of the urban poor, emphasizing their resistance and persistence in the face of social and economic challenges within the urban.[408] Menna Agha and Leopold Lambert, in an essay in *Architectural Review*, argue that informal is a term defined by denial, so it does not indicate *what is*, but *what is not*. The label *informal*, therefore, is based on an institutional belief that such self-constructed places lack organization, while the authors argue that this is a matter of the institutional reading code, which renders these areas beyond recognition of the institutional epistemology. The same can be said for the field of architecture, which tends to be Eurocentric and hygienic. It often fails to acknowledge that there are diverse

405 In 2006, ALUIZNI – *the Agency for Legalization, Urbanization and Integration of Areas and Informal Constructions* – was created to manage this construction capital, mainly with the purpose of legalizing buildings where they did not show a hazard to public interest and when they were not placed in territories at high environmental risk.

406 John F. C. Turner, "The Squatter Settlement: An Architecture That Works," *Architectural Design*, 1968.

407 Arjun Appadurai, "Deep Democracy: Urban Governmentality and the Horizon of Politics," *Environment&Urbanization* 13, no. 2 (2001).

408 Ananya Roy, "Slumdog Cities: Rethinking Subaltern Urbanism," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 35, no. 2 (2011): 223–38, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2427.2011.01051.x.

cosmologies where various ideas and realities can coexist, thereby perpetuating exclusion. As a result, individuals who have developed and inhabited these alternate cosmologies are labeled as "others," characterized as different, and consequently regarded as informal.[409]

The attitude toward these geographies and architectures in the Albanian professional discourse tends to be either stigmatizing, dismissive, or, recently, fetishizing.[410] This attitude distances the possibility that professional architectural design learns from the experience of constructing a city like Kamza, eventually being able to contribute with professional expertise.[411]

Recent attempts to increase the state's involvement and architectural expertise, with the aim of improving living conditions, might result in the control and commodification of these territories, jeopardizing their autonomy and shrinking communal agency. These forms of institutional and professional engagement have just begun to amplify in Kamza due to pressure from the commodification of land and gentrification. The question to be posed here is how the discipline and profession of architecture can relate to the spatial production of Kamza, firstly at the level of understanding this reality, and secondly at the level of possibly contributing to it. Is there something contextual that needs to be understood in Kamza, and does architecture as a discipline have the capacity at the moment to read these realities? Do we need new ways of engagement to avoid the risk of artificially transferring models like the current one, which is homogenizing Tirana into a city of apartment buildings pushing toward atomization, individualization, and disruption of community living, alongside commodification and gentrification? The following is an attempt, which, within the frame of this dissertation, aims at studying commoning practices that stand at the heart of the formation of Kamza. As explained in the methodology chapter, my fieldwork in Kamza has been conducted both in collective settings and on my own. As will be seen throughout the chapter, the encountered commoning practices unfold as fragmented collectivities and differ from the totalizing understanding of the ideological singular form of collectivity.

409 Menna Agha and Leopold Lambert, "Outrage: Informality Is a Fallacy," *Architectural Review*, October 2020, https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/outrage/outrage-informality-is-a-fallacy.
410 As observed in Albania and elsewhere, architects close to power, on the one hand, talk about the informal as spontaneous and valuable, while, on the other hand, they are part of and serve state-capital structures that actively erase these realities. This speaks of the discrepancy between what is said and what is done in a profession that is not autonomous of power structures in a neoliberal and extractivist world order.
411 This discourse leads to discussions over professionalism and expertise versus amateurism (from Latin *amātor*: love-driven practice) and the way in which these categorizations have often proved to be problematic.

6.2.2 Squatting and Signs in the Territory

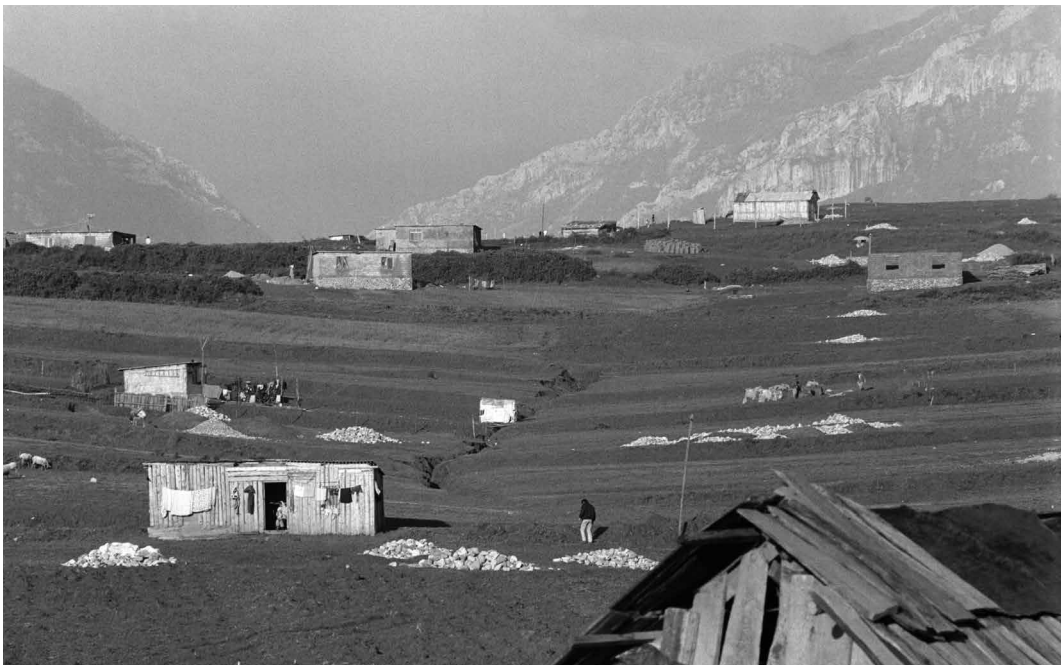


FIG. 6.11 Bathore neighborhood in Kamza, 1993, photo credit Hans Peter Jost

The strongest signs in the territory were the bunkers. The group I was part of during LAU 2023 chose to navigate through these stubborn structures to then understand how the territory had been appropriated and transformed, articulated and re-articulated as needs changed. Initially, they were turned into shelters as temporary living spaces for the newly arrived inhabitants and later adapted for animal shelter and storage. As a final stage, the small bunkers were dismantled by the inhabitants, and their materials were reused in construction. The larger ones were used in various ways over time, as removing them would interfere with the foundations of their houses already constructed near them.

The images of Hans Peter Jost are a powerful tool for transporting us back in time. Many of the people we talk to are deeply moved upon seeing the pictures. They recognize their story of moving to this place along with their families. Being subjected to stigma as well as being called informal for decades, the *right to history* of these places has been taken away. During our visit, we had the opportunity to explore the home of one of the initial families who established themselves in *Bathore*, the first neighborhood of Kamza as a city.

This neighborhood preserves its agricultural heritage through the toponym Bathore, which means "bean-growing land," derived from *bathë*, meaning "beans" in Albanian. Typically, the migration pattern involved families arriving with a load of wood materials from the highlands to construct their initial temporary wooden dwelling. Fadil, the male figure of the family we visit, vividly describes the process of demarcating the land to create their new home.

"We would excavate a small canal as a line, make a square the size of a house, a bit bigger than a house. A piece of land, a dylym (1,000 sqm), which more or less one thought would be needed. Then the arriving neighbor would notice where your line was and respect it. Everyone occupied as much as they could at first. Some more, some less, depending on how big the family was. One would come first and then have the brothers join as well. When my brother came here, he occupied two or three terraces, almost up on the hill. All the people [of the extended family and kin] who were there [in our village] have come and located here, without paying anything, for free."

Fadil (aged 70), one of the first settlers in Bathore[412]

Bathore's land was state-owned and vacant as agricultural state enterprises, like Ylli i Kuq, had halted operations. A common stigma associated with land squatters is that they grab others' land property. Fadil, however, explains that customary rules dictated that if anyone showed up claiming the land as their property, negotiations would follow, but no such claims were made.[413] For them, this was an opportunity to locate with their extended family on the available land when they needed it the most. Neighborhoods in Kamza are composed of clusters of people from specific regions in the northeast, reflecting the community's rich diversity. This process mirrors the creation of Kamza, a characteristic of arrival cities where communities are naturally formed out of necessity in a challenging yet hopeful startup moment.[414]

412 "Group Conversation with Fadil, 70 Years Old Inhabitant of Bathore," September 8, 2023. Working group composed of the author, Elsa Paja, Hans Peter Jost, Pavjo Gjini, Marjana Syla, and Arba Bekteshi.
413 Certainly, these negotiations were not a guarantee that they would always go well. There have been cases, also reported in the media, of fatalities during these times. After all, the authority of the customary rules and regulations is not absolute, especially in the times of anarchy and reinterpretation of roles and rules of the state and customs.
414 Doug Saunders, *Arrival City: How the Largest Migration in History Is Reshaping Our World* (Vintage Books, 2012).



FIG. 6.12 The bunker is used for storage

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FIG. 6.13 The bunker is made part of the external wall of the parcel.



FIG. 6.14 The bunker is a solid presence in the yard



FIG. 6.15 Construction machinery in the yard indicated that the construction work continues

Northern Albania is known as a region with a sort of autonomous character. As previously mentioned, the families of Kamza have brought with them the customs and traditions of their places of origin, which are often considered rougher than those of the rest of Albania.[415] The Kanun of Lek Dukagjini, which was a self-administered set of oral customary laws in effect prior to communism, is widely known, not without exoticization, for its harsh vendetta rules and patriarchal character.

However, in the context of my study, it is interesting to note that these laws include the customary institution of *Kujria*, a set of principles governing the use of common land used for pasture by the residents of a village.[416]

We ask about the common land, which, as in many other cultures, is a piece of communal land commonly used. Fadil explains the concept to us.

"In the village where we used to live, everyone had their own piece of land for private use. There was a piece of land that no one owned, it was common for grazing and for cutting wood for heating. This part of the land that was shared was called "mera." No one had the right to say, "It's mine." They could say "It's ours," but not "It's mine."[417]

In the early days, Kamza was essentially a "*mera*," where families could graze their animals without limitation. As urbanization progressed, the streets, water, and electrical infrastructure were the co-constructed "urban commons," the newly created and negotiated *urban mera* of Kamza. Residents organized into groups to collectively address shared concerns related to the basic infrastructure needed for their new city they were creating together from scratch. Although the precarious conditions prevailed, many inhabitants shared with us the experience of pooling funds to purchase pipes and electrical wiring, ensuring that those facing financial difficulties were not excluded from these communal efforts.

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415 Voell, "The Kanun in the City. Albanian Customary Law as a Habitus and Its Persistence in the Suburb of Tirana, Bathore," 2003.

416 As mentioned briefly in the subchapter 4.2, the Kanun of Lek Dukagjini is an oral set of self-administered customary laws gathered and codified by the medieval Prince Lek Dukagjini. These laws were codified in the 15th century and used until the 20th century in Northern and Central Albania and in other ex-Yugoslavian areas where there is an ethnic Albanian population. Kanun is known to be patriarchal and rough in using death as a tool for justice and vendetta. The state socialist regime managed to stop the practice of Kanun by imposing state laws and police control. With the fall of the regime, they were revived in different forms. Most of the people who practice them have inherited them via oral transmission through generations, therefore there are variations in interpretation. One expression that has circulated in Kamza nowadays is "There is no law, there is no Kanun!" This expresses a condition of uncertainty in which people have lost credence in the state but cannot fully rely on the Kanun either. See Bardhoshi, *Antropologjia e Kanunit*.

417 "Group Conversation with Fadil, 70 Years Old Inhabitant of Bathore," September 8, 2023.



FIG. 6.16 Arial images of Bathore in 1993 and 2023

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While often regarded as emblematic of anomalous urbanization, Kamza could even be seen as an *unplanned structuralist participation*, a sort of Habraken project, embodying a "support and infill" approach to city development.[418] The new inhabitants were clearly influenced by existing features in the territory, such as irrigation and drainage canals, as well as agricultural terraces. These elements served as a sort of foundational grid, guiding the layout of family-housing parcels. Notably, the streets in Kamza exhibit a deliberate interconnectedness, with the "right of way" effectively negotiated and maintained among its inhabitants.

As mentioned before, the majority of families initially built simple wooden huts as temporary dwellings while building a more stable, permanent home on the side. In the early foundational years of Kamza's formation, its residents were confronted with significant challenges, particularly the lack of adequate water and infrastructure. These harsh material conditions prompted several protests, which were another form of commoning, a way to be heard and recognized by those who felt entitled to look down upon them. Residents pushed back against government efforts to demolish their homes in 1995 and later rallied for essential services such as water, infrastructure, education, and the legalization of homes.[419]

The legalization process is based on Hernando de Soto's neoliberal theory, which suggests that it is beneficial for capital to recognize the private property rights of constructions considered illegal.[420] Ananya Roy has analyzed the impact of the legalization process based on this theory, and the outcome is the opening up of entire self-built areas to the real estate market, which will eventually trigger gentrification and interference in the social structures of these areas.[421] Indeed, these gentrifying effects are currently noticeable in Kamza.

418 John Habraken, *Supports: An Alternative to Mass Housing* (Urban International Press, 1999), https://www.habraken.com/html/supports.htm; N. John Habraken, *The Structure of the Ordinary: Form and Control in the Built Environment* (MIT Press, 2000).
419 Malaj, "Uncannying Kamza: The Construction of a Disavowed City."
420 Hernando de Soto, *The Mystery of Capital: Why Capitalism Triumphs in the West and Fails Everywhere Else* (Black Swan, 2000); Hernando de Soto, *Misteri i Kapitalit: Pse Kapitalizmi Triumfon Në Perëndim Dhe Dështon Kudo Tjetër* (Co-PLAN, 2000).
421 Ananya Roy, "Urban Informality: Toward an Epistemology of Planning."

6.2.3 Women and children commoning the city

"Making concrete is one of the most difficult processes in construction. One person is not enough; it would be better if there were two. We are talking about concrete that was made with a shovel and not with a concrete mixer machine.

Women, alongside their men, are involved in the construction of houses in Kamez or wherever their families have moved in the hope of 'a better life'. The concrete process is mainly taken over by women. They say it's like making dough, you need to know the amount of both water and cement you put in."

_ Prej Themeleve te Çatia, Bashkë, From the Foundations to the Roof, Together, Intergenerational meeting held on March 8, 2022, with women from Kamza at the Grupi ATA community center

In Albania, while construction is traditionally attributed to skilled individuals, typically the men within the extended family, in Kamza, women played a substantial role in the building process. The rituals surrounding house construction begin with the sacrificial offering of an animal for the foundations, followed by the enthusiastic involvement of the entire extended family and kin.

Dylbere, now a 61-year-old woman (35 when she arrived in Kamza), who had worked as a construction worker in Tropoja during the previous state socialist regime, had hands-on experience in building various public structures, including bunkers situated in the rugged mountainous terrains. At one point, she had even operated cranes in Tropoja. Her construction knowledge proved useful when she and her family first moved into a squatted building in a former industrial building of Kombinat. To my pleasant surprise, as she indicated to me, this was one of the dwellings located within the former Fluff Factory in the community of Hidrofili, as presented in the previous chapter of this dissertation. Later, upon moving to Kamza, they embarked on the challenging endeavor of constructing their own house from the ground up.

In January 1997, they made the move with four children, with high hopes for a brighter future. Despite the initial shock of the challenging conditions, they refused to be discouraged. Returning was not an option, given the loss of jobs and the harsh circumstances left behind, marked by a lack of access to education and healthcare. Their primary goal was to create improved life opportunities for their children.



FIG. 6.17 Poster of the event "From the Foundations to the Roof, Together," centering the role of women and children in constructing the houses of Kamza, March 8, 2022, Source: Grupi ATA



FIG. 6.18 Picture of mother and her children mixing concrete to construct their house, Source: Family archive

Dylbere's husband is a construction worker as well, a master builder. She was his dedicated assistant. At the beginning, she assisted him full-time in constructing houses for some acquaintances who commissioned their services, and later she contributed part-time to the construction of their own home while working at a manufacturing firm of buckle manufacturing firm.[422] Like numerous other women in Kombinat and Kamza, these manufacturing firms are the primary source of employment. Owned by foreign investors, mainly from Italy, they make use of the cheap labor of these women. To bolster their income, they undertake overtime work at home, often involving their children's assistance. Dylbere also mentioned that their four children played an active role in the construction of their new house. "They grew up prematurely. Two of them would fill in the sand and the other two would pull it up. The hands of the two little children were blistered by the rope they would be pulling." - she shares.[423]

422 See Subchapter 5.2, where this buckle manufacturing firm is mentioned.
423 Dylbere, a resident of Kamza, who initially lived in Kombinat, where she still worked at the time of the conversation with the author, September 30, 2023.

Rrushe, now 44, is one of the women I had the chance to meet twice, initially during the Laboratory of Urban Anthropology 2023, when, together with the working group I was part of, we visited her house. Later, I met her again for a close-up conversation about her experience of moving to Bathore and building a livelihood there. She shares a hearty laugh while gazing at the photograph taken by the Swiss photographer. She vividly recalls her arrival in Bathore as a young bride, an experience that required her to don rubber boots over her pristine white wedding dress, as their car was stuck in the mud. Subsequently, alongside other women and children from the community, they had to use a wheelbarrow to fetch water. However, her smile fades as she remembers the challenges of doing so while pregnant and having to push the wheelbarrow in the mud and the way they would get stuck. She sighs: *"Oh, kena vujt bre!"* meaning "We have really suffered!"

It was her husband, together with one brother, who initially moved to Bathore, where they stayed for two years in a bunker they still have in their yard. Slowly, they constructed one house on the side, and as they continued to live together, they built two more houses, which made it possible for the large family to separate and for each of the brothers to live with their wife and children. On the day of the opening of the foundation of the houses, she recalls the foundation rituals that included the sacrifice of an animal, usually a lamb, but also, they did not forget to place in the foundation pit objects like a comb and a mirror. These old rituals are performed to protect, bless, and bring prosperity to the new house, along with the wish that its construction go smoothly. The comb and mirror are often read as feminine and as symbols of fertility, related to reproduction and the continuation of the family.

She continues by telling me that the construction of the houses takes several years, and she describes how it gets accomplished in a kin setting, of a genealogical character and beyond. This involves various forms of support, such as borrowing money and receiving physical assistance, from both her husband's family and her own, as well as from the neighbors living nearby. As also mentioned in other conversations with other interlocutors, she points out the days and weeks dedicated to construction when a group of kin people (*krahët*– the helping hands/arms) come together to work on specific parts of the house. This is especially true for tasks that require immediate action, such as preparing and pouring concrete for foundations, columns, and slabs. Other work, like building walls, installing windows and doors, and completing the finishing touches, can be completed at a slower tempo. When asked about the bunker in her yard and whether she would prefer to have it dismantled, as some of her neighbors have done, she laughs and replies, "Absolutely not!" This is during a time when the news about the war in Ukraine is dominating headlines. In Albania, bunkers are often viewed with disdain because of the memory of state socialism, but Rrushe, on the contrary, says she is very happy to have a bunker in the yard, and that she regularly cleans and maintains it.



FIG. 6.19 Picture of a bunker in the yard of one of Kamza's houses. The bunker was initially used for shelter with some arrangements, like gravel on the floor, and a light in the ceiling.

Among women, Rrushe shares, mutual support has been essential for managing childcare while continuing to work outside the home and living in under-construction conditions. Older children often had to make sacrifices, including dedicating time from their studies, to assist in caring for their younger siblings.

"[My oldest daughter] took care of the little one, up to changing her diapers, and feeding her, as I had to go to work. I had a job as a cleaner at a wedding bar down here. She brought her to me there, so I could breastfeed her. … I also had my sister-in-law [living at the house close by], and she used to breastfeed my baby often … Both of us had babies of the same gender, both girls, so we could exchange breastfeeding. Her baby-daughter was breastfed by me for up to one year, when her mother had to go to see her parents for example, or somewhere else."[424]

Women in Kamza assisted each other with home births, as access to the hospital was not always possible. Another commoning practice initiated and brought forward by women was the teaming up of some teachers to create collective classes, where children could continue with their education because, initially, there were no schools in the vicinity of Bathore.[425]

424 Rrushe, (44-year-old woman), living and working in Bathore, Kamez, from 1997, October 1, 2023.
425 *Mesueset e Bathores, LAU 2023 Pervijime Te Kamzes*, Documentary film, with Ronald Qema et al., 2023.

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FIG. 6.20 Laundry hanging to dry on the terraces is a very common image in Kamza.

Engaging discussions unfolded at a roundtable I was part of at the edition LAU 2021 in the house of one of the ATA activists. The most heated debate centers on gendered inequalities over inheritance. According to the Kanun, daughters are systematically excluded from inheriting any portion of their parents' house, reflecting a deeply ingrained patriarchal tradition. However, this traditional rule encounters resistance from the new generation, as an increasing number of women firmly refuse to relinquish their right to inheritance, a right recognized by official law.

However, women's immense contributions extend beyond the initial construction of houses. Their ongoing contributions are particularly visible in the meticulous maintenance of these homes. This unrecognized commitment is evident in the façade and terraces, with the ubiquitous hanging of laundry and carpets. Despite facing legal and cultural challenges, women are increasingly leaving an enduring imprint on both the physical and cultural aspects of these households.



FIG. 6.21 All around the houses, women's unrecognized work, like carpets and laundry, hangs over the facades of the houses of Kamza.

Indeed, the refusal to accept traditional limitations on inheritance rights represents a radical and empowering stance taken by women. This determination to assert their rights and ownership reflects a transformative shift in societal norms and an acknowledgment of the need for gender equality. By coming together to resist these norms, as in the case of the activist collective ATA, the evolving narrative challenges established patriarchal structures. Especially women activists who studied law, constantly operate in two directions, by supporting women to resist the customary rule and claim their inheritance rights that are recognized by the state law, while at the same time opening debates and discussions within the community to advance this recognition. This is an expression of one of the paradoxes of traditional kinship and customary rules and regulations, which are there to provide a support system, but at the same time exercise a form of control over members of the community, which in the case of women is a form of economic dependency.

6.3 The Real-Imaginary House

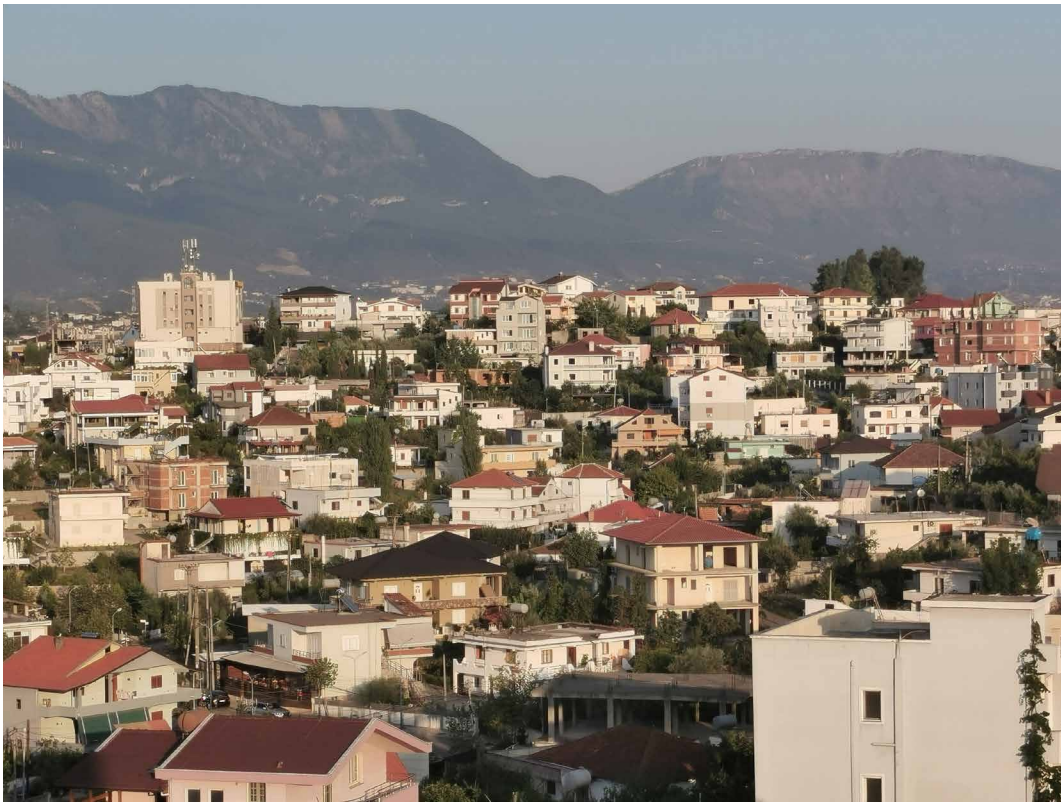


FIG. 6.22 Photo taken in Kamza during LAU 2023, by the same photographer, Hans Peter Jost, from approximately the same position as the older photos of 1993. Photo credit: Hans Peter Jost

One of the themes of LAU 2023's exploration is death, recognizing the significance of graveyards in co-constructing a city. When I ask Mynire, the woman from the first family we visit, about their thoughts on cemeteries and how they approached matters concerning the deceased, her response is instinctive and revealing. She remarked, "We thought we would never die!" This statement caught us by surprise and really encapsulates the very essence of Kamza's inception and the immense task of building a city from the ground up without any statal or professional presence.

The architectural landscape of Kamza's houses reflects an adaptation to uncertainties and new livelihoods, never starting from scratch, but carrying the presence of ancestral knowledge and continuity. As Carsten and Hugh-Jones suggest, kinship is not a given; it is made through processes of relatedness in the hearth and in the everyday material practices of cohabitation, residence, commensality, and rituals.[426] From Kamza, I would add that it is also a process of relatedness through co-construction and maintenance of the house. Despite movements, the house retains its pivotal role as the primary material anchor for families, serving as the connective tissue for all its members, even those who have emigrated abroad. These distant family members often contribute their savings toward the ongoing presence in the family house.[427]

My focus during LAU 2021 was on unraveling the nexus between spatial configurations and the materialization of the house, and on how these processes facilitate kin-making and vice versa. What became apparent was the intricate interweaving of the real and the imaginary, not only through the mystical stories about the house in the Albanian culture, but also in the coexistence of imaginary spaces within the actual built structures. Through sketches and images, I sought to capture how temporalities collide without being separated into the realms of the past, present, and future, showcasing a spatial imagination shaped by both pragmatic and affective impulses. The traditional large house manifests itself reinterpreted amidst reality and imagination, as a tangible, material, spatial presence that also accommodates hope, dreams, and aspirations.

The observations made during LAU 2021 were conducted within the houses of two members of the collective Grupi ATA, providing a close experience that allowed for a deeper understanding of how the architectural essence of the house is a dynamic interplay of past, present, and future aspirations and imaginaries.

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426 Janet Carsten and Stephen Hugh-Jones, "Introduction: About the House _ Lévi-Straaus and Beyond," in *About the House: Lévi-Straaus and Beyond*, 1st ed., ed. Janet Carsten and Stephen Hugh-Jones (Cambridge University Press, 1995).

427 Dalakoglou, "Migrating-Remitting-'Building'-Dwelling."

6.3.1 The Arch: A Master's Obsession



FIG. 6.23 House in Kamza constructed by all members of the family under the direction of the father, a master-builder

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FIG. 6.24 Hysen, one of the master builders of Kamza, showing his large family houses in Bujan, Tropoja.

In the following picture, Hysen, Dylbere's husband, proudly showcases the houses he actively helped build in his hometown of Bujan, Tropojë. Among them, the most significant is the largest one, a structure in which, at the age of 7, he and his brothers served as assistants to their father during a five-year construction process that culminated in 1974. Hysen fondly recognizes this house as a formative "school" for him, where he developed a profound interest in the art of construction. It is here that he first explored building with his own hands, gaining an intimate understanding of every facet of the house within his own family home.

The three-story house constructed by Hysen's father attracted attention during a visit by Mehmet Shehu, the Prime Minister of Albania, in the era of Hoxha's regime. Intrigued by the structure, Shehu inquired if it was a newly built state-sponsored daycare. Upon learning that it was a privately owned residence, he ordered a comprehensive investigation. Subsequently, Hysen's father was arrested and spent six months in prison while officials from the notorious *Sigurimi i Shtetit* (Directorate

of State Security), including engineers, meticulously assessed every element of the house. From the stone walls to the wooden components of the roof and even a simple wooden table, every detail was scrutinized to calculate the cost and check how the funds were secured. After the exhaustive six-month investigation, Hysen's father was released one morning. However, he chose to leave prison in the evening, avoiding the gaze of the village, unwilling to be seen in his weakened physical state with long, unkempt hair and dirty, untrimmed nails. Hysen was 14 at the time and vividly recalls these events while looking at the house in the picture.

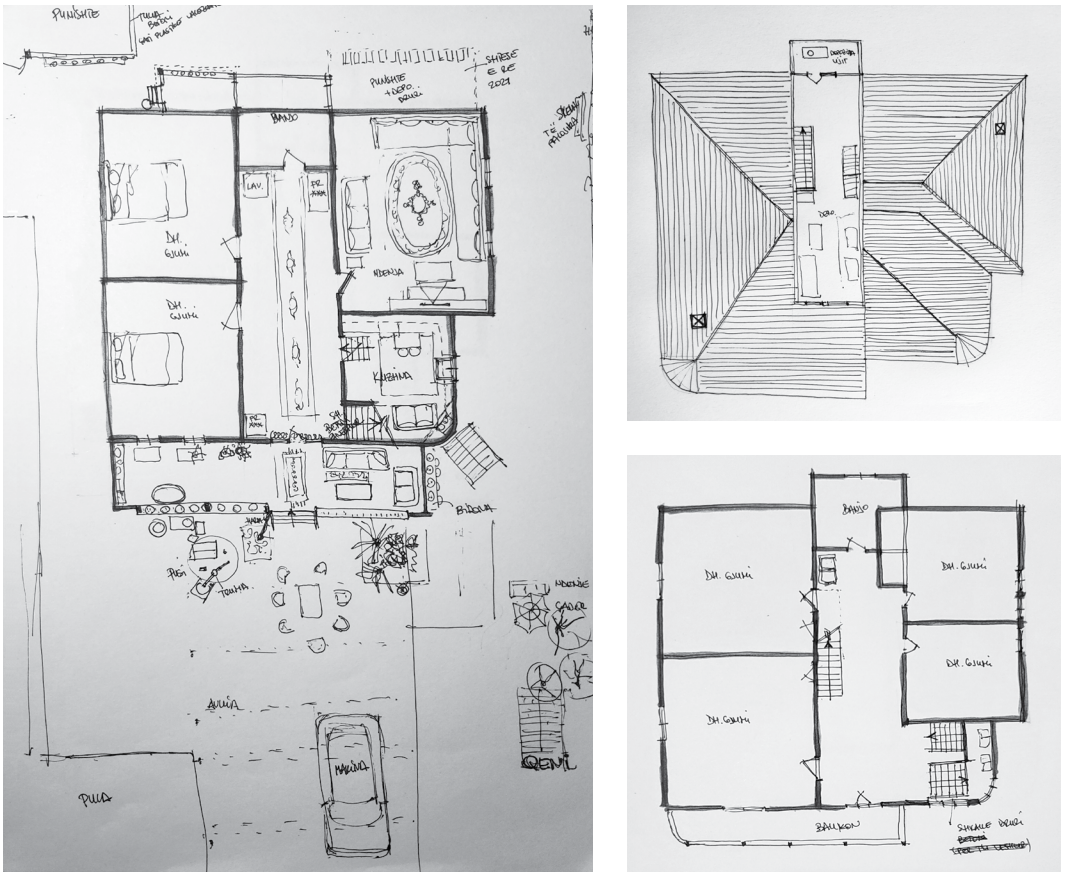


FIG. 6.25 On-site sketches of the house plans.

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Later, during the state socialist regime, Hysen worked as a professional builder within a state-owned enterprise. Following the regime's end, he continued his craft, working on constructing private residences in arrival areas as well as extensions, which became a phenomenon in Tirana and Albania, mostly in apartment buildings constructed during state socialism.[428] In the narrative of constructing the house in Kamza, he assumes the role of orchestrator, manager, and central figure. His wife and children, serving as his invaluable helpers, are endearingly referred to as *krahët* (the helping hands/arms) in his account of their collaborative efforts, a term which I keep encountering in many conversations.

As mentioned in Dylbere's account, the family initially settled in Tirana in 1997, finding refuge in one of the abandoned buildings within the ex-industrial zone of Kombinat. After enduring three challenging years in those conditions, they eventually seized an opportunity to acquire a piece of land in Kamza, adjacent to her brother.[429] This marked the beginning of the construction of their current house. As explained, the clustering of house locations is a prevailing practice in Kamza, as previously seen in Kombinat, where families with connections, shared origins, or kinship deliberately choose locations in proximity to one another, fostering mutual support when needed. While acknowledging the numerous advantages of such a communal setup, the younger generation, humorously noted by members of the ATA group, often views it as a form of "tyranny of the cousins," a concept introduced by the social anthropologist Ernest Gellner to define a controlling aspect of communities in relation to individual freedom.[430] As a matter of fact, as mentioned in conversations in Kamza, many young people emigrate not only for economic reasons but also to escape this condition. At the same time, this community presence gives the inhabitants a sense of security and confidence in their agency. This speaks to the ambivalent role of kinship, which, like the concepts of collectivity and community, can simultaneously be supportive, controlling, and exclusionary.

428 Manfredo di Robilant et al., "Shtesa, Tirana: An Investigation of Spontaneous Elements of Architecture," *Canadian Centre for Architecture*, no. Ideas of Living (2018).

429 This is another case in which proximity positioning follows the lineage of female kin, again twisting the customary rules.

430 Gellner contrasts civil society with the segmentary community, which avoids central tyranny by absorbing individuals into tightly bounded kin groups. Ernest Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and Its Rivals*, Penguin History (Penguin Books, 1996).



FIG. 6.26 Photo from houses in Bujan where the beautiful arch can be observed. Source: Family archive



FIG. 6.27 Photo of the house in Bujan where the large family posing on the stars, with an arch in the background. Source: Family archive

It was in 1999 that Hysen and Dylbere, with the help of their children, started to build this house in Kamza. The ground floor was built in one year and was enough for the family to move in. The rest of the house, the first floor and the attic, took longer to be built depending on the financial means. Although, from his narration, the building of the house sounds like a family unit enterprise, it actually has been a collective process as the neighbors were in a similar stage of constructing their houses. Hysen is one of the passionate master builders of Kamza who helps others with his expertise in construction, including the family of his brother-in-law living next to them. The nearby houses went through a similar developmental trajectory in their construction processes. As shared by many and mentioned in the previous section, the moment of opening the foundations is associated with a celebratory ritual but also functions as a reciprocal gathering of forces in solidarity. Similarly, the moment of casting of the concrete of the slab and columns is a moment of hard work and joy for the entire community and kinship.



FIG. 6.28 In the actual house in Kamza, arches are constructed singly or in groups of two or three, and sometimes they follow an offset line of the stairs. Arches are everywhere, including the back of the house.

Addressing infrastructure challenges proves to be a challenging task. With lots of effort they dig a well to secure a water source, initially intended for both drinking and general use. However, they later realize that the water does not meet drinking water standards, causing them to cease using it for that purpose. Despite this, the well continued to serve essential needs for a while and is now used to irrigate the yard's plants.

Additionally, Hysen describes the collaborative spirit within the community as they gather with neighbors to address electricity requirements. Although not without tensions, this collective effort reflects the shared commitment to overcoming challenges and creating solutions for the community's essential services.

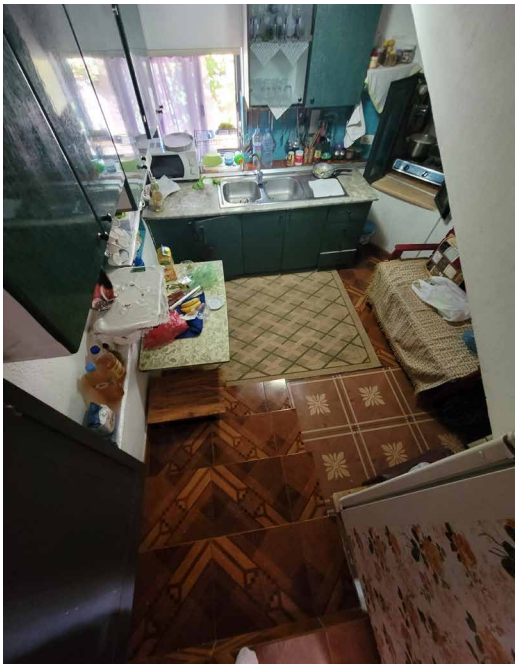
While most houses in Kamza have a basic, similar layout featuring a central corridor leading to rooms on either side and a bathroom at the end, there is remarkable diversity in architectural forms and elements across the city. Despite being frequently labeled as kitsch and chaotic, the diverse range of formal expressions is a tangible manifestation of the desire to personalize architectural language. In Hysen's house, one distinctive element stands out: the repeated use of arches. When questioned about his affinity for the arch, he explained that he appreciates the challenge it presents. "It is not easy to create it," he remarks.[431] This architectural feature has become a recurring motif, evident in the house he constructed in his hometown, his residence in Kamza, and even in his involvement in building his brother-in-law's house adjacent to his own. It appears as a symbolic thread of connecting the different places, lands, and ancestors of a family.

431 "Group Conversation with Hysen," October 23, 2021, voice recording.



FIG. 6.29 Photos from the veranda of the house.

Beyond the challenge of realization, his affinity for the arch has another, more personal rebellious story for Hysen. The use of the arch in his family's house in Bujan Tropoja during state socialism put him into an uncomfortable situation reminiscent of his father's experience with the authorities. At that time, he faced inquiries from the authorities who demanded an explanation from him about the choice of incorporating arches into his work and questioned where he encountered this architectural element. In a time when watching foreign TV channels or reading unapproved books was strictly prohibited, any deviation from the officially sanctioned cultural influences was met with suspicion. Despite the limitations, as the authorities also knew but tried to prevent, foreign materials and sources of information circulated in a clandestine way, including the capture of TV signals through makeshift antennas across Albania.



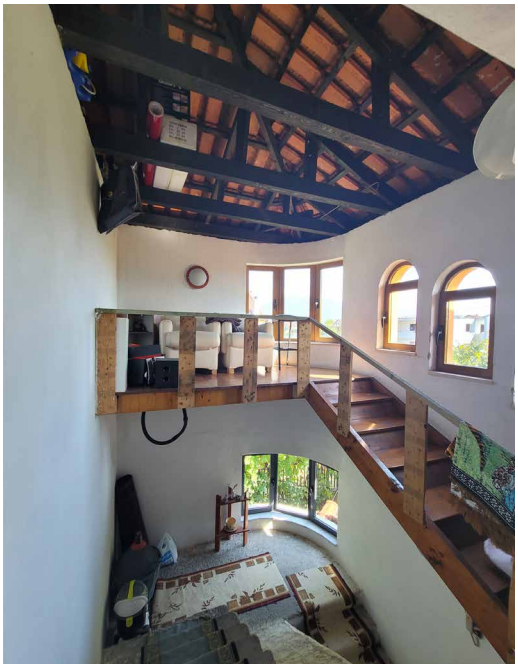


FIG. 6.30 Photos of the kitchen and stairs.



FIG. 6.31 Hysen proudly showing his beloved tools in his wood workshop in the back of the house in Kamza.



FIG. 6.32 Handmade wooden bench.

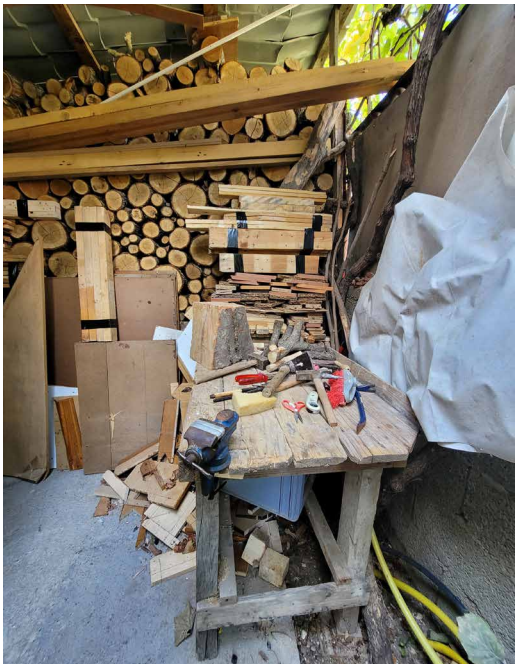


FIG. 6.33 Wood workshop.





FIG. 6.34 The back side of the house is a larder for food.

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His use of arches, therefore, was perceived as indicative of foreign influence, and he found himself having to justify their use. In response, he denied any external influence, of course, attributing the architectural choice to his own imaginative creativity. However, in a candid moment within his close family circle, he revealed that he had observed something similar on a TV channel from Prishtina, which he intercepted because of their proximity to the Kosovo border, then part of ex-Yugoslavia. This narrative, and many more similar to it, encapsulates the subtle contrast between creative expression and the constraints imposed by the political and cultural climate of the time. Indeed, the experiences of restrictions and scrutiny during the state socialist era influenced a subsequent yearning for freedom of architectural expression in the Albanian landscape. With the fall of the regime, newfound liberty unleashed a proliferation of diverse forms and styles.[432] Kamza stands as a vivid embodiment of this expanded realm of architectural expression, where a spectrum of creative possibilities unfolded, reflecting the collective desire to break free from the constraints of the past and embrace a more liberated and diverse architectural language.

Hysen's case shows how, for him, a house transcends being a mere fulfillment of the need for shelter and becomes an opportunity to hone his skills, a manifestation of the desire to live well, and a canvas for developing an intuitive aesthetic sense. Building houses is not just a practical endeavor but a genuine passion that seems to never diminish for him.[433] While Hysen's house in Kamza may appear complete at first glance, he is still working on the unfinished stairs and continues to enhance it by adding shed-like extensions in the back. One such addition is a workshop, a dedicated space for him to indulge in his hobby of crafting with wood. Located at the back of the house, the workshop is also used by the women of the house to process and store food, as seen in the following photos.

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432 The newfound freedom of expression is evident not only in Kamza and in the architecture created by local inhabitants and master builders, but also in the diverse architectural styles adopted by professional architects throughout Albania after the decade's censure of the state socialist regime had passed.
433 In the last decade, he managed to return to Bujan and start constructing another house there, which is still unfinished, and he goes there seasonally to keep working on and maintaining it together with Dylbere.

6.3.2 Planned and Unplanned Encounters



FIG. 6.35 The amateur recording of an emigrant (Ron's father) returning to Kamza to build his house in the early 1990s. Screened at ATA community center during Laboratory of Urban Anthropology 2021.

Ron is one of the ATA activists with many talents. He works across various creative fields, including text, photography, film, sound, and theater. He actively co-organizes and participates in a variety of group activities and is known for finding hands on solutions to any technical problem arising during events. During LAU 2021, at the ATA community center, when I was one of the participants, we had the opportunity to watch a rare recording of Ron's father, capturing a glimpse of the past that is often challenging to find, except in family archives. In the recording, we saw the sacrifice ritual. As mentioned before, this old ritual, which was banned during state socialism, entails the sacrifice of an animal, usually a sheep, at the moment the foundations of a house are laid. The sacrifice, as mentioned, is made for the foundations and the house to stand strong and the family to prosper. Interestingly, this ritual is often practiced by construction companies even for high-rise buildings in the city.

Upon visiting their home after watching the recording, we engaged in warm conversations with the family members who hosted us, treating us to traditional cuisine. Among the various topics discussed was the intricate process of constructing a house. In a parallel narrative to Hysen's story, the father of this household is a master builder as well. His wife and five children, two sons and three daughters, were active contributors to the construction process, especially the concrete process.

Originally a single-story structure, the house underwent a transformative change a few years ago, just before the parliamentary elections of 2020, with the construction of a second floor. Self-construction without permission was banned from 2016, but here we see how electoral campaigns are used for selective concessions when for electoral profit, the authorities turn a blind eye and soften enforcement of the law. This is a recurring pattern. The family had to make use of that moment, and within a few weeks, a remarkably short time span, they managed to complete the construction of the second floor.



FIG. 6.36 Photo of the LAU 2021 participants at Roni's house. The large table set in the yard beneath the vineyard, together with the delicious food, becomes a space for gathering, and sharing extended conversations.

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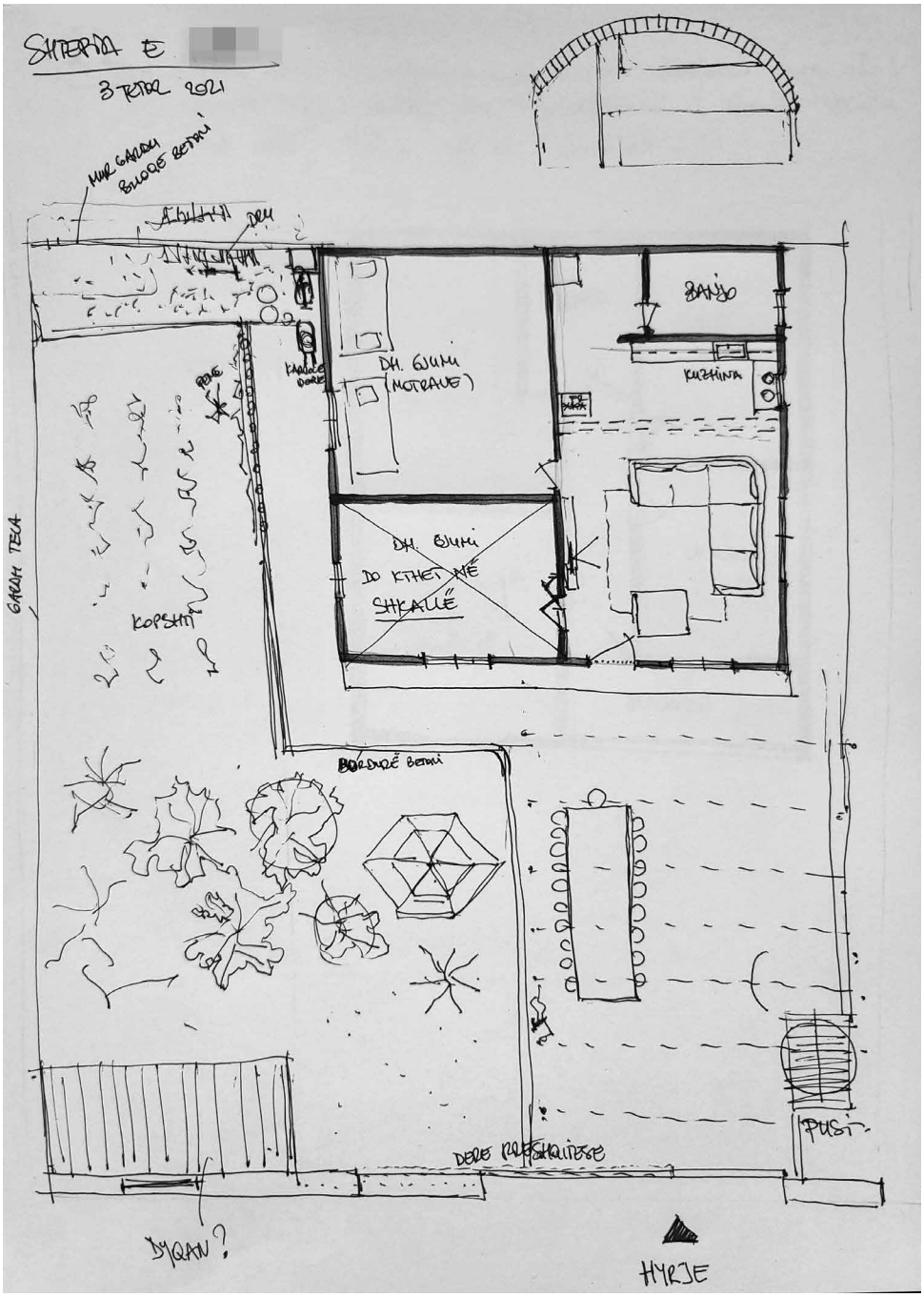


FIG. 6.37 On-site sketch of the floor plan

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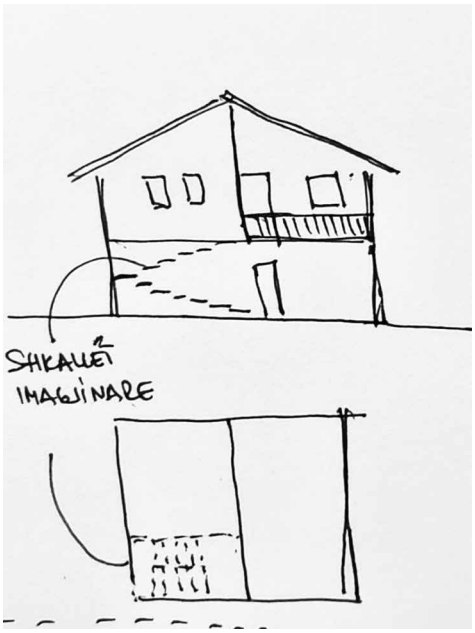


FIG. 6.38 The stairs are imaginary, although the second floor appears finished from the outside.

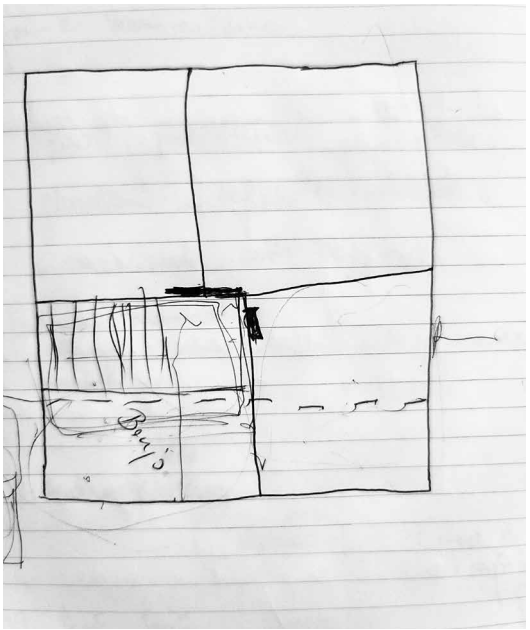


FIG. 6.39 Ron's drawing explaining to me the future partitions of the second floor.

For Ron's father, as for many in Kamza, the symbolic significance of *"kulmi,"* the roof and its tip, holds great importance in defining a house. The desire for this vertical closure represents a deep-rooted aspiration to have a completed home. During the house tour provided by Ron, after exploring the first floor, I learned, to my surprise, that there are no stairs leading up to the second floor. The family has envisioned converting the space of one of the rooms into a staircase in the near future. Interestingly, the staircase and even the partitions of the second floor exist in a realm of imagination within this house, despite its outward appearance of completeness. However, the second floor is not completely unreachable, as Ron already sleeps there in a makeshift room. The space is reached through a wooden portable ladder that is placed on the façade leading to the balcony. At the moment, when the space of the yard in front of the house is being used for a collective lunch, that ladder cannot be placed there. So, I decided to pay them a visit another day to reach the second floor of Ron's house. The tangible and the imaginary seamlessly coexist, adding a layer of intriguing complexity to the architectural narrative of the home.



FIG. 6.40 Empty unfinished houses of emigrants in Kamza.

Adjacent to Ron's house, two abandoned structures stand incomplete. Empty houses in Kamza, often left unfinished, are a common sight in the landscape of the streets. Ron explains to me that the owners of the empty houses adjacent to his have emigrated abroad, leaving their houses in that unfinished condition. They have entrusted Ron's family to keep an eye on them in good faith. For Ron and some of his friends this was one of the neighborhood playgrounds where they played a lot when growing up. Now, the unfinished structures serve as a space primarily occupied by a cow and some chickens walking around. For the owners, despite living overseas, their real-imaginary homes remain rooted in Kamza, and they still rely on their neighbors to watch them closely. Notably, similar empty houses have become selected settings for theater performances by the ATA group.



FIG. 6.41 Empty unfinished houses accommodate the rurban character of the place.

The *house on pillars* is another common pattern of houses in Kamza that we noticed while walking along the streets. The first floor is left open and uninhabited, while the second floor is completed and fully utilized. This architectural choice appears to be merely pragmatic, with the cost considerations of isolating the first floor from water influencing the decision to leave it open and unhabitable for the time being. The space is often used as parking for cars. Interestingly, in the houses that do not have a roof yet, the reinforcing steel bars extend beyond the last slab of the second floor, signaling the intention to construct a third floor in the future.

Also common in Kamza are *mirror houses* or *repetitive houses*. They usually pertain to two or more brothers of the same large family. In the houses in the following images, we see how the first floor is visibly inhabited, while the ground and second floors remain in an imaginary state, as pillar houses. Noteworthy are the corner elements and the rounded balconies, indicative of an aesthetic ambition. The inclusion of spiral stairs, as seen in the last picture, adds a touch of plasticity to the use of concrete, suggesting a visually engaging feature of the overall architectural composition.



FIG. 6.42 House on pillars, Kamza 2021

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FIG. 6.43 House on pillars, Kamza 2021



FIG. 6.44 Mirror houses spotted from the street, Kamza 2021



FIG. 6.45 Rounded corner element that is mirrored in the other house.

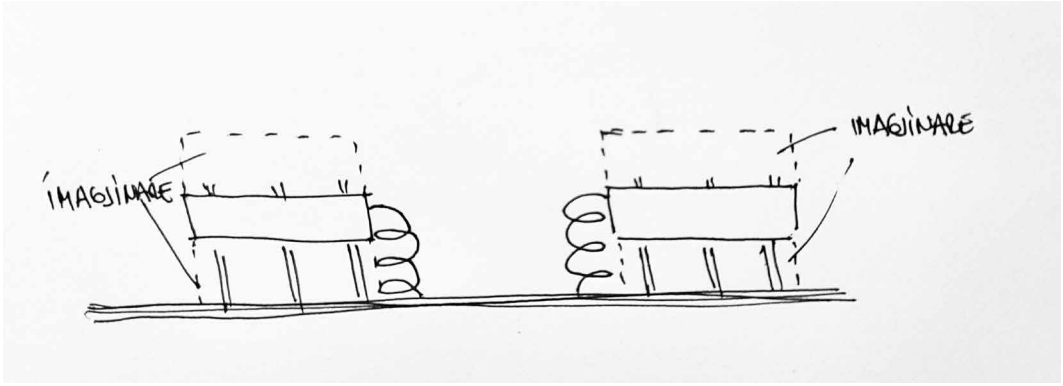


FIG. 6.46 The mirror houses are also pillar houses with real and imaginary elements..

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FIG. 6.47 The spiral staircase, challenging to construct, reflects the builders' ambition to play with concrete and pursue aesthetically expressive architectural features in the two mirror houses.

6.4 Conclusion: Kincommoning as a Spatial Logic from the House to the City

Embedded within the kinship clusters of Kamza, the house is the foundational unit of the city, embodying the essence of *vatra* (the hearth) and serving as the unifying force for families. It transcends mere shelter, evolving into an almost sacred object of worship, with each family member deeply invested in its existence. In the North Albanian tradition, the house, known as *kulla*, transcends the mundane, assuming a supernatural dimension rich with mystical tales of entities such as *ora* (singular) or *orët* (plural), mythical beings believed to influence the fate of household members. This interplay of the real and imaginary infuses the house with profound significance, shaping the cultural and spiritual identity of the Kamza community. It also influenced my way of looking at the houses of Kamza, unraveling the complexities of house architecture, revealing an intricate interweaving of the real and the imaginary, highlighting its commoning dimension. Amidst the co-construction of new livelihoods, the house remains a vital anchor for families, retaining its role as the connective tissue for members who are present and absent, near and far, ancestors and emigrants.

The house becomes the focal point, the scene, "matter", and goal of kincommoning. Construction rituals enacted during its foundation, the symbolism attached to every element of the house, such as the roof for completeness, the pragmatism of standing pillars, and the repetition of the same house among brothers, are expressions of the entanglement of the spiritual, the symbolic, and the tangible. Houses of Kamza, even those that are seemingly complete, continue to be transformed. Missing elements, such as stairs and partitions, coexist with tangible structures in both the real and the imaginary realms. Abandoned houses stand as stubborn testimony of dreams left in the middle, telling tales of migration and aspiration for return.

The diversity of formal expressions, though often labeled as kitsch, represents a collective desire for personalization and decency in architectural language. Hysen's use of arches, influenced by personal challenges and political scrutiny, exemplifies the struggle for freedom of architectural expression after the imposed limitations during state socialism. Kamza stands as a manifestation of this liberated architectural language, which flourishes in a newfound era of possibilities.

The story of Kamza is a story of people coming together to shape their own city in the absence of a functioning state, relying on communal situated knowledge generated in practice and also imported from their places of origin. The history of Kamza is also rooted in the ashes of the past utopian project of constructing communism, from the days of the state-run agricultural enterprise "Ylli i Kuq." The materialization of the city was influenced by signs in the territory, enacting a process of knowledge transculturation of what is brought in and what is found in place, through commoning practices.

Commoning in Kamza takes on various forms, from squatting and repurposing bunkers to the active involvement of women and children in the construction of their homes to the creation of communities of care and education. The residents of Kamza have collectively addressed shared concerns, including infrastructure, water supply, sewage systems, and the legalization of their homes. The streets of Kamza reflect a deliberate interconnectedness, emphasizing the importance that was given to cooperation and negotiation among its inhabitants. However, this does not mean that the process has been harmonious. The migrant inhabitants that co-constructed Kamza had to deal with stigma, tension, and conflicts, which were not always resolved without fatalities in times of anarchy.

Women's involvement in physically demanding tasks such as concrete mixing and house construction defies established gendered norms and definitions. Their maintenance work appearing in everyday life in the form of carpets and laundry hanging on the façades of the houses in Kamza is a material manifestation of their continuous contribution to the household. Resistance to commoning practices of the activists on the unrecognized inheritance rights of women by the customary rules within kin structures speaks of another form of kincommoning that is operational in the terrains of Kamza to challenge patriarchal settings imposed by the genealogical kinship. These are examples that kin-making is a process and not a given that is taken for granted and unchallenged.

This way, besides what can be seen as commoning within a traditional frame, new forms of commoning have recently emerged in Kamza. The work of the activist group ATA, came as a need to collectively understand, accept and improve their city by firstly recognizing the intergenerational efforts of co-creation by establishing a community counter-archive and challenging the mainstream stigma toward Kamza. Through their work, they address center-periphery tensions, patriarchal family structures, traditional forms of power relations and gendered roles, environmental concerns, and the threat of developmentalist projects that would abruptly interfere in the community life and social structures built during these years of co-construction of the city.

7 The Albanian Theater

7.1 Commoning as a Material Engagement of Resistance: The Struggle to Save the Albanian National Theater[434]

This chapter discusses the struggles of commoning as a material engagement in Tirana, the capital of Albania. The rupture from the previous regime shifted the orientation toward individualism, private initiatives, and privatization of public property, which has created a common belief that collective activities died with the communist experiment. I aim to point out that these practices are present and even resistant to the new neoliberal regime that does not recognize them and even attacks them.

In particular, I reflect upon relational agencies generated during the collective resistance to save the National Theater in Tirana, a complex story that is essential in understanding the struggles of collectivity in Albania. The theater became a place of collective resistance to a developmentalist project that threatened the existence of the heritage building and all its material and spatial relations, collective memories, and affiliations. The theater building was demolished in May 2020, amplifying these affective relations, which eventually turned out to be the most vulnerable.

434 Parts of this chapter have been published in an earlier form in Pllumbi, D. (2022). "Commoning as a Material Engagement of Resistance: The Struggle to Save the Albanian National Theater." In G. Bruyns & S. Kousoulas (Eds.), *Design Commons: Practices, Processes and Crossovers* (pp. 19–43). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-95057-6_2

The last decade has seen a new neoliberal state consolidating its hold. Albania is now going through the consolidation of a new regime, a combination of first-stage capitalism in the milieu of consecutive corrupt administrations, with a weak, almost non-existent social welfare system, a growing gap of inequality, and a total lack of entities to represent the interests of the workers and the lower middle class. As a reaction to the pressure of the oligarchic concentration of power and capital and the pairing of the state with this power, the last decade has seen several instances of civil unrest as society has started to wake up from its political apathy. In 2018, the new law for higher education that would favor private universities and the commodification of the public ones triggered massive student protests, which sparked hope in society at large. It gave another status to the protest as a possible instrument that can now be utilized in the public interest.[435] Different forms of activism for the preservation of cultural and environmental heritage under threat have taken place, such as reactions against public-private-partnership management of archeological sites like Butrinti, activism for the economic rights of mine and oil workers, against planned hydroelectric power plants to be built over several wild rivers in Albania, and so on. All these are forms of commoning that are temporal but consistent, commoning with nature and culture, a constitution of human and non-human relations.

In this chapter, I discuss the dynamics that unfolded during the commoning resistance for the theater building in Tirana. The movement for the theater exposes how the notion of collectivity was ideologically contaminated in Albania during five decades of totalitarianism, and how this has provided a favorable ground for neoliberal privatizing policies to be implemented. It is also an emblematic case of the different forms of collective resistance against these policies.

435 Arlind Qori, "From Faculty to Factory," *Jacobin*, 2019, https://jacobinmag.com/2019/02/albania-student-movement-higher-education.

7.2 An Agential Material-Human Formation

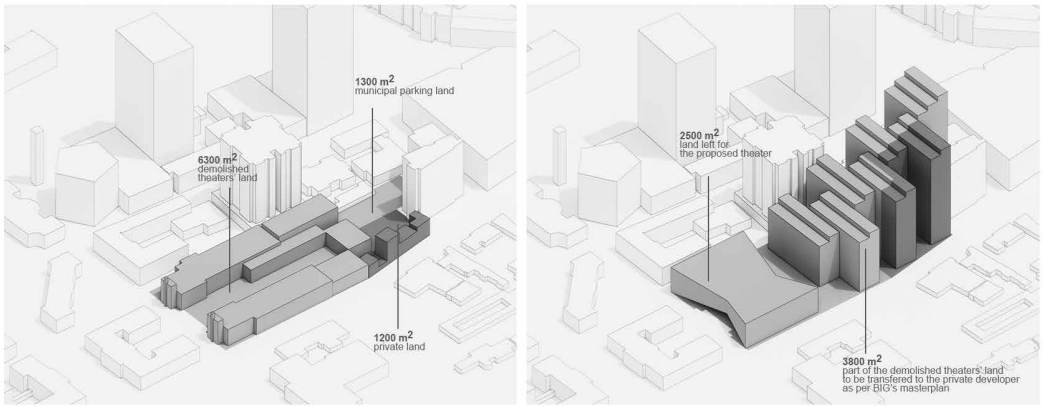


FIG. 7.1 Diagram produced by the author based on masterplan of BIG presented to the Albanian

Replacing the old theater with a brand new one would be part of a Public-Private Partnership where a private developer would invest in a new theater while using two-thirds of the public land to construct their private high-rise buildings. In this case, one-third of the public land would be used for a new theater. The masterplan was designed by the architectural firm BIG, commissioned by the state-private coalition. Bjarke Ingels was in Tirana to present the project and was introduced as the most successful contemporary star-architect in th0e world.[436] When the debate about the theater started to intensify in 2018, a group of artists and citizens started a civil resistance campaign, which unfolded in multiple forms of action. The group was named "Alliance for the Protection of the Theater"; I will refer to it as *Aleanca*. This triggered the creation of a community that started to take care of the building, carrying out all sorts of maintenance and populating it with artistic activities.

436 Commissioning star architects is a strategy used for various projects in Albania. For local critical voices, this is seen as a way to silence the public debate on these projects. For more on the engagement of BIG in the Theater story, see this open response letter published initially as Pllumbi, Dorina. 2020. Er bjarke ingells dybt naiv eller bare luddoven? *Politiken,* August 11.
English version: Pllumbi, Dorina. 2020. Is Bjarke Ingels deeply naive or a liar? Arkitekteza. http://www.arkitekteza.com/SQ/response-to-the-article-of-bjarke-ingels-published-in-politiken/. Accessed October 2020.

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They guarded the building day and night, even during the pandemic, until it was brutally demolished.[437]

The picture I draw here is rooted in subjectivities generated by my own relation to the place. Its material condition, its cultural embodiment, and the ecology of the practice of resistance that has unfolded in all its vulnerability, is emblematic of the character of commoning practices in a saturated reality like that of Albania. My own relationship to the theater building and the resistance to saving it has different levels. The building itself had always had an attractive force. As an undergraduate in Tirana, like every architecture student who sharpens their senses on the material reality that surrounds them, the theater building was one of those artifacts with which I had a special encounter. Later, during my years of teaching at the Faculty of Architecture of the Polytechnic University of Tirana, with students and colleagues, we had a yearly ritual of starting the second semester with a visit to several cultural buildings in Tirana, one of which was the National Theater.[438] We would analyze the functionality of the place, the foyer, the seating area, the stage, the dressing rooms, and so on. No lecture in class could compare to the level of knowledge that the theater building would provide us. It was an open, welcoming and generous book, and a simple and humble one.

When listening to the voices grieving the loss of the theater, the details of these repeated encounters would come back to me with the same intensity. I heard people speaking about the scent of the building. In architecture school we never spoke about it. In the architecture history books, no one speaks about the scent. How did we miss mentioning it? Furthermore, the red velvet of the theater hall, the stage that accommodated the freed word during the resistance, the breeze in the courtyard; how bittersweet these sensations sound verbalized by the people close to the theater! I never thought that I would revisit these sensations in such times of shock when the building would be gone.

As one of many people living far from Albania but who was at the same time present at the theater building during the resistance, never before had I experienced the unique position of being so intensively in a place, although physically far from it. The theater was one of the places where I studied the commons in Tirana, the loudest one compared to the other unnoticed places in the marginal areas of the city.

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437 More on the history and the chronology of the resistance can be found here: Alliance for the Restoration of Cultural Heritage. 2020. Teatri Kombëtar (National Theater). https://www.archinternational.org/2020/08/11/teatri-kombetar-national-theater/?fbclid=IwAR0VTFCgnMTk-5zQZViUvGhPexLE-kZ_2nySqdYGlWKPiiXR27TL1FuIcEo Accessed October 2020.

438 Pllumbi, Dorina. 2020. Po tani, çfarë t'u themi studenteve? https://peizazhe.com/2020/05/16/po-tani-cfare-tu-themi-studenteve/ Accessed October 2020.



FIG. 7.2 After a clash with the police, Aleanca manages to occupy the Theater on July 24, 2019. The buildings starts to be guarded around the clock by the activists for 10 months until its demolition. Source: Gert Izeti

Before the COVID-19 outbreak, I conducted visits and conversations with many of the citizens involved in the resistance. The intensive round-the-clock resistance was broadcast daily on social media, mainly Facebook, reaching out to every citizen, near and far, to those that could not join, and especially to those that did not have the courage to show up.[439] Every single event was important, every single decision was communicated. My architecture colleagues, including my former classmates, were doing activism in full force. Some local architects were raising their voices against the demolition of the building. Finally, there was an opportunity to understand what acting collectively means in post-socialist Albania, and whether it still makes sense to talk about collective acting.

439 Political parties in Albania have adopted an opportunistic approach to recruit membership by providing jobs to the party members in exchange for their blind adherence to the party line. This is a tactic used by all the political parties, and widespread in all fields, thus corrupting the freedom of political engagement of the citizens. Professional and even academic jobs, including those from the architectural field, are not immune to this phenomenon.



FIG. 7.3 Handwritten sign "Cultural Monument, Safeguarded by the People" that later was transformed into a big banner. Picture of the main entrance of the Theater. Source: author, site visit on October 31, 2019

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The discourse went beyond that of a building. We were speaking about a collective formation of matter and human bodies. This formation was not only material; it was not only human. Never before has Tirana seen human bodies attached so affectionately to an edifice. It was so hard to detach these human beings from the building that thousands of armed police bodies were required to do the job. The authorities seized the opportunity created by the global pandemic and struck in the early hours of the morning, thus avoiding the crowds.[440] It was difficult to distinguish where boundaries of the material ended and where human flesh began. What kind of *conatus* is this that pushes human bodies to cling to the roof when looking at bulldozers approaching and armed troops forcibly bringing out other bodies from the building?[441] It was something strongly relational, an affectionate entanglement with some rare agency.

The material-human formation was generated by a mutual love between artists and theater that had existed for decades. When endangered, this relation provoked the immediate attachment of more bodies in solidarity, caring and loving bodies, intelligent bodies, human and more-than-human bodies (in association with technological equipment). We witnessed more than two years of resistance in the name of love, in the name of care, of freedom, of emancipation, of feeling alive. We met the spirits of our ancestors and the voices of our future grandchildren. We felt pieces torn from our souls when the theater was ripped apart.[442]

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440 Van Gerven Oei, Vincent W.J. 2020. Comment: The Rotten Birth of a Covid Dictatorship. https://exit.al/en/2020/05/17/the-rotten-birth-of-a-covid-dictatorship/ Accessed October 2020.
Di Liscia, Valentina. 2020. Open Letter Condemns the "Artwashing" of Albanian Prime Minister's Politics. https://hyperallergic.com/565114/open-letter-condemns-artwashing-albania/ Accessed October 2020.

441 In his prominent book *Ethics*, Spinoza refers to *conatus* as the driving force that is present within humans and things. It is this conatus that makes them act within their capacities and desires.
The demolition started while there were people inside and on the rooftop of the building. Activists were forcibly brought out by armed troops without identification numbers, something confirmed by the Minister of the Interior Affairs. At 02:55 in the video cited below, actors Juliana Emiri and Neritan Liçaj shout from the roof that this is an installation of a dictatorship.
Komani L., Musai D. 2020. WHAT HAPPENED ON THE 17TH OF MAY IN TIRANA? AN OUTCRY FOR HELP [video on Internet]. Radar Ost Digital (June 19-21): Deutsches Theater Berlin; [cited 2020 October 12]. Available from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fzpSmo0hyeA&feature=emb_title&fbclid=IwAR0R15jz1oZXpTvFQ2QzqdjqohjnHigImnOqk7YVHmbwscKtgnuO3bOoB1Q

442 Mehdi Malkaj, well-known actor: "The theater was not demolished, it was ripped apart!"
Report TV. 2020. I përlotur aktori Mehdi Malkaj: Populli është në gjumë, hienat e shembën Teatrin [cited 2020 October 12]. Available from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PNjzK0SXEdk



FIG. 7.4 Banner installed at the entrance of the courtyard stating, "Cultural Monument, Safeguarded by People." Source: author, site visit on November 16, 2019



FIG. 7.5 Bird's-eye view picture taken during the early hours of May 17, 2020. The demolition started at 4:30. Picture taken by drone. Source: Behaudin Dobi

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The debate on the fate of the building was characterized by all kinds of fluctuations. The politicians in power tried to denigrate it, to annihilate it. They tried to identify it as one thing, but they knew it was more than one.[443] The collective material-human formation kept on reconfiguring itself. "*Unë jam Teatri*" – "I am the theater" – was the motto of the initial campaign that attracted numerous citizens to identify themselves with the theater, with its struggle and its power; a resistance that transversally made room for the individual and the collective. Political parties, agents, and other organizations infiltrated to use the moment for their own political interests.[444] Despite persistent attempts to annex it, the marvelous entanglement remained *a multi*, fairly autonomous, without converging into *a one*.[445] It demonstrated a rising belief in the power of self-organization, while becoming an emblem of the struggles that organizing has in society as such. This made this material-human formation a multitude, with its strengths and weaknesses. Without a strong and confined identity, as politically queer as it can be, it became a place of multiple affiliations: born as fascist, appropriated by the communists, a temporary colonial elitist entity, claimed and taken over by the people, the first house of Albanology, the womb of Albanian art, a theater of the people, an open door for all coming from the street, a place of retreat, used and abused, loved and despised. A cultural monument, safeguarded by the people.[446] That explains how horrified the politicians in power were by its agency. That explains the urgency they had to kill it, to finish with its ever-growing power as soon as possible, in such a cowardly manner.[447] At the end, all we are left with is the Spinozist fascination of what a (collective) body (bodily formation) can do.

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443 Attempting to identify the protest as pertaining to the opposition party had the goal of reducing the discourse into a polarized discussion of position-opposition. The opposition parties did support the resistance, and they occupied extensive space with their own rhetoric, but the resistance still remained plural, multiple, a compound of a varied political spectrum.

444 Romeo Kodra, Albanian artist, expresses in his blog the frustration of participating in these protests, like the one for the theater, because of the penetration of these forces that try to absorb the movement, imposing their own political agenda, attempting to give it a single-identity profile, therefore limiting the potential of these emancipatory moments to contribute to the democratization of the society. See Kodra, Romeo. 2020. The curtain of the Albanian National Theater came down. 'Starving, skinny ribs wolves' are coming. Aksrevista. https://aksrevista.wordpress.com/2020/05/24/the-curtain-of-the-albanian-national-theater-came-down-starving-skinny-ribs-wolves-are-coming-romeo-kodra/. Accessed October 2020.

445 Hardt and Negri, *Multitude. War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*.

446 The theater was built by an Albanian government affiliated with the Italian government in 1938–39, right before the occupation of Albania by the Italian fascist state. After the Second World War, at the very start of the installation of a new Albanian Republic of the People (that later turned out to be a State-Socialist Regime), while still in the spirit of the Anti-Fascist War, there was an appropriation of the theater by amateur theater groups of Çeta (Guerrilla Albanian partisan groups), to then establish the Theater of the People. Later, in 1991, the institution was named the National Theater.

447 The theater building had a light structure of a combination of concrete columns, prefabricated wood roof, and an infill with composite material. If they really had to, it could have been technically possible to dismantle the structure, thereby showing some respect for its history. The act of bulldozing was a clear act of brutality against the building and what it stands for.



FIG. 7.6 Picture taken during the early hours of May 17, 2020, taken by drone, showing citizens gathered in protest against the demolition. Several were beaten and arrested. Source: Behaudin Dobi

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7.3 Survival Struggles of a Commoning Practice

In the process of learning with those involved in resistance commoning, I have been speaking and sharing thoughts constantly with my colleagues involved in the process, but also with others who were part of the resistance group. With that, this contribution to the discourse remains a partial perspective that does not claim to tell absolute truths.[448] Both Doriana Musai, architect and urban designer, and Kreshnik Merxhani, architect and heritage specialist, have been actively involved in the process of resistance. The adrenaline of activism has been a significant component that has affected our connections and actions. In October–November 2019 I visited the theater intensively for several days. It was a time when a Festival for Saving the Theater had already started. An open microphone was active every evening from the start of the resistance. The urban configuration of the theater site played a role in the spontaneous positioning of the microphone, which had started as a moving one. The U-shaped building had a central courtyard where the microphone was located. The microclimate of the courtyard was very favorable for the gatherings, with the presence of pine trees and a pool; it was a pleasant place to be in summer. While it was open to another square and pedestrian area, at the same time, it had a kind of intimacy. Keeping the microphone in working order was a struggle in a situation when the electricity had been cut off. It was the initiative of an individual to voluntarily bring all the audio equipment and two power generators, and to maintain them, ensuring that the microphone was on every single evening during the entire period, rain or shine.[449] The microphone became "the thermometer of the day, the real voice of the protest in Albania, beyond what is shown in the media, which is all filtered," says Ervin Goci, an activist and lecturer at the Department of Journalism and Communications at the University of Tirana.[450] This microphone became the place of convergence for all the protests, from students to inhabitants of a displaced community (in the *Unaza e re* neighborhood, known as *Astiri*), to personal individual indignations. Many had found psychological support at this microphone. It became a form of collective therapy and mobilization.

448 I have entered into conversation with some of the key figures of the group, such as the artists Neritan Liçaj, Edmond Budina, Juliana Emiri, and more. They always stressed that there is no leading group, but that this is a horizontal organization. Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective."

449 Doriana Musai in conversation with the author and Ervin Goci, November 8, 2019, at the Theater site in Tirana.

450 Ervin Goci in conversation with the author and Doriana Musai, November 8, 2019 at the Theater site in Tirana.



FIG. 7.7 The intimacy of the courtyard. Source: author; site visit on November 17, 2019



FIG. 7.8 Gathering around the microphone continued every evening throughout the 27 months of the resistance. Source: author, site visit on October 31, 2019

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FIG. 7.9 Side entrance of the theater, a niche where the activists were stationed. Source: author, site visit on November 17, 2019.

Aleanca included intellectuals and professionals from various fields, who worked across dimensions, with roles not fixed within their professional boundaries. There were several clusters to be recognized within the group, specialized in law, journalism, architecture and engineering, sociology, and so on. Independent researchers outside of *Aleanca*, like historians, were also involved in shaping the public debate. The front line of artists conducted the resistance through art performances, exhibitions, and speeches. This kind of convergence from different fields is something quite exemplary for the Albanian reality. And then, there were the citizens, the most prominent group being a number of retirees, who took care of the building and the activists, showing their love and resistance through cleaning and cooking. Edmond Budina, a well-known artist, speaks passionately about how physical work, cleaning, and maintenance created a moment of connection for him and the group, allowing them to perceive the place as their own and feel a sense of belonging.[451]

451 Edmond Budina in conversation with the author, November 16, 2019 at the Theater site, Tirana.



FIG. 7.10 Many performances were organized for the Festival for Saving the Theater, like plays, monologies, exhibitions, and so on. Pictured on stage is Grupi ATA from Kamza performing "The Bald Soprano" in the National Theater. Photo credit: Aurora Leka

The clusters of volunteers shared ways of working, creating a common situated knowledge that grew in the everyday practice of the resistance. Doriana Musai, for example, explains how the involvement within the community gave her the opportunity to experiment in other mediums beyond her field of expertise. She was able to explore new tools and roles, not only as an architect, but also became one of the curators of the Festival for Saving the Theater, taking care of several aspects of the artistic performances, visual exhibitions, and so on. In collaboration with a geodetic engineer, she conducted a laser scan of the building that provided a highly detailed virtual model of its physicality. Doriana has been one of the most active agents who has spoken about the material conditions of the building through photography. "The more I stay with the building, the more I discover parts of it that have particularities worth capturing," she stated.[452] She was inside the building at the moment of the attack and broadcast it live on social media, which enabled a stark transmission of the moment of shock to the wider public, which otherwise would not have been aware of the brutal level of intervention of the police forces.

452 Doriana Musai in conversation with the author and Ervin Goci, November 8, 2019, at the Theater site, Tirana.

The architect and heritage specialist Kreshnik Merxhani shares how a group of architects and architecture students were involved in the process. He is an activist-architect who constantly fights for heritage causes in Albania. At the theater, he explains how, at the very beginning, they conducted a detailed survey of the building. He compared the impact of two survey techniques – laser scan and hand drawing – on their connection with the material conditions of the building. For him, the hand-drawn survey was a thrilling experience and a very special encounter with the building. It played a role in the resistance engagement:

"We needed to get in touch with the building. When some officials show up and want to destroy it, you can ask them: 'Have you ever been inside? Because I have. Have you been on the roof? Have you seen the authentic trusses?' You have to go up there to feel the magic of the space under the roof, just like in Gjirokaster. It is a magical feeling in itself. It is only a thin wooden skin that divides you from the world, but it has created a whole other world inside. The way the light comes in, that cut on the roof, the wood, the sound of your steps, the smell. That's architecture. That's how you experience architecture." [453]

Kreshnik recognizes that it is this atmosphere that one senses, that makes us the greatest defender of the theater, doing our utmost to save it. "How can they remove these feelings from you? How can you allow them to erase from you the sensations that this building provokes? Not another building, but this one."[454]

The detailed laser scan of the building gave the community a reassurance that even if the worst were to happen and the building would be gone; they would at least have its virtual model. After the demolition, renderings coming out of this scan would become visual material for the group to articulate the demand for justice, asking that the building be rebuilt *as it was, where it was*.

453 Kreshnik Merxhani in conversation with the author, November 12,2019, at the Theater site. Gjirokaster is a city in the south of Albania, and its old town is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The architect has the experience of working for several years with projects for the preservation of its monuments, an affective experience of care for the past, present, and the future. He describes this as the most influential experience of his life, which has brewed in him the love for authentic architecture and the inner will to fight for it when in danger.
454 Ibid.

The architects saw an opportunity to apply for the Europa Nostra yearly program "7 Most Endangered" heritage sites, an application proved successful as the building was selected as a European heritage site at risk.[455] Kreshnik shares how the process of finding financial opportunities for the project, other than waiting for what politics decides, has demonstrated that alternative ways are possible, meaning that architects can see the profession as a mission instead of just a service to a client and politicians in power. Recently, in Albania, architects have been heavily criticized as being tools in the hands of politics and capital. Different ways of engagement in public causes would help restore belief in the profession.

Understandably, the debate for the theater has triggered an ethical discourse regarding the role of the architect in society. Many architects have been vocal in their support for the building and the resistance community, while some others in administrative and political positions enabled the demolition through their signatures. Some well-known architects who initially were against the demolition have experienced pressure from political powers. The Albanian Association of Architects issued a declaration against the demolition of the theater at the beginning of the discussion and, more likely, was pressured to keep silent afterwards. This shows how vulnerable the position of the architect is in these situations, how limited and manipulated their professional freedom is in the face of oppressive economic and political interests. The power struggle that can be recognized is not only in terms of material violence to the city but also of the possibilities of professional engagement with minor voices, other than those in power.

455 EuropaNostra. 2020. National Theater of Albanian, Tirana, Albania. Seven most endangered. http://7mostendangered.eu/sites/national-theater-of-albania-tirana-albania/. Accessed October 2020. Several other organizations for heritage showed their support for the saving of the building. SIRA and Do.Co.Mo.Mo. had also appealed to save the building.
DoCoMoMo. 2018. National Theater of Albania. https://www.docomomo.com/2018/04/06/national-theater-of-albania/. Accessed October 2020.
DoCoMoMo. 2020. National Theater of Albania.https://www.docomomo.com/2020/05/22/national-theater-of-albania-demolished/. Accessed October 2020.

The erasure of the theater, apart from protests, triggered both domestic and international reactions that occupied television broadcasts, and written and social media. The prime minister attempted to soothe the shock effect caused by the brutal act of demolition. That morning, while the demolition was in progress, he published on his Facebook page renderings of the theater designed by BIG and declared in parliament that the demolition was not a big deal as they may replicate the historical building at some other site in the city, as a museum for children. He even used a purist language of rebuilding it as per its initial design by the architect Giulio Berte, eliminating the changes made to it over time.[456] On the other side, the community that resisted the demolition for 27 months articulated the demand to *rebuild the theater where it was and how it was.* The public debate on the future of the site is currently reduced to this binary discussion of two camps, those demanding the rebuilding of the theater, and those in power pushing the initial commercial plan that enabled its demolition and the public land grab by private developers.[457] Unfortunately, the theater building has become a political trophy, a victim of a transitional moment in a society that aspires to democratize itself but struggles to achieve this in its integrity. At this point, the demolished theater demands justice and dignity, just like those bodies that were affectionately attached to it.

456 Exit.al. https://exit.al/en/2020/05/21/prime-minister-says-government-will-rebuild-albanias-national-theater-for-kids-to-visit/. Accessed October 2020.

457 The media, which is also a reflection of the political power influences, makes its contribution to reducing the discourse in these two binaries and the association of them with the two major political formations, position VS opposition.

7.4 Politically and Emotionally Loaded Matter

In 1938–39, when Albania had a close connection to Italy – which later transformed to the occupation of Albania by the fascist Italian state – prefabricated pieces of this building were transported from Italy to be mounted in Tirana, as if they were installing pieces of Italian colonialism, planting modernism, giving a Western face to an Ottoman Tirana of the time. A building of this kind served a new Albanian elite and the Italian invaders. And yet, the less mentioned feature of the history of the theater was that of the re-appropriation by "the people" during the very first years after the Second World War, as Romeo Kodra puts it, beautifully "evidencing its fundamental value, … the power of the poorest to convert a symbolic building of colonization in a symbolic building of culture."[458] The historical building was the material witness of important moments in Albanian history. A dark one, but important to be witnessed, is the 1945 occurrence of special trials that condemned to death important figures who were against the installation of the totalitarian regime of the dictator Enver Hoxha.[459]

The actor Edmond Budina, when asked why he is such a passionate defender of the theater, explained how this theater is a place that has the potential to emancipate the society, to be a model of autonomy and direct democracy, to become the theater that people feel is theirs, that cultivates a sense of common ownership. He explains how, during the resistance, they encouraged those activist-amateurs who wanted to achieve their life's dream of performing in front of a public, to experiment with acting on the stage themselves. The theater became their place of becoming and entanglement with others and the building.[460]

Beyond the physicality of the building, its aesthetics, and its form, there is an array of historical practices, techniques, research, debates, exchanges, transportations, labor, and power relations that are embedded in its materiality and physical presence.[461]

458 Kodra, Romeo. 2020. The curtain of the Albanian National Theater came down. 'Starving, skinny ribs wolves' are coming.
Aksrevista. https://aksrevista.wordpress.com/2020/05/24/the-curtain-of-the-albanian-national-theater-came-down-starving-skinny-ribs-wolves-are-coming-romeo-kodra/. Accessed October 2020.
459 Some of the activists in the movement were the heirs of these victims and expressed their connection to the building and the need to preserve it as a family and ancestral call to keep the memory of the atrocities of the state socialist regime.
460 Edmond Budina in conversation with the author, November 16, 2019, at the Theater site.
461 Katie Lloyd Thomas, ed., *Material Matters: Architecture and Material Practice* (Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2007).

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The recognition of these social and material practices that have made the building come to life, to then be appropriated and transformed, is substantial to avoid its fetishization. Matter is loaded with memory and, at the same time, contains knowledge embodied in it. Crucial to the discourse is the need to read the stories that matter has to tell, and to craft a new material language.

The Italian presence in giving a modern Western face to Tirana has been extensively discussed.[462] The monumental buildings were adopted during the post-war socialist regime, although they represented the opposite ideology. Both regimes, fascist and state-socialist, had monumentality and self-sufficiency as their central concern.[463] The theater building came to life in the times of Italian autarky, when there was a heated debate and experimentation on the techniques and materials to be used to glorify the image of the Italian Fascist era and, at the same time, to satisfy the ambition for self-sufficiency.[464] The theater is one of a series of buildings erected during the same period in Tirana, while it simultaneously was different from its coevals because of its lack of monumentality and because of its experimental construction technique. The struggle to find construction techniques that would respond to these ambitions is also a common characteristic. *Populit*, an ecological and acoustic material which was used as the infill of the structural frame of the theater building, seems to have been an attraction even for the socialist technicians who were trying to adopt low-cost, high-quality techniques as part of their attempt to master fabrication and standardization:

> [Populit] was a high-resistance composite made of wood shavings bound with cement, which could be pressed to obtain relatively lightweight slabs providing durability and insulation. Populit seems to have arrived in Albania from the Italians before the Second World War, though the details are obscure. Some accounts mention the involvement of an Italian engineer by the name of Dario Pater, known to Mussolini's wife, and a fixture at Villa Torlonia, Il Duce's residence. The Fascist regime reveled in material innovations that showed Italian ingenuity and self-reliance, so populit fit into an obsession with giving autarky material form.[465]

462 Simone Gismondi, ed., *Architetti e Ingegneri Italiani in Albania* (Edifir Edizioni Firenze s.r.l., 2012).
463 Mëhilli, *From Stalin to Mao.*
464 Pep Avilés, "Autarky and Material Contingencies in Italian Architectural Debate (1936-1954)," *Footprint*, no. 4 (2009): 21–34, https://doi.org/10.7480/footprint.3.1.697; Anna Bruna Menghini, "Experimental Building Techniques in the 1930's : The 'Pater' System in the Ex-Circolo Skanderbeg of Tirana," *2nd International Balkans Conference on Challenges of Civil Engineering, BCCCE, 23-25 May 2013* (Tirana), 2013.
465 Elidor Mëhilli, *From Stalin to Mao: Albania and the Socialist World* (Cornell University, 2017), 179,



FIG. 7.11 The mayor of Tirana, Erion Veliaj, appeared in several television studios holding the material populit in his hands, alleging that it was tallash (sawdust). Here he is on the TV show Opinion from May 18, 2020, on the national television station RTV Klan. (Source: YouTube https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y297-McaHHU&t=2077s)

Interestingly enough, as pointed out by Merxhani, *celenit*, a new contemporary patented ecological material, with similar composition, is used nowadays in the newly renovated Opera and Ballet Theater in Tirana, which is promoted as one of the successful projects of the current administration.[466] Here it is possible to distinguish the double standard of the language, when principally the same material is denigrated in the case of the theater building, and praised in the case of a project brought about by the administration itself. The forefront of the rhetoric to devalue the theater building was extensively sustained by the allegedly degraded material condition, a result of the decay intentionally left to happen due to the lack of maintenance.

466 Merxhani, Kreshnik. 2019. "Kjo është serioze", arkitekti Merxhani: Me pupulit po restaurohet dhe Opera, është i mirë a helmues? Dosja.al. https://dosja.al/kjo-eshte-serioze-arkitekti-merxhani-me-pupulit-po-restaurohet-dhe-opera-eshte-i-mire-a-helmues/. Accessed October 2020.

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Populit was constantly denigrated, being labelled as *tallash* (sawdust), implying that it was weak, had no good load bearing properties, and posed a risk to the health of users, because of the presence of mold and probably asbestos.[467] The presence of asbestos was never proven by any technical report, although the illness of some actors was speculatively blamed on the material. Even if asbestos were found, we know that it is not a reason to demolish a building when its removal is a commonly known practice. The intentionally offensive language used toward the material was associated with a derogatory depiction of the defenders of the building as being emotional, non-rational artists who romanticize everything old. They were accused of stopping progress and hating everything new. The more the building and its matter were attacked with this populist language, the more capacious the agency of the material-human formation became throughout its resistance.

The building was declared without any value, a *karakatine* (a hovel). The public was warned that this *karakatine* was in such poor condition that it would fall in on itself. Ironically, the light structure of the theater performed perfectly well during the devastating earthquake of November 2019, showing no damage whatsoever. During this event, the building demonstrated that it was light but not weak. The material-human formation acted as a place of mutual humanitarian aid for those in need during the aftermath of the earthquake, when donations from far and near were collected there. This was another indicator that the official institutions had lost the trust of the people and that the theater had become an alternative institution of hope.[468]

The violence toward the theater building is the demonstration of a material culture of a so-called progress, translated in an overwriting by concrete on top of light and ecological materials like *populit* and wood. The theater building is situated in a kind of material unrest in Tirana, when other Old Town areas struggle to survive.[469]

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467 Several politicians despised the material in videos or reactions on Facebook. Deputy mayor of Tirana, Arbjan Mazniku, appeared propagating the bad properties of the material, holding and refracting it when speaking, min 1:00. The video appeared on the Facebook page of the Prime Minister. https://www.facebook.com/edirama.al/videos/985013495163240 Accessed October 2020.
The day after the demolition, the Mayor of Tirana, Erion Veliaj, continued to carry the material Populit in an interview on the popular TV show *Opinion*: RTV Klan. 2020. Opinion - Erion Veliaj: Shembja e teatrit! (18 maj 2020). [cited 2020 October 12]. Available from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y297-McaHHU&t=2077s.

468 Taylor, Alice. 2019. The Heroes of the Albanian Earthquake Are Civil Society. Exit.al. https://exit.al/en/2019/12/02/the-heroes-of-the-albanian-earthquake-are-civil-society/. Accessed October 2020.

469 An open-source database initiated by Jora Kasapi to collect images of objects in dangerous or already demolished areas.
Preserving Tirana. https://preservingtirana.city/. Accessed October 2020.

It is a reflection of the systemic violence of the strong, the heavy, the stubborn, the major toward the minor, the oppressed, the fragile, the ecological, the relational, the collective. Just like Albanian society has gone through an accelerated division of classes, these material struggles reflect the inequalities associated with it.



FIG. 7.12 Picture taken by drone during the early morning hours of May 17, 2020. Source: Edmond Dingu

7.5 Conclusion

As described in this chapter, we witness another form of attack on the initiative to engage collectively, and on the possibility of material-human activism having a say in the formation of the city. Authoritarian, politically oppressive powers continue to suffocate, control, and manipulate the collective.

Several commoning practices unfolded during the long two-year lifespan of the resistance for the saving of the theater. The recurring nightly ritual of gathering around an open microphone located in the courtyard of the theater created a place of collective therapy, a place to cherish free speech. The "*Unë Jam Teatri*" – I Am The Theater – campaign triggered the bodily relation of a multitude of citizens who would identify with the building and its matter, meaning on attack to the theater would be an attack on their own selves. The trend of spreading a self-portrait picture with the tag "*Unë Jam Teatri*" spread beyond the activists located on the actual site; many from the diaspora and foreign supporters joined the campaign as well. The Festival for the Saving of the Theater turned the place back into an artistic venue, attracting more supporters and demonstrating that the building was perfectly functional and had plenty of life. An entire process of cleaning and spatial organization took place before the Festival, and the maintenance of the building continued daily, consolidating the bond of the group with the building and amongst each other. The theater became a place equal to home for the group, as they had to safeguard it around the clock. Care and solidarity for the building were paired with the collective and spontaneous humanitarian aid for the victims of the devastating earthquake of November 2019; a time when unexpected donations of all forms were collected on the theater site, demonstrating increased trust in the theater group from a broader public. This is when the theater collective gained a new dimension, that of an autonomous alternative to the official institution. Young architects and engineers did a continuous visual documentation of the building and its material conditions through hand survey, laser scanning and photography. These were relational commoning practices of entering into dialogue with the building, of knowing it more closely, of giving it a visual component beyond the debunking narrative used against it by the politicians in power. The recognition of the theater as a heritage site in danger by Europa Nostra and the successful finding of alternative sources of financial support for its preservation was a major lesson in securing some autonomy from top-down decisions. Overall, although the theater buildings are not there anymore, these practices have created a common situated knowledge, which is present and active in playing a crucial role in the ongoing process of the Albanian society to regain belief in collectivity.

Although in a hostile environment, the commoning practice for the saving of the National Theater building, the longest resistance of this kind in Albania, has nourished values of self-organization, of the courage to engage collectively, of care and mutual aid of matter and humans, challenging corrupted institutions and power relations. This resistance took the form of a material-human formation that played an educational role in producing a situated knowledge located in the daily practice of commoning, while generously keeping the process open and horizontal, without hierarchy, without reducing it to one political identity. The process has triggered ethical questions regarding the role of the state, the individual, the collective, the intellectual, the professional and the citizen in society in general and city transformation in particular. It has exposed the role of foreign star architects who ignore and even facilitate through their design the attack on these self-organized material-human ecologies. It has provoked questions on the role of the local architect, institutional functionaries, academics, and students in the field of architecture. It triggered an ethical awareness of the practice of architecture and its social, political, and cultural implications. Architectural professionals and researchers engaged in the process have been a substantial part of it, setting an example of other ways of doing architecture with others, as activists of engaging with matter and the community close to it.

Matter has carried both a political and emotional load, becoming the main agent in the process. It has been the anchor of this material-human formation of resistance. Its loss has been highly affective and has not been accepted by one part of the community, for whom the idea of reconstruction still keeps the resistance alive, although dispersed and even divided. The pre-electoral atmosphere divided the multitude into several pieces, although its agency is still present in the political and professional discourses. There is an ongoing questioning of what happened, but most importantly, a reflection of the immediate need to craft other narratives, different from the problematic language that normalizes a material culture of demolition, reconstruction, violence to the material conditions of the city, which has dominated the accelerated transition of Tirana toward a cruel so-called progress that does not spear even the collective will to actively participate in city decision-making.

PART 4

Conclusion: Collectivities as Contested Terrains

8 Reflecting on a Research Journey of Lost-and-Founds

This research journey began by interrogating the dominant view in the Albanian local reality, which maintains that collectivity vanished with the fall of state socialism in 1991. This interrogation began with my personal wonderings, which significantly influenced the trajectory of this PhD study. Growing up during the country's deep transformations during the shifting of regimes from authoritarian state socialism to neoliberalism, I was exposed extensively to the widespread belief that collective life had been forcibly imposed under communism and permanently and irreparably dissolved in its aftermath, with the shift toward an individualistic lifestyle. While my entry point for this research was the field of architecture, it emerged amid an interdisciplinary academic enthusiasm for the notion of the commons. This interest in the commons had extended into the field of architecture, and also had roots dating back to discussions of users' perspectives and participation in architecture. I initially sought to study urban commons, similar to those celebrated in Europe. I approached the collective assumed void in Albania as an issue of reconstruction and reparation. My belief that collectivity in Albania was significantly damaged, along with my predominantly constructivist education in architecture, made pursuing ways to construct collective life through architectural means a compelling path for this research. Furthermore, this condition resonated with the critique of late capitalism, commodification, and gentrification in large Western cities, which guided several countercultural movements that claimed abandoned areas in these cities. This discourse raised awareness of access to resources and placed hope in the revival of the notion of the commons as a means of overcoming capitalism and of relearning how to live collectively. Examples of these initiatives included community urban gardens, time banking, and the reuse and squatting of abandoned spaces and buildings in European cities. These examples were and still are fascinatingly inspiring in helping expand the horizon of possibilities, imagining a future without the obligation of capitalistic growth, one that is fruitful for our communities and the planetary future. I found this a great discourse to find attunement with the Albanian reality, with this call to revive the notion of the collective.

Therefore, from an architectural perspective, I started this study with the aim of filling what was predominantly understood as the void of collectivity in the Albanian reality by experimenting with commoning practices to construct the collective from scratch, assuming it was missing.

My initial engagement with the theory of the commons, especially the works of feminist and autonomist thinkers, gave me the confidence to unlearn internalized assumptions and to reframe collectivities not as extinct in Albanian society, but as politically captured or hindered. A first turning point emerged when I became aware of how commoning practices might still persist in forms shadowed by dominant discourses of neoliberal capitalism, progressivism, and individualism. I came to realize that overlapping experiments aimed at constructing collectivity from scratch could be problematic, as they risked further overshadowing the practices already present on the ground, which the prevailing rhetoric on collectivity in Albania had rendered invisible.

The emergence of the Movement to Protect the National Theater in February 2018, one year after this PhD research had started, was an eye-opening moment for me, as well as for many others interested in the discourse on the public realm and collectivities in Albania. The collective resistance to the demolition of the National Theater revealed a sensitive collective nerve in Albanian society, emerging from below and composed of a wide range of actors, in the form of a multitude, in Hardt and Negri's terms.[470] This movement made visible the complex entanglements of citizens, institutions, intellectuals, and professionals within a refound Albanian collectivity articulating a meaningful reading of the history of the Theater's building along with what its preservation could mean for future generations. The movement, however, became a sort of Albanian theater of collectivities, where the historical building and its surroundings served as the contextual stage for the construction and deconstruction of the multitude. It also revealed the state's alignment with private interests and the involvement of star-architects' commercial companies—in this case BIG—in the Albanian local politics of urban transformation, as a regime of oppressive aesthetic imposition.[471]

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470 This collective movement, which I have extensively discussed in Chapter 7, was not the first and only one that emerged in a society that is often internally defined as apathetic and not politically active. Other earlier environmental protests - like a massive one in 2016 against the importation of hazardous chemical waste in Albania, as well as many other smaller protests against environmental extractivism and degradation of developmentalist projects - were a sign of the sensitivity and democratic engagement of the Albanian society in political decision-making of the country. Furthermore, a few months after the start of the movement for the Theater, in December 2018, Albanian students massively occupied the streets against a new law of higher education that clearly favored the private sector at the expense of public education.

471 Pllumbi, "Is Tirana's Rapid Transformation Progress or Erasure?"

This critical moment ultimately led me to abandon efforts to conduct an all-fronts neutral approach to research that aims to pay attention and engage in conversation with all the actors involved, including institutionally dominant voices in power that already occupy and control all the platforms. Their political stance was already clear. The theater's demolition exposed the hegemonic state-oligarchic alliance. It clarified where I needed to direct my attention: I decided to focus on the marginalized commoning practices rather than the dominant narratives that portray Tirana's current projects as the shining stars of progress the country had long expected to see. Instead, I positioned myself alongside the othered and marginalized voices. This position allowed me to understand and connect with the Albanian collective dimension, which is still alive, struggling to find its purpose and gain ground amid the hostile attitudes of the newly formulated and recycled political and economic elite. The demolition of the Theater, along with the opportunistic use of the pandemic and the November 2019 earthquake, was a turning point in the urban politics in Tirana and Albania.[472] Although operating for a long time discursively and materially, the new bulldozer regime had finally been consolidated, demolishing not only buildings, but also the belief in the possibility of a non-hostile state, which would demonstrate its aggression even more toward the weak and more marginalized fragments of the populations.[473] This was a form of de-commoning—an "against the commons" operation—carried out by the neoliberal state, occurring openly while I was conducting this study.

472 In November 2019, Albania was struck by a devastating earthquake, followed shortly by the global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. This sequence of overlapping crises was instrumentalized by the government to justify a wave of urban interventions. While in some cases demolition and reconstruction were necessary due to severe damage by the earthquake, in others the crisis served as a pretext for demolishing existing housing stock and opening space for speculative development. With the consolidation in power of the administration of Prime Minister Edi Rama, and the brutal demolition of the Theater during the last night of the pandemic curfew - at 4:30 am when the activists were still inside the building - the political sphere slipped toward authoritarianism, shrinking the public engagement and the hope for a democratic governance. The government's "bulldozer politics" became the dominant mode of interventions in Tirana, with neighborhoods like Kombinat, 5 Maji, and others subject to top-down redevelopment. In Kombinat, a new masterplan designed by the Italian architecture firm Archea Associati was swiftly approved through expedited online meetings, circumventing any meaningful public consultation or participation by residents. A similar process unfolded in the "5 Maji" neighborhood, where a redevelopment plan by Stefano Boeri's firm led to widespread displacement. Many families lost their homes and were offered only temporary rental assistance by the municipality, with no long-term housing solutions in place. These urban transformations have deepened social precarity and have been widely linked to a renewed wave of youth emigration abroad. See Pllumbi, "Is Tirana's Rapid Transformation Progress or Erasure?"; Millona and Pllumbi, "Mes Fadromës Dhe Bienales: Kultura Arkitekturore e Formacioneve Grabitqare."

473 Pllumbi, "Is Tirana's rapid transformation progress or erasure?"

I realized that there was no meaning in the idea of "constructing the commons" anew with the help of architectural expertise, at least not without reevaluating what this expertise means in the Albanian reality. Reading authors such as Linebaugh, Federici, and De Angelis gave me confidence that the commons are never absent in a society, regardless of how much they are oppressed. Instead, the commons persist alongside the forces of capitalist enclosure or statist control. Commons in Albania, too, were not lost but hidden, suffocated, and erased, in a process masked by stigmatization. This was often facilitated by the architectural lenses I myself had been trained to wear. I realized that the architectural discipline, encompassing planning and urban design, was a limited and restrictive framework for what I found myself compelled to do in this study: to conduct a nuanced understanding of the condition of collectivities in Albanian society. After the pandemic and the theater's brutal demolition, I returned to Albania and began engaging with communities in Kombinat and Kamza. In these places, I recognized living commons of people reclaiming the city, transforming abandoned structures into spaces of shelter and collective life. These were the first findings of my research, not as discoveries, as they have always been active and operational, but as a personal and professional moment of awareness that I often wished I had arrived at earlier. Not surprisingly, professional architects or academics in the field of architecture were not involved in these collective processes, either as participants or observers. I was already familiar with the dominant stigma toward these marginalized places and spatial practices, as well as with how macro spatial politics of the state had utilized and perpetuated the architectural stigma of "ugliness and unruliness."[474] I found myself on the edge of the architectural discipline, often within and against its limits, aware of the possibility of contributing to expanding its boundaries through the knowledge embedded in the practices I had encountered in the places of study in Albania. This condition also resonated with the challenges that the concept of the commons, particularly spatial commoning, poses to rigid, enclosed concepts of property and ownership. Thinking with theories of the commons, and recent calls for decolonizing architecture, along with being situated in the midst of the Albanian context and its particularities,

474 Novas and Pllumbi, "Observing the Architectural Stigma of the Ugliness: The Cases of Albania and Galicia."

I understood that I was more interested in the culture of architecture, as a collective and political agent, than a mere professional practice.[475]

As highlighted by several authors, commons' theories often struggle to account for the real spatial and material dimensions in which commoning is embedded and enacted.[476] And this is perhaps precisely because of the fugitive, temporal, and unstable condition in which the commoning practices dwell. Throughout this study, I have addressed the difficulty in understanding the logics of the spatial and material dimensions of the commons in the Albanian context, characterized by profound political, economic, and cultural transformations. However, the study does embrace the non-purist, non-utopian, but deeply rooted forms of the commons in the Albanian context. The commons I encountered did not always conform to the logic of the commons as understood by key commons theories, such as being fully self-autonomous and self-governed places, both economically and politically. These places did not align with the vision of emancipatory thresholds, as guiding examples to push society beyond the state and the market, as, for instance, Stavros Stavrides would have it in his seminal book *Common Space: The City as Commons*.[477]

475 Architecture was selectively reduced to a technical practice during state socialism in Albania, where talented architects could practice without questioning the party-state politics, even in aesthetic terms. Those who dared to go outside of the statist frame were punished and disciplined. At the same time, there were class differences between architects. Many of the children of the leaders and their family members held leading positions in planning and design bureaus during state socialism in Albania. Therefore, the architect—far from a homogeneous figure—was not only the one operating "under pressure," as is often argued within the local architectural community in Albania, but also the professional who would serve and enable the system to continue. Although much more diversified in the years that followed, the elitist climate within the community of local architects persevered and continues to be reproduced nowadays with the involvement of the starchitect as a new agent in spatial politics. This figure reproduces and reinforces asymmetric colonial capitalist power relations, working closely with power at the top of the hierarchy and serving the state-oligarchic structure to maintain and curate its regime, while simultaneously silencing some local critical voices. Simultaneously, many members of the local architectural community are compelled to facilitate this systemic reproduction of hierarchies to survive or profit from it. The Albanian National Pavilion at the Venice Biennale of Architecture 2025 showcases the propagandistic celebration of the involvement of foreign star architects in Albania, with no local architects mentioned at all. See https://www.labiennale.org/en/architecture/2025/albania

476 David Bollier and Silke Helfrich, *Free, Fair, and Alive: The Insurgent Power of the Commons* (New Society Publishers, 2019); Massimo De Angelis, "The Production of Commons and the 'Explosion' of the Middle Class," *Antipode* 42, no. 4 (2010): 954–77; Massimo De Angelis, *Omnia Sunt Communia: On the Commons and the Transformation to Postcapitalism*, vol. 53 (Zed Books, 2017)

477 Stavrides, *Common Space: The City as Commons*; Stavrides, *Common Spaces of Urban Emancipation*.

The commons that I engaged with are ideologically agnostic, not explicitly anti-capitalist, often shaped by hierarchies and patriarchy, while constantly also being subversive to these oppressive systems through their tacit material and spatial politics. They operate in the system's cracks, much like in the anarchic times when they flourished. They seek recognition from the state, as with the legalization of the houses in Kamza, not because they do not claim autonomy or are driven by the greed of private property (which can also be the case sometimes), but because of a need for stability and protection against displacement through bulldozer politics that has repeatedly been active in these terrains. These are fugitive commons as "being-in but not being-of" the official institutions of the city, the state, capitalism, and colonial systemic structures.[478] A fugitive mode of living that inhabits these places without being fully captured by these systemic registers.

478 Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*; Harney et al., *All Incomplete*.

8.1 Shifting Terrains of Social Articulations and Disarticulations

After the turns my research had to take, which I described in the previous section as part of a journey of lost-and-founds, the research questions and focus changed as I aimed to remain reflexive throughout the research process. The overarching question guiding this work was how to identify the plurality of collectivities and reflect on the nexus between them and the spatial and material production of urban space amid deep political, social, and cultural transformations. Therefore, the more general questions accompanying this study were:

Which collectivities have persisted across shifting temporalities in Albanian society, amid deep political, social, and cultural transformations?

How are these collectivities produced-through and productive-of space in the city?

After realizing the relevance of kin-making and proximity in most of the commoning practices I engaged with, my research focused more specifically on understanding the role of kin relations in processes of commoning in the materialization of marginalized spatialities. I looked into the transformation of collective life and spatial organization in Albania as it transitioned from state socialism to neoliberalism, with a particular focus on the material, social, and political implications of these shifts during the anarchic interregnum between the two regimes.

In Part 3, and more specifically in Chapters 5.1 and 6.1 on Kombinat and Kamza before the 1990s, I explained how, under the state socialist regime, collectivism was imposed through state mechanisms, including collective housing, forced voluntarism, state cooperatives, and state ownership of land and infrastructure. While these forms of collectivism were coercive and ideologically driven, they nonetheless produced a material and symbolic infrastructure for shared life. However, they also disrupted pre-existing social and spatial arrangements—understood here as pre-socialist commons—rooted in traditional and customary forms of communal organization and cultural practices. As argued in the aforementioned chapters, I understood the imposition of state collectivism as the first stage of de-commoning, which disrupted and erased older commons, dismantling and replacing them with a centralized, totalitarian system of state-driven collectivism.

Following the collapse of the state socialist regime in the early 1990s, collectivism came to be associated with the memory of state repression and loss of agency, giving rise to strong anti-collectivist sentiment. At this time, Albania underwent a rapid shift to a liberal market economy, often referred to as "shock therapy." This was marked by the privatization of the inherited housing stock, state-owned factories, land, and public infrastructure, under policies promoted by institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).[479] This rapid privatization and the dismantling of state collectivist structures created a governance vacuum and widespread disorientation.

However, I have offered a bridging transdisciplinary (architectural and anthropological) perspective to this discussion, as these processes were not merely administrative or economic. They were deeply spatial, material, and affective, producing societal alienation and disarticulation in Albanian cities, as well as an opportunistic drive toward private enterprise, marking the start of an era of wild, unregulated capitalism. Importantly, this shift was dual-directional. It was not only implemented from above as a strategy to weaken the state and establish a liberal market economy, but it also unfolded with the participation of the Albanian public, which was exhausted by the long-lasting, imposed, and rigid politics of state collectivism. The public's involvement occurred through everyday acts of withdrawal or competition over privatizing or territorial rights toward public properties or common resources. This comes across, for example, as I reflect on Chapter 5.2, in the way the abandoned mills of Kombinat were initially privatized, looted, and appropriated by those who had worked in them, by state officials, and later migrants arriving from remote areas of Albania. In Chapter 6, I have shown how, similarly, dynamics over territorial rights in Kamza are perceived ambiguously and in contrasting ways. For those looking from the elitist centrality of Tirana, these actions were viewed as opportunistic squatting, and an othering and stigmatizing narrative was constructed around them. In contrast, for those coming from remote areas, this action was done as a means to achieve justice after experiencing oppression and restrictions on movement during state socialism.

479 Similar reforms were previously undertaken in other former socialist countries of Eastern Europe, as well as post-revolutionary countries of Latin America. Authors of the commons theory, such as Silvia Federici and Massimo De Angelis, heavily criticize the politics of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) as neoliberal and inciting the enclosure and commodification of the commons.

By some local political scholars and activists, they are considered an anti-statist and anarchic libertarian moment, otherwise recognized as a time when customary laws and regulations (e.g., the Kanun) were invoked to assert territorial rights over unclaimed land.[480]

One of the key findings of this study is that I was able to distinguish unnoticed or otherwise rendered unseen practices of commoning, which I defined as *kincommoning*. In the absence of institutional support, these practices of commoning emerged as alternative social infrastructures, particularly in marginalized urban areas like Kombinat and Kamza. Unlike the imposed collectivism of the socialist state, these practices of commoning are rooted in kin relations, customary rules and regulations, and improvised social practices of everyday life. Kincommoning, in these realities, functions as an alternative infrastructure for caregiving, housing, employment, education, healthcare, and even dispute resolution, especially among marginalized internal migrants. These micro-scale collectives represent not just a survival mechanism but also a form of hope-driven spatial, political,and social reproduction, as aspirations for a better life.

The places I studied show that the difference between state collectivism and kin-based commoning is not simply a change in spatial scale, from macro to micro politics, but a fundamental transformation in the production and experience of common space. Whereas state socialist collectivism aimed to forge centralized control, kincommoning is situated and culturally embedded in material and spatial tacit politics. However, this concept shall not be read as the ultimate suggestion for a guaranteed harmonious and benevolent reality. Kincommoning, as seen in the places of study, has its own mechanisms of control over the individuals and groups, and therefore dwells in ambivalences. It is a contested terrain of mutual aid, struggles, and resistance, and it also has the potential for unfolding subversive practices against oppressive systems.

480 In conversations with the inhabitants of Kamza, contrary to all presumptions, they do not consider themselves squatters, but rather as having the right to access a territory that had no established ownership at the time. According to the kanun (customary law), it is strictly prohibited to occupy land whose owner has already been recognized. The inhabitants clearly state that when they arrived, no one claimed ownership of the land. The rules of customary law, however, are physical and material, as well as intergenerationally orally transmitted and applied situationally in negotiation within a societal structure that includes a council of elders and witnesses. In the case of Kamza, access to land took effect at a time when state rules were unclear, and the migrant inhabitants needed immediate access to land to construct their houses. Consequently, customary law was revived – and in some instances reinterpreted - procedurally to address the situation in place. Certainly, the negotiation process over ownership was not always successful, and cases of conflict and fatalities also happened.

While not exhaustive, this study acknowledges the need for further work to document and reflect the resistance toward the process of de-commoning during the campaigns against the so-called backwardness and central collectivization implemented by state socialism from 1960 to 1991. Furthermore, my cross-temporal research includes reflections on the current consolidation of the neoliberal regime in Albania, marked by yet another intensified process of de-commoning. This process is currently driven by state policies that prioritize large-scale investments and private enclosures, which political analysts have described as an alliance between the state and oligarchic interests. In response to the developmentalist agenda advanced by this alliance, new forms of commoning as resistance have emerged in Tirana, particularly through grassroots protests against urban or environmentally damaging projects. One such example, discussed in Chapter 7, is the previously mentioned Movement for the Protection of the National Theater.

In the following sections of this concluding chapter of the dissertation, I reflect on three ways in which my work makes a significant and original contribution to knowledge: methodologically, theoretically, and thematically.

8.2 Situated Knowledge and the Reflexive Multimodal Practice of Study

As discussed in Chapter 3, *On Positions and Methods*, decolonial thinkers such as Walter Mignolo argue for *epistemic disobedience*, challenging dominant knowledge systems and legitimizing other ways of knowing and building knowledge.[481] Studying collectivities in Albania, which were constantly bulldozed, compelled me to reject the Eurocentric—often tabula rasa—planning approach and embrace meaningful spatial fragments, incompleteness, and co-created spatial configurations that question the gaslighting and teleological notion of progress as a linear, unidirectional process.[482] As Ananya Roy, AbdouMaliq Simone, and Achille Mbembe suggest, cities in the Global South defy modernist and colonial narratives and reveal forms of urban life that challenge colonial binaries of order vs chaos, developed vs undeveloped, or developing.[483] All these notions are very present in the rhetoric of the progressivist and evolutionary agenda of governance in Albania, as well as in the dominant narrative in the local academia, including in architectural education, further reinforced and legitimized by the pervasive influence of dominant Western epistemologies and frameworks of knowledge.

In William James' terms, I engaged in radical empiricism, which allowed me as a researcher to *immerse* myself *in the field of relations,*[484] to affect and be affected within this field, already existing on the grounds and composed of inhabitant-commoners, kin-making practices, old and emerging discourses, professionals, civil society, collectives, and so on. I developed a multimodal research-creation practice, which, as Moten and Harney put it, is simply the study of a place.[485] This is a place where knowledge is situated and co-produced, not within a formal education or an institution, but collectively and within a process of fugitive entanglements.[486]

481 Mignolo, "Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom."
482 Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *All Incomplete*, with Denise Ferreira da Silva and Zun Lee (Minor Compositions, 2021).
483 Simone, "People as Infrastructure: Intersecting Fragments in Johannesburg"; Roy, "Slumdog Cities"; Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe, *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis*, Public Culture (Duke University Press, 2008).
484 Manning, "Against Method."
485 William James cited in Manning, "Against Method."
486 Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study.*

In the Albanian context of the commons I engaged with, these entanglements do not happen within a homogenizing condition of state collectivism and normativity, as in the past, but in a process of becoming-with that is improvised, affective, and sometimes insurgent, a process of unfolding sociality of pragmatic and everyday kin-making beyond legal, genealogical, or professional foundations. These are places of study because people share knowledge and transform each other's practices, outside dominant institutions, and in settings of spatial and material commoning.

As Sarah Pink et. al. maintain, "a reflexive approach … encompasses all the decisions we make through the research, sharing and intervention processes, and it underpins our ability and commitment to being accountable."[487] Immersing in this field of relations, I had to orient myself reflexively, and situationally, readjusting the tool kit at my disposal, with tools I was already equipped with during my previous studies in architecture,—like architectural observation, photography, sketches, measurements, drawings,—as well as with tools I adopted along the way while being in the field on my own as well as experimenting collectively with data generation throughout group discussions and co-production of documentary film through spatial ethnography. Screening these films in various settings, such as activist, artistic, or academic settings, and writing reflexively on several platforms, either as a single author or co-author, were also ways to spark discussions and reflect collectively on the subject of study. Engaging in local debates, such as on TV shows or podcasts, and presenting the local perspective in broader cultural and professional media were practiced to transcend the confines of debates within specific audiences. However, although I have tried to weave or transcend material and discursive realities throughout my work, I have aimed to do that beyond representation. Taking a decolonial and feminist approach to research has helped me stay true to my journey within and outside Albania, of back-and-forth departures and returns, without claiming representational and cultural identities. Rather, I cherished affiliations and affinities, as well as criticalities with my country of origin, with the Western institution I was affiliated with during this study, as well as with my role as a researcher adhering to decolonial values. This position remains true to the genuine need to navigate this journey, without engaging in an emancipatory pursuit on the one hand, during my encounter with grounded realities, or advocating for cultural conservatism on the other hand, while romanticizing the conditions and concepts I develop here.

487 Sarah Pink et al., *Design Ethnography: Research, Responsibilities, and Futures*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2022), 26.

8.3 A Theoretical Delineation of State Collectivism, Kincommoning and De-Commoning

Theoretically, this research contributes to the evolving literature on the commons by situating commoning as a spatial, political, and cultural practice that is neither residual nor utopian. With this study, I have shifted from *collectivity* as a concept operating in the major register to a plurality of collectivities that have emerged and operated across various shifting grounds of political regimes in Albania, grouped mainly in upper and lower registers, but also cutting across these registers.

I have elaborated on the concepts of *state collectivism* and *de-commoning*. These two concepts have primarily been the domain of state apparatuses, operationalizing the professionalized architecture that has been instrumental to the implementation and materialization of these concepts. State collectivism has been mostly consolidated during state socialism in Albania as an expression of the capture of collectivity as the primary ideological tool of the state apparatus to consolidate its power, alongside absolute totalitarianism. This is yet another encounter with the concept of de-commoning, as introduced by Alvaro Sevilla-Buitrago, in how, historically, modernism, through urban planning, has been developed in the West by eliminating self-organized urban commons.[488] This also resonates with the critique of authors of the commons theory of enclosure, as a way of continuous privatization and commodification of the commons. From the Albanian perspective, I expand the concept of de-commoning by showing that state socialism has also engaged in a form of de-commoning, while paradoxically holding the ideological flag of collectivism and emancipation. During this period in Albania, as with examples of Western modernist interventions in the city, the state has developed projects that have captured the agency of communities to operate politically within their own built environment.

In this dissertation, I also advance a critique of Eurocentric architecture and urban theory. I demonstrate how the Albanian experience, often perceived as a peripheral or belated European reality, can contribute to discourse on processes of urban transformation, semi-autonomous urbanization, and situated forms of spatial resistance. This way, the marginal in the European context, as well as the margins of the margin within the Albanian reality, become sites for theoretical reflection.

488 Sevilla-Buitrago, *Against the Commons: A Radical History of Urban Planning.*

These realities are not just empirical exceptions, but specific yet generative contexts for reflecting on grounded practices of commoning.

As I explained throughout this dissertation, the study has been cross-temporal; however, the most compelling period to theorize has been the one between the two political regimes, where the commons regained agency, transcending the private-public dichotomy, and emerged not only in opposition to privatization or state withdrawal but also in a complex entanglement with them. My research complicates the aspirations of some theories of the commons to go beyond the state and the market by demonstrating how commoning often operates in the interstices of institutional neglect and the commoners' co-creation of their own social infrastructures.

Drawing on empirical fieldwork observations, I argue that commoning in societies must be understood through relational concepts, such as practical kin-making, spatial proximity, and reciprocity and mutual aid, alongside, and not excluding, notions of publicness or citizenship. Instead of dismissing kin-based commoning practices as related to underdevelopment and as present only during exceptional, anarchic periods of societal shifts between political regimes, this research proposes a new understanding of the role of kin-making and spatial proximity as central mechanisms of spatial commoning. Unlike some of the theories of the commons, which tend to focus on the emancipatory role of commoning practices while being blind to the role of kin relations due to their associations with tradition and patriarchy, my fieldwork observations showed that kinship, and more broadly a practical everyday practice of kin-making, remains a vital mode of social organization for generative entanglements of becoming-in-common. This empirical insight urged me to expand the theory of the commons from the standpoint of Albanian positionality, introducing the concept of *kincommoning*.

The dissertation, therefore, contributes to a more grounded theory of the city as a commons, one that is simultaneously attuned to spatial possibilities of imagining otherwise through tacit material practices. The concept of kincommoning, emerging from this study of spatial commoning in marginal areas in Albania, resides in ambivalences and ideological contradictions, as well as relational and spatial instabilities, fragmentations, and incompleteness. These qualities of kincommoning practices reflect the cross-temporal particularities of an Albanian experience with collectivities.

While kin-making has been the primary mutual aid mechanism for survival during interregnum times, it is manifested in spatial configurations of commoning, including the materialization of an entire city, such as Kamza, or the transformation of ex-industrial buildings, as seen in Kombinat. These practices of commoning are also the most attacked and eroded forms of collectivity, during both state socialism and the current neoliberal regime, meaning that state structures have persistently viewed kincommoning with suspicion, as a threat to their territorial authority. Under state socialism, such forms of solidarity were often deemed backward and incompatible with the logic of centralized planning and state collectivism. In the neoliberal era, these societal structures were reinterpreted no longer as ideological suspects but as informal and outside the framework of legal ownership and state-market-led development.

During the current neoliberal regime in Albania, we see how commoning practices and their spatial manifestations, which flourished during the period following the fall of state socialism, are being enclosed, erased, and shrunk by the greed-oriented regime of private-state collaboration. This persistent delegitimization operates through both discursive and material means, such as policy frameworks that render kin-based commoning practices invisible and unseen, as well as through urban planning mechanisms that prioritize market-led development over the reproduction of communal life. In shrinking these spatial commoning configurations, the state reinforces a dichotomy between formal and informal, public and private, which erases the possibility of alternative communal arrangements that are neither wholly controlled by the state nor fully commodified by the market. As observed in the places of study, kincommoning then became a contested terrain, where survival, care, and belonging unfolded in the cracked, grey zones of these dichotomies, where new spatial imaginaries continued to be built.

Many contemporary theories of the commons are animated by an emancipatory impulse that envisions common spaces as a driving force toward an eventual transformation beyond capitalism. Crucially, kincommoning challenges the assumption within the theory of the commons that commoning must always lead toward post-capitalist futures, although the potential is there, as these practices are often outside the capitalist economic frame and marginalized. However, kincommoning – at least the one practiced in the Albanian marginalized spaces I engaged with, but most likely in other similar realities – instead emphasizes the persistence of localized, situated practices of commoning that are not necessarily driven by a utopian emancipatory horizon but by the immediate, practical need to sustain life in the present.

Therefore, kincommoning is a decolonial concept that foregrounds communal forms of kin-making, encompassing both inherited kinship structures and everyday practices of relatedness and relationality.[489] The shift from kinship as a more conservative concept to kin-making as a processual concept makes kin-based commoning assert the ongoing relevance of kin relations and their operationality in contemporary contexts. It challenges the notion that kin-based organizations belong solely to the past or to so-called pre-modern societies, instead demonstrating how kin—understood as both an inherited and actively produced relation—continues to influence collective life beyond dominant frameworks, even in times of agnostic ideological conditions.

489 As explained in Chapter 2, the concepts of relatedness and relationality are sometimes used interchangeably, although they derive from different bodies of knowledge. The first is developed in the kinship theory, while the second stems more from new materialism and posthuman philosophies.

8.4 Thematic Contribution: Minor Collectivities as Contested Terrains

This dissertation's thematic contribution lies in providing a nuanced reflection on the spatial and material manifestations of state collectivism, kincommoning and de-commoning. In post-1990 Albania, the deep transformation from a centrally planned regime to a market-oriented one profoundly reconfigured the very foundations of collective life. In this context, the commons are not a neutral domain, but *contested terrains*, influenced by the politics of state collectivism, past and ongoing processes of de-commoning, as well as systemic cracks.

Themes emerged empirically from research conducted on Kombinat, Kamza, and the Movement to Save the National Theater, and, given the complexity of these places of study, the toponyms were kept central. I will thematically elaborate on them here to understand the nexus between the variety of collective agencies and the built environment encountered in these shifting and contested terrains, focusing more extensively on the period between the two state regimes (1991-2013): between state socialism (1946-1991) and the current neoliberal one (2013-onwards).

As seen during the glorious period of Kombinat (Subchapter 5.1), or the *Ndërmarrje Bujqësore "Ylli i Kuq"* (Agrarian State Enterprise Red Star) in Kamza (Subchapter 6.1), the socialist state in Albania utilized the instrument of state collectivism to produce spaces and infrastructures that both sustained the centrally planned regime rooted in communist ideology and propelled a broader project of socialist modernity of the society. This way, the party-state advanced its goal of proletarianizing the population as well as consolidating its capture and hold on collective political agency. Kombinat was but one of these infrastructures that were strategically designed to anchor the regime's power, foster collective life, and enforce mechanisms of control and planning, as well as social engineering, under state socialism. Yet, these state collectivist structures were not experienced homogenously. In everyday life, they were accepted, maintained, reinterpreted, and at times challenged by the inhabitants. Places like Kombinat became sites not only of ideological top-down inscription but also of negotiation and transculturation, where state-imposed forms of life intersected with the production of local identity, international socialist aspirations until the 1960s and 1970s, and alternative imaginaries of self-reliance, especially after the late 1970s, with the party line's turn toward autarchy.

Contrary to the mainstream belief that collectivities were absent after state socialism, this study concludes that minor collectivities, expressed as situated forms of commoning that were active in Albania in the aftermath of the collapse of state socialism, were ubiquitous. They were sometimes more subtle, as in the case of Kombinat, and sometimes more vocal and pronounced, as in the case of Kamza and the Movement for the Saving of the National Theater. The observations demonstrate that these alternative minor forms of collectivity do not suffocate the individual and instead make more room for it, unlike the hegemonic attempts at state collectivism, though they do have their own less oppressive forms of control, just as every community does. These grounded collectivities claimed and reworked urban space, co-managing it under conditions of uncertainty and precarity. By problematizing the framing of informality as illegal and kinship as backward—both stigmatizing political tropes—this dissertation reinterprets these minor forms of collectivity as relationally, spatially-materially, and politically entangled practices of commoning.

8.4.1 Kin-making as Spatial Politics

In both Hidrofili (Kombinat) and Kamza, kin-making was a spatial logic, an organizing principle that shaped how communities appropriated and transformed buildings and territories. Extended families, particularly those from the northeastern regions of Albania, utilized blood ties and affinity to navigate the challenges of relocation. They built together, shared labor, and self-managed their space through relational proximity. Extended families, particularly larger ones, played a central role in organizing and shaping the community. Beyond blood ties, proximity-based practical kin relationships also fostered solidarity, as neighbors supported each other through construction projects, childcare, education, and shared resources. Commoning practices also included pooling construction labor, sharing knowledge about building techniques, and borrowing money for immediate needs. These acts of solidarity were rooted in the belief that everyone would eventually need help, creating a reciprocal system of support.

While the communities exhibited many features of commoning, they were not entirely horizontal or egalitarian in practice. Hierarchies based on family size and patriarchal norms influenced decision-making. Kin ties impacted spatial arrangements, resource sharing, and collective efforts, with larger families often exerting greater influence, reflecting a system of consensus decision-making rather than direct democracy. Nevertheless, the communities' ability to adapt and cooperate in the absence of formal state support highlights the capacity of commoning practices in Hidrofili and Kamza.

Limits and potentials of the community to operate its capacity were always negotiated materially and in space, rather than in formal institutions.[490]

Both the housing units in Hidrofili, Kombinat, and the family houses in Kamza were characterized by a condition of incompleteness, otherwise known as incremental constructions, which evolved in response to the shifting needs of the extended family, depending on life events, like marriages, newborns, and certainly migration. This way, the construction is entangled with life itself. Incremental housing became a kin-making and commoning practice, where extended families build through common economies, and construction unfolds through solidarity and reciprocal practices. One of the terms encountered both in Kombinat and Kamza was *krahët* - arms in Albanian - to say that during the construction process, many arms (i.e., helping hands) were gathering to help the family, pouring concrete for columns, slabs, and stairs, materializing an entanglement of care and construction.

These dwellings accommodated those physically present in the household and often relatives visiting temporarily in need of access to healthcare in Tirana. The houses had always had space available for the return of family members who had emigrated abroad. In this way, the home became a space of belonging for both the present and the absent, materially enacting kin ties across distance and time. Home, particularly in contexts of migration, precarity, and marginalization, often serves as a relational and aspirational dream space, accommodating both lived realities and imagined futures.[491]

The spatial logic of kin-making unfolded more compactly at Hidrofili in Kombinat, where the community was established within two former industrial buildings. While kin-making and commoning practices operated similarly in Kamza, the spatial setting was less compact. Although distances were greater, spatial proximity remained relevant in the practices of kin-based commoning. In this context, the spatial logic expanded on a larger scale, contributing to the construction of an entire city almost from scratch. The houses in Kamza came to embody the hearth (*vatra*), where relational aspirations were translated into built form. Here, the house carried broader claims to permanence, legitimacy, and autonomy from the state, rendering the house and the city relationally constructed and politically charged. These spatial-material embodiments of kin-making became assertions of urban presence, resisting the marginalizing label of "informal" and contesting dominant definitions of who gets to be seen as a legitimate urban subject.

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490 Co-Plan is an NGO that has attempted to bridge state institutions with community representatives as well as foreign donators to improve the conditions in Kamza. This was not so present in the discussions with the interlocutors but was found in one of Co-Plan's publications.

491 Dalakoglou, "Migrating-Remitting-'Building'-Dwelling"; Simone, "People as Infrastructure: Intersecting Fragments in Johannesburg."

The practice of homemaking and ongoing maintenance—largely undertaken by women—is visibly inscribed on the façades of houses in Kamza and Kombinat through the everyday display of clothes and rugs hanging to dry on balconies and in windows. Women increasingly asserted their inheritance rights to land and housing, where acts of maintenance also began to be understood as a form of spatial authorship. This gendered defiance began to reconfigure patriarchal expectations surrounding the recognition of women's labor, both materially and socially. These acts constitute a quiet but persistent claim to permanence in the territory, rendering the domestic sphere not only a site of care and reproduction but also one of political practice of spatial belonging.

Alongside the spatial-political claims embodied in the house and the city, this challenge to dominant narratives continues in more recent forms of commoning, most notably in the political and cultural activism of the collective ATA, whose efforts have created an autonomous political centrality in Kamza. Led by a new generation building on the groundwork laid by their parents, ATA's initiatives reaffirm and rearticulate commoning as an enduring political and spatial force through artistic and activist practices such as theater performances enacted in various urban situations across the city, ethnographic filmmaking, environmentally driven protests, and the establishment of a locally influential media platform. Here, although a civic form of commoning, practical and non-genealogical kin relations are deliberately cultivated and maintained as a means of sustaining a grounded and enduring political stance.

At the National Theater Movement, spatial occupation became a deliberate political statement. Protesters transformed a state-owned cultural site into a collective space of resistance through performances, caretaking, organizing, and inhabiting it. Here, relational ties (between artists, activists, and ordinary citizens) were embodied in the spatial maintenance of the theater, turning affective attachment into material resistance. Kin-like relations were also established in this movement that unfolded in the heart of Tirana, especially during the time the theater building was occupied. Some members of *Aleanca (Alliance for the Protection of the Theater)* explicitly declared their biological kin relations to the theater building, as a place of remembrance of parts of the history of their own grandparents, such as connections with the theater guerrilla movements, when it was a Theater of the People, or even the dark, infamous communist trials that took place there. The occupation became a space of intensified relationality, inhabited in the routine of the everyday. Shared meals, collective maintenance, solidarity, and continuous presence fostered a sense of mutual responsibility and a shared sense of belonging. In this setting, the saving of the theater was not only a fight for architectural heritage or public space, but also a process of commoning rooted in embodied relationality. Relational proximity became a political force, transforming the occupied space into a site of both resistance and reproduction of alternative political engagement in city-making.

8.4.2 Commoning as Territorial Resistance

The final demolition of the theater, as well as former industrial buildings in Kombinat and some houses in Kamza, enforced by state violence to clear up land for speculative public-private partnership constructions, starkly exposed the fragility of the commons in the face of authoritarian urban interventions. Although, as Lefebvre maintains, societal groups need space to constitute themselves, commoning practices retain inertia even after the loss of space as their material anchor. This nexus, where relational organization enables material and spatial occupation, which in turn enables political dissensus, suggests that commoning is a practice of territorial resistance. It grows from everyday negotiations and can escalate into systemic struggles.

In Kamza and at the Theater, commoning practices of resistance aimed at securing territorial permanence are more visible and pronounced. In Kombinat, by contrast, such practices are subtler, taking the form of everyday acts that assert territorial autonomy through the demarcation of space with walls, or graffiti that reclaims and makes a reversed use of stigma, such as the inscription "Beware, there are *Tropojans* here!" (*Kujdes, ka Tropojan!*).[492] These expressions function as semiotic boundary markers, signaling both presence, territoriality, and defiance. Perhaps the most extreme manifestation of territorial resistance encountered in Kombinat is the burning of one's own housing unit just before the arrival of the bulldozers. This final and irreversible act of refusal rejects both dispossession and the erasure of spatial autonomy and is an effort to safeguard memory and refuse surrender to such an insidious attack.

8.4.3 Commoning Practices of Gendered Defiance

One of the most persistent yet often unrecognized dimensions of the practices noticed across Hidrofili, Kamza, and the National Theater Movement is the presence of invisible infrastructures of care. These relational and material practices—maintaining homes, supporting neighbors, sharing resources—underpin not only the survival but the possibility of collective life. In all three places of study, commoning unfolded as a deeply gendered and care-oriented endeavor, where the everyday labor of sustaining the commons became both a practice of survival, political articulation of rights and a site of defiance of normative gendered roles.

492 See Fig 5.9 in Chapter 5.

In Hidrofili, and similarly in Kamza, women not only carried the heaviest weight of reproductive labor but frequently took active roles in physically constructing homes, making key decisions about spatial arrangements, and cultivating solidarities that extended beyond genealogical kinship lineages and patriarchal expectations. Women's involvement in the construction of houses disrupted the gendered division between "building" and "caring." They engaged in mixing concrete, lifting blocks, and making design decisions. In some cases, sisters with their respective families lived in close proximity—an arrangement expressly prohibited by customary law—thus subtly but decisively challenging patrilineal logics of spatial separation of women's kin lineages. Moreover, many women assumed leadership in the absence of men who had emigrated abroad, managing the household economy and navigating systems of support and negotiation beyond the boundaries of the home. This encompasses efforts to address access to water, infrastructure, education, and healthcare in conditions marked by substantial absence. These acts were not recognized as political or architectural contributions in conventional terms, yet they formed the relational glue that held the community together and enabled the establishment of Kamza as a city and Hidrofili as a community. The quiet persistence of these everyday gestures, such as cooking for multiple households, tending to the elderly, and watching one another's children, constituted a mode of commoning grounded in mutual and collective reliance for the construction and reproduction of a livelihood.

In Kamza, in response to the lack of formal schooling, the initiative of a group of teachers to provide classes for children in a city still under construction exemplifies a commoning act of care and contribution for the future generations. Similarly, women with knowledge of midwifery stepped in to support reproductive labor, offering assistance in the absence of institutional healthcare. The work of the activist collective ATA further politicized this defiance by highlighting and documenting women's labor and contributions to the city, transforming care into a tool of memory, recognition, and resistance.

In the National Theater Movement, protest's care-based resistance: cleaning, organizing, curating, and defending the building during months of occupation, were shared tasks, but often reproduced the gendered division of roles. Often unseen in public narratives of the protest, women's care work was foundational in keeping the space livable and politically charged. This gendered performance of care demonstrates that the commons are sustained not only through confrontation but through embodied, affective, and continuous acts of care. In doing so, women activists expanded the notion of political action to include the maintenance of space and memory.

Across all three sites, commoning through care was simultaneously a gendered burden and a terrain of resistance. It was relational and spatial, improvised and sustained, affective and political. Yet, as feminist scholars have long argued, care is rarely recognized in official narratives of city-making or political action. While care work across the three places of study often fell along traditional gendered lines, it was also continuously redefined by women who claimed space, authority, and a voice through their everyday actions. These practices formed what can be described as counter-hegemonic feminized infrastructures, which are invisible yet indispensable, marginal yet politically powerful. As Silvia Federici reminds us, reproductive labor is productive of society, and in these places, it was also productive of political urban alternatives of imagination and resistance.[493]

Yet the defiance of gendered roles in the places of study was not always overt or revolutionary. It was often slow, relational, and embedded in practical decisions and micro-resistances, such as living next to a sister, working the concrete, cooking for the workers and activists, defending a theater with a broom and a banner, among the diversity of intellectual and professional activities that women engaged in. To recognize the invisible infrastructures of care in the making of the urban commons is thus to understand that resistance is not always loud, nor is transformation always spectacular. But precisely in this mundane persistence, these acts challenge the spatial, cultural, and political architectures of patriarchy. These acts are even forms of collective authorship. To foreground care in the analysis of commoning is to recognize that the city is made not only by plans or even protests, but by the ongoing work of tending to others, maintaining shared spaces, and building relationships across time and shortages. These practices may be modest, even invisible, but they are foundational. In moments of abandonment and in sites of resistance, they become the quiet infrastructure through which the commons endure.

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493 Federici, *Re-Enchanting the World. Feminism and the Politics of the Commons.*

8.5 Expanding Horizons

To conclude, this study demonstrates that in Albania, the agency of minor collectives, manifested in practices of kincommoning, including resistance commoning, remains fragile and incomplete, constrained by both the legacy of state socialism and the ongoing pressures of neoliberal governance. This does not mean that they are weak and have no agency. On the contrary, as demonstrated in this study, they have played a substantial role in materializing entire urban areas in times of institutional disfunctionality. This situated and empirically grounded study of collectivities in Albania contributes to ongoing debates on a pressing question in global urban discourse related to how minor collectivities assert the right to the city for marginalized groups. These groups are often the most active in claiming participation in the processes of city-making. I conclude this study by opening several threads of inquiry that exceed the scope of a single doctoral research journey and point toward generative directions for future scholarship.

A possible thread could concern a more historically deep inquiry into the processes of de-commoning under state socialism. While this dissertation has begun to trace the process by which the Albanian party-state apparatus captured and aimed to dismantle pre-socialist commons, this history remains underexplored. Future research could more systematically document the forms of minor collectivities, such as customary, land-related forms that existed prior to 1946, that were attacked through collectivization campaigns. Simultaneously, more research could be conducted to understand the way these minor collectivities resisted and continued to operate in old and newly created urban settings during state socialism. This would lead to a deeper understanding of the role kincommoning activities, with all their embedded contradictions, played in the life of communities. Oral histories, local archives, and ethnographic recovery work could illuminate what was lost, what persisted underground, and how communities adapted their commoning practices under conditions of party-state societal engineering.

The gendered dimensions of kincommoning demand further exploration. Although this study has paid particular attention to women's invisible and unnoticed contribution to practices of care, construction, and resistance, as foundational to commoning in Hidrofili, Kamza, and the National Theater Movement, a dedicated feminist ethnography of these practices remains to be written. Since carework is central to kincommoning, there is a productive, and so far underexplored, conversation to be had between kincommoning and feminist care theory, particularly with studies on care as a political and spatial practice. Future work could center women's spatial collective authorship more explicitly, their roles in construction,

homemaking, and community organizing, and engage more directly with feminist commons theory to interrogate how patriarchal structures and commoning practices simultaneously constrain and are subverted by women's agency.

As this study demonstrates, kincommoning produced houses physically located in Albania yet substantially shaped by transnational relations, a dual presence registered in both the real material and imaginary dimensions of home. Fully unfolding these transnational dimensions would require a deeper, longer ethnography that remains attentive to the materiality of absence, the waiting, and the hope of return, and to how these affective registers are inscribed in places like Kamza and Kombinat. Althought the theme of migration has been present and central in this study, a more expanded ethnography that includes parts of kin abroad, the way their life unfolds in houses they dwell in other countries while keeping or reinterpreting kin-making, would be a solid and generative bridge of this work with the realm of migrant studies.

As seen in this study, kincommoning did not only produce houses, but neighborhoods and the entire city, therefore also urban infrastructure such as streets, healthcare, schooling, but also water and sewage systems. Theorizing the materialization of these as commoning infrastructure, rather than merely calling them informal, will contribute to a bridging of infrastructure studies and commons theory. Furthermore, here, a more systematic research is needed to understand the role played by the state and the market once they re-enter in the field through legalization programs, urban upgrading, and electoral politics. This is to understand how kincommoning communities negotiate with, resist, or absorb state intervention, and how each of these influences their political agency.

The role of the professionalized architecture and spatial design in relation to commoning practices deserves further critical investigation. This study has highlighted how architectural expertise, both local and global, professional and academic, has been largely absent, stigmatizing, or complicitly against the marginalized commoning practices. It points out the need to better understand the consequences of the mainstream growth-oriented, Western-centric master planning currently operating throughout Albania. A future research path could explore revised design practice that delineates how architectural knowledge might be reconstructed to accompany, rather than override, these practices. This is not about designing for these communities but with them, and on their terms, and therefore, not as a technical imposition, but as a reflexive discipline capable of learning from the spatial intelligence embedded in spatial production based on kincommoning.

The cross-temporal scope of this study aimed at engaging with the subsequent regimes, from state socialism to the currently consolidating neoliberal regime. The current moment, marked by accelerating bulldozer politics, displacement, and youth emigration, demands urgent documentation. A long-term research project that tracks the communities of Kombinat, Kamza, and activist collectives over the coming years could explain how kincommoning adapts, erodes, or transforms under intensifying pressures of speculative urban development and demographic shifts.

The methodological approach developed in this study as a multimodal, reflexive, and decolonially oriented research-creation practice merits, in itself, further reflection and applications, including pedagogical ones. This approach uses spatial ethnography, including the use of various tools such as sketching, photography, drawing, and documentary filmmaking, to practice non-extractive and collaborative knowledge production with the communities involved. Future research should critically engage with issues of methodological and ethical concern, especially within the fields of architectural and urban studies, which are still predominantly shaped by dominant Western epistemologies. Simultaneously, a pedagogical research project asking how architectural education can be transformed by engagement with self-organized urbanism would contribute to the growing field of decolonial architectural pedagogy.

Albania serves as a paradigmatic case precisely because the conditions of regime change, state collapse, mass migration, and absence of functioning institutions are not unique to this reality. This means that kincommoning, as developed from within the Albanian context, can travel as a concept to other geographies, while requiring modifications and variations across, which, on the other hand, reveal conditions that enable or constrain it. Research engaging communities in Southeastern Europe, the Balkans, and broadly in the Global South, could test the generative capacity of kincommoning as a theoretical concept beyond its Albanian origins, while remaining attentive to situated differences.

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Curriculum vitae

Dorina Pllumbi

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I am a researcher and educator working with spatial ethnography across disciplines of architecture, urbanism, socio-cultural anthropology and influenced by currents of feminist and decolinial studies. Through a situated research-creation practice, I investigate the mutual constitution of kin-making, urban commoning, and the spatial production of the built environment. In my work I practice a multimodal research-creation methodological approach is grounded in spatial ethnography and combines oral and visual methods such as photography, archival research, writing, and film to document and critically engage with various places of study.

The core of my work is situated in Albania, with research extending across various geographies I have inhabited and visited, including Amsterdam, Delft, Tampere, Finland, and New York City. One of the co-produced films, based on my doctoral research on Albanian collectivities, is titled *Would You Call Yourself a Kombinats?* It served both as a method and an output, allowing for an ethnography that explores themes of construction and destruction. In Amsterdam, together with Klaske Havik, we looked into the transformation of the NDSM ShipWharf in Amsterdam Noord, specifically exploring the evolving role of architects in these practices. In Tampere, together with Mathilde Merolli, we conceived the *QUOETRY* method, which enabled us to explore the story of amateur and communal skatepark construction culture.

As part of the *Writingplace* book series, I am currently co-editing the book *(Hidden) Narratives of Spatial Resistance*, which includes contributions that explore how acts of spatial resistance (whether quiet or confrontational) are inscribed in and expressed through space, architecture, and narration.

EDUCATION

2026 **Doctor of Philosophy in Architecture**
Delft University of Technology, Delft, Netherlands
Research Group: Situated Architecture
Chair: Methods of Analysis and Imagination
Title: Marginalized Spatialities: Situated reflections on state collectivism and kin-commoning in Albania

2017- 2022 **Courses offered by the Graduate School of TUDelft,**
The courses were structured around three main categories: discipline-specific, research methodologies, and transferable skills.

2019- 2023 **Courses on Political Sciences,** Brooklyn Institute for Social Research, New York, USA
I expanded my background by taking courses on social, political, and environmental themes, reflecting my deep interest in the intersections between architecture, urbanism and society. Amongst these courses were: "Hannah Arendt: The Human Condition" and "Thinking without a Banister (Hannah Arendt)" by Samantha Hill; *"A Ruthless Criticism of Everything Existing: An Introduction to Marx," "What is Liberalism?," "What is Neoliberalism?" and "The Politics of Climate Change" by Ajay Singh Chaudhary; "Ecofeminism and Xenofeminism" by Alyssa Battistoni; "Donna Haraway: Cyborgs, Science, and Gender" by Danya Glabau.* https://thebrooklyninstitute.com/

2010 **Advanced Master of Architecture**, Faculty of Architecture Valle Giulia, Sapienza University of Rome, Rome, Italy
Title: Programming, Designing, and Management of Territorial and Healthcare Facilities, Graded 110/110

2007 **Diploma of Architecture** (5 years integrated Bachelor+Masters), Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism, Polytechnic University of Tirana, Albania
Graduation thesis: National Library of Albania, Tirana, Graded 10/10

WORK/ EXCHANGE EXPERIENCE

2018- 2026 **Doctoral Researcher**
Delft University of Technology, Delft, Netherlands
Title: Marginalized Spatialities: Situated reflections on state collectivism and kin-commoning in Albania
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2023 **Research Assistant**
Delft University of Technology, Delft, Netherlands
Part of the Writing team of the Horizon application project entitled *MATRICES: Mapping and Intervening in Obstacles to Inclusive Built Environment Design Education*

2019- 2021 **Plan Examiner**
Department of Buildings, The City of New York, USA

2020- 2021 **Visiting Researcher**
Parsons School of Design, New York, USA
One-year exchange period with Prof. Georgia (Jilly) Traganou.

2008- 2017 **Lecturer**
Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism, Polytechnic University of Tirana

2005- 2017 **Architectural Design in Practice**
During my architectural studies and after graduating, I worked as a design architect in various architecture firms in Tirana, Albania, as a Specialist in the Urban Office of the Municipality of Lezha, and later I co-founded the architecture firm 3plusarchitects based in Tirana. The firm developed various projects of different scales, ranging from interiors and renovations to newly constructed collective apartment buildings.

TEACHING/ EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES

Jan 2025 **Invited Lecturer,** Specialist Module D, Technische Universität Darmstadt
Course: The common in architecture. Coordinator: Prof. Dr. Martino Tattara

The course examines the relationship between architecture and the commons through three primary lenses: property, construction, and typology.

Mar 2023 **Initiator and main organizer,** Training School on ethnographic film: *Tirana and Kamza: The planned, the unplanned, and everything in between*, COST Action Writing Urban Place, Coordinators: Dorina Pllumbi, Diana Malaj, Willie Vogel

The training school convened transdisciplinary scholars and filmmakers from various European and regional institutions, along with Albanian activists and urban communities. It centered on ethnographic film as a research-creation method for examining urban areas undergoing rapid transformations. Collaborating parties: TUDelft, Activist Collective ATA, Polytechnic University of Tirana, and Dokufest film academy.
https://writingurbanplaces.eu/training-school-report-tirana-and-kamza-the-planned-the-unplanned-and-everything-in-between/

Oct 2023 **Speaker and Mentor**_ Laboratory of Urban Anthropology: Outlines of Kamza (*Përvijime të Kamzës)*, Albania. Organizers: Collective Grupi ATA, IAKSA Institute of Cultural Anthropology and Art Studies, Albania, https://nyje.al/pervijime-te-kamzes/

The Laboratory explores the urban, social, and spatial transformations of Kamza—one of Albania's fastest-growing cities—through ethnographic observation, mapping, and artistic practices. The project examines how everyday life, informality, and collective agency shape Kamza's evolving urban fabric, offering critical insights into post-socialist urbanization and the making of contemporary Albanian space.

Apr 2021 **Invited Critic**_ Architectural Design Studio_ Rice University School of Architecture, Houston, Coordinator: Viola Ago

*I served as an invited critic for a design studio coordinated by **Viola Ago**, engaging with students' projects through critical discussion and review. The session focused on conceptual clarity, design methodology, and the integration of research within architectural practice, fostering dialogue on experimental approaches to contemporary design.*

Fall 2020 **Tutor [AR1A061]** Architectural Positions: Delft Lectures on Architectural Design and Research Methods, Master Level. TU Delft, Faculty of Architecture. Coordinators: Prof. Dr. Ir. Klaske Havik, Marieke Berkers, Ir. Elsbeth Ronner, Ir. Robert A. Gorny.

The course introduces students to key methodologies and theoretical positions in contemporary architectural research and practice. Through a series of lectures by TU Delft faculty and invited speakers, the course explores how architects formulate design approaches, construct arguments, and position their work within broader cultural, social, and disciplinary frameworks. Students critically engage in diverse modes of inquiry—ranging from historical and theoretical analysis to design-based research—to develop an informed understanding of architecture as both a reflective and projective practice.

Fall 2017 **Tutor [AR0113]** Roles and Tools of Architecture, Master Level. TU Delft, Faculty of Architecture. Coordinators: Prof. Dr. Tom Avermaete, Prof. Dr. Ir. Klaske Havik, Dr. Ir. Hans Teerds, Dr. Ir. Jorge Mejia Hernandez, Ir. Robert A. Gorny

The course departs from a discussion on the importance and role of imagination for architectural thinking. It proceeds with three consecutive workshops, exploring the use of visual, textual, and material methods of analysis and imagination. All three of the investigations are related to the analysis of a specific site. Three main topics: On Projection, On Modelling, and On Representing.

Jan 2008-Mar 2017 **Lecturer**_ Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism, Polytechnic University of Tirana

I taught courses such as Public Buildings Studio, Environmental Design Studio, Urban Design, and the Master's Graduation Studio. The teaching emphasized multimodal spatial analysis, contextual design strategies, and the integration of social and environmental considerations into architectural and urban projects, guiding students through both the conceptual development and the articulation of their designs.

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS/ TALKS

Mar 2024 **Laboratorio Lotta alla Gentrificazione**, Forte Prenestino, Roma,
Invited Speakers: Diana Malaj and Dorina Pllumbi
https://nyje.al/forte-prenestino-keshtjella-qe-jehon-rezistence/

Nov 2023 **Symposium of Urban Design History and Theory**, 1-3 November, 2023
Track: Socio-Politics of Urban Design, Panel: Inequality, Segregation, and Injustice
Title: A Piece of Land to Start from Scratch: Co-creating Kamza from Below
Speaker: Dorina Pllumbi, https://urbandesignsymposium.com/program/

Oct 2023 **Laboratory of Urban Anthropology** _ LAU 2022: Përvijime të Kamzës, Albania
Organizers: Grupi ATA, IAKSA
Talk and film presentation: Dorina Pllumbi and Klodiana Millona

Jun 2022 **Urban Commons Research Workshop**, London Metropolitan University,
Title: *Hidrofili: more than a place of refuge*
Speaker: Dorina Pllumbi

Nov 2021 **Jaap Bakema Annual Conference**, Het Nieuwe Instituut Rotterdam
The Observers Observed: Architectural Uses of Ethnography Panel: Claiming the City,
Title presentation: *Observing the Architectural Stigma of Ugliness: The Case of Albania and Galicia.*
Authors: Maria Novas and Dorina Pllumbi
https://pure.tudelft.nl/ws/portalfiles/portal/103471825/2021_JBSC_Proceedings_Maria_Novas_and_Dorina_Pllumbi.pdf

Feb 2021 **109th CAA Annual conference,** Panel: Affective and Generative Dimensions in Covid 19 Activism,
Title presentation: *Material-human resistance in times of Covid-19. The story of the erasure of the National Theater in Tirana, Albania,*
Speakers: Dorina Pllumbi and Doriana Musaj
https://caa.confex.com/caa/2021/meetingapp.cgi/Session/7558

Sep 2019 **Research Symposium The City as a Commons,** Pavia
Title: *Transitional Tirana: Commoning as material engagement*
Speaker: Dorina Pllumbi
http://cityascommons.unipv.it/researchsymposium2019/

Aug 2018 **Capacious Conference Affect Inquiry/ Making Space,** Lancaster, PA
Stream#19 Affective Spaces: Reframing Theory, Praxis, and Pedagogies in Architecture & Design,
Title presentation: *Affective Common-Place: The Case of NDSM Ship Wharf, Amsterdam,* Speaker: Dorina Pllumbi
http://capaciousjournal.com/conference/files/capacious_AIMS_abstracts.pdf

May 2015 **Biennale Spazio Pubblico 2015,** Rome
Spazi in transizione e usi temporanei,
Title presentation: *Public Space in Transition. The case of Tirana*,
Speaker: Dorina Pllumbi

July 2014 **Marie Jahoda Summer School of Sociology**, University of Vienna
Public Spaces in Transition,
Speaker: Dorina Pllumbi
https://www.soz.univie.ac.at/veranstaltungen/archiv-veranstaltungen/marie-jahoda-schools/summer-school-2014/

LIST OF PUBLICATIONS/ FILMS

2026 Pllumbi, D. (2026). *Marginalized Spatialities: Situated reflections on state collectivism and kincommoning in Albania*. Dissertation TU Delft.

Forthcoming 2026 Elina, A., Pllumbi, D., and Milian Bernal, D. (2026), *(Hidden)Narratives of Spatial Resistance*, WritingPlace Book Series, NAI publishers

Forthcoming 2026 Pllumbi, D. (2026). Kombinati Tekstil Stalin in Tirana: Political Stakes of a Histoire Croisée, in Nuijsink., C., Avermaete, T. (eds) in *Diversifying the Architectural Canon with "Crossed Histories"*, gta Verlag

Forthcoming 2026 Pllumbi, D. (2026), Commoning Spatial Dissent at the TUDelft Encampment for Palestine, in Qudah, N., Tanović, S. (eds) in *Architecture and Colonialism in and about Palestine: On Space, Erasure and Memory*, Springer Nature

2025 Pllumbi, D. (2025, July 6). Me ba vend n'histori: Përbashkime të fragmentuara. *Nyje*. https://nyje.al/me-ba-vend-nhistori-perbashkime-te-fragmentuara/

2023 Pllumbi, D., Kochaniewicz, A., & Alatalo, E. (Directors). (2023). ***Would you call yourself a kombinats?*** [documentary film]. Screened in several settings such as TUDelft Exhibition 2026 *This is Practice*; Film Festival Dokufest 2023, Prizren, Kosovo; Romanian Biennale of Architecture 2023; Faculty of Architecture, University of Tampere, Finland; Laboratory of Urban Anthropology, Kamza, Albania; Urban House, Activist collective, Tirana, Albania; Forte Prenestino, Rome, Italy. https://dokufest.com/en/festival/2023/the-planned-the-unplanned-and-everything-inbetween/would-you-call-yourself-a-kombinats/ https://research.tuni.fi/insurgentspatialpractices/news/two-short-films-screened-in-romanian-biennial-of-architecture/

2023 Pllumbi D. (2023) Urban Façades, Political Shades: Tirana's Nationalistic Turn in Architecture and Its Subtexts, *Art Studies* vol. 22 https://research.tudelft.nl/en/publications/urban-fa%C3%A7ades-political-shades-tiranas-nationalistic-turn-in-arch

2023 Pllumbi, D., Merolli, M., Natunen. V., (2023) *Quoetry: Hands, Words, Worlds,* in Bernal, D. M., Alatalo, E., Hawkins, J. A., & Lehtovuori, P. (2023). Tampere: Co-Constructed Narratives of the Grassroots in the City Narrating Hiedanranta. *Writingplace*, *8–9*. https://doi.org/10.7480/writingplace.8-9.7257

2023 Pllumbi, D. & Vogel, W. C., (2023), Kamza and Tirana: A Travel Captured in Correspondence. The Planned, the Unplanned, and Everything in Between In: *Writingplace: Journal for Architecture and Literature*. 8-9, p. 288-310 https://journals.open.tudelft.nl/writingplace/article/view/7262

2022 Pllumbi, D. (2022). Commoning as a Material Engagement of Resistance: The Struggle to Save the Albanian National Theater. In: Bruyns, G., Kousoulas, S. (eds) *Design Commons*. Design Research Foundations. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-95057-6_2

2022 Pllumbi, D. (2022). Kombinat: The Unseen and Their Architectural Oddkins. *Architectural Design*, *92*(2), 30-35. https://doi.org/10.1002/ad.2790

2022 Pllumbi, D. (2022, July 14). Is Tirana's rapid transformation progress or erasure? *Kosovo 2.0*. https://kosovotwopointzero.com/en/is-tiranas-rapid-transformation-progress-or-erasure/

2021 Novas Ferradás, M. & Pllumbi, D., (2021), Observing the Architectural Stigma of the Ugliness: The Cases of Albania and Galicia, in *The Observers Observed: Architectural Uses of Ethnography: Proceedings of the 8th Annual Conference of the Jaap Bakema Study Centre*. van den Heuvel, D., Tanis, F. & Hwang, S. A. (eds.). Rotterdam: TU Delft and Het Nieuwe Instituut, p. 114-120 https://pure.tudelft.nl/ws/portalfiles/portal/103471825/2021_JBSC_Proceedings_Maria_Novas_and_Dorina_Pllumbi.pdf

2021 Pllumbi, D., (2021, May 19), Outrage: the unwilding of the Pyramid of Tirana, In: *The Architectural Review: AR May 2021 Play* https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/outrage/outrage-the-unwilding-of-the-pyramid-of-tirana

2020 Havik, K., & Pllumbi, D. (2020). Urban Commoning and Architectural Situated Knowledge: The Architects' Role in the Transformation of the NDSM Ship Wharf, Amsterdam. *Architecture and Culture*, *8*(2), 289–308. https://doi-org.tudelft.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/20507828.2020.1766305

MEDIA APPEARANCE/ PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

2026 Barca, F., & Caruso, F. (2026, February 16). Building a "collective desire": Near Tirana, Kamza tells the story of Albania. *Voxeurop Independent European Journalism*. https://voxeurop.eu/en/kamza-tirana-story-albania-urbanism/

2026 Barca, F., & Caruso, F. (2026, February 16). Empty towers: Inside Tirana's mad construction boom. *Voxeurop Independent European Journalism*. https://voxeurop.eu/en/tirana-construction-boom-towers-urbanism/

2023 Podcast: Other Talking Points_ #S1EP5 - Gentrification, Speakers: Dorina Pllumbi & Iva Čukić
https://research.tudelft.nl/en/clippings/podcast-other-talking-points-s1ep5-gentrification

2023 Albanian National Radio Television Show ARTES
Artes: Arkitektura shpirtërore, rrëfimet njerëzore dhe fabrikimet e politikës për qytetin (Affective architecture, peoples'stories and political fabrications for the city)
Gusts: Dorina Pllumbi, Arba Bekteshi, Aurora Birbilaj, Eroll Bilibani
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QcjuhmGScb8&t=345s

2022 Artes: Ardhja, shtëpia, varri (Arrival, house, grave), episode on the Laboratory of Urban Anthropology
Guests: Dorina Pllumbi, Nebi Bardhoshi, Entenela Ndrevataj, Lori Lako
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WtHeZCFDUrY

2022 ARTES: Kritika Xhejkobiane ne kontekstin shqiptar (Jacobs' critics in the Albanian context)
Guests: Elona Pira, Doriana Musaj, Dorina Pllumbi
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rsUYnFOGEwc



26#13

Marginalized Spatialities

Situated reflections on state collectivism and kincommoning in Albania

Dorina Pllumbi

This doctoral study explores forms of collectivities and their spatial politics in Albania across three political periods: state socialism, the anarchic aftermath of its collapse in the early 1990s, and the current neoliberal regime. It challenges the prevailing assumption that the fall of state socialism led to the loss of collective practices and a turn towards individualism. The study draws a sharp distinction between state collectivism, utilized by the party-state as the main ideological tool, and fragmented commoning practices that persisted and intensified precisely in moments of institutional failure and political instability.

Empirically, despite their fluctuating agency, it shows that commoning practices have remained present and politically relevant throughout successive regimes. Often overlooked and marginalized in professional and academic discourse, they have served as vital social infrastructures shaping the materialization of livelihood patterns and urbanization. Theoretically, the study advances the concept of kincommoning to account for collective practices reliant on practical kin-making, spatial proximity, reciprocity, and migration. It engages with these practices as contested terrains, recognizing the internal tensions and contradictions, while foregrounding their capacity to sustain collective life, as well as their often unseen defiant tacit politics of everyday life. Methodologically, the research has a transdisciplinary approach, integrating multi-modal spatial ethnography, including documentary film production, and reflexive writing.

Centering the agency of marginalized places as generative of knowledge rather than mere case studies, the dissertation critiques deterministic emancipatory frameworks perpetuated by the interplay of hierarchies of state power, market forces, and professional practices of architecture and urban planning.

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