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Dorina Pllumbi

# Kombinat

## The Unseen and Their Architectural Oddkins

Kombinat, Tirana, Albania, photographed in November 2019

Although production ceased in the textile factories with the fall of the totalitarian regime in 1991, an industrial landscape still prevails in Kombinat.



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Architectural researcher **Dorina Pllumbi** explores the appropriation of an ex-industrial area of Albania for dwelling purposes. She points out the need for the architectural discipline to learn from the unconventional process of transformation of these realities by their new inhabitants.

In the southwestern part of Tirana, about 6 kilometres (4 miles) from the city centre, is Kombinat, a peripheral ex-industrial neighbourhood. Anarchic episodes and a transitioning weak state followed the dismantling of state totalitarianism in 1991. It was then that the deindustrialisation of Kombinat started. Once the pride of the Communist party-state, it turned into a ghost terrain of empty abandoned mills. These structures were appropriated and transformed into dwellings by migrant inhabitants arriving from all around Albania.

The story of Kombinat is emblematic in understanding the Albanian reality of the totalitarian past and the transition to a new form of a neoliberal state, which has recently been denounced by many as having developed authoritarian features. Citizens have little or no opportunity to contest the decisions impacting their lives. After many years of neglect, and in the aftermath of an earthquake that hit central Albania in November 2019, a new masterplan by the Italian architectural firm Archea Associati, which proposes a drastic transformation of the area through massive demolition and new construction, was approved and presented to the public through a meeting that was held online because of the Covid-19 pandemic situation. 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 that are proposed to be saved, while ignoring the rich history of Kombinat and wiping out other forms of life that have mushroomed at the mills. This article proposes a different reading of these structures, without romanticising them, but recognising them as material evidence of inhabitants' efforts to improve their living conditions on their own, unaided, in solidarity with each other but forgotten by the state and the city of Tirana, for whom they are invisible or subject to stigma.

The discussed tacit and genuine processes of appropriation of the ex-industrial buildings for dwelling purposes are usually considered as in the architectural canon as a form of disorder. This results in the *unseeing* of these processes by architectural professionals, academics and the state. This article argues instead that they offer valuable and paradigmatic architectural knowledge – a field that although longing for a shift towards inclusive modus operandi, still does not have the capability to incorporate these sorts of *disorderly processes* in its operational protocols.



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## FROM GLORY TO UNCERTAINTY

The industrial complex known as the Stalin Textile Factory, commonly known as Kombinat (from its Albanian name Kombinati Tekstil Stalin), was inaugurated in 1951. It was a gift from the Soviet Union to the Albanian people with the instalment of the socialist regime. For the Communist party-state, Kombinat was a model working-class neighbourhood. It would represent the historical moment of a new era of transition from an agrarian to an industrial Albania. Here the New Worker and the New Socialist Man were being fabricated. The Soviet machines gave a new status and identity to the workers. They and their family members would all be called *kombinats* – citizens of Kombinat.[1]

With the fall of the totalitarian regime in 1991, production stopped and the machinery and mills were abandoned. Demographic allocations of the population were no longer centrally controlled as they had been under the previous regime. This triggered a flux of migration towards the capital city from remote areas of the country as people sought better life opportunities. These migrants in need of housing discovered the cold and enormous industrial structures of Kombinat. Once vibrant and the objects of pride, these buildings now stood in a state of depression, surprisingly stoic and simultaneously inviting. They were seen as a place of refuge, a roof over one's head, with no comfortable rooms, no heat, but just an opportunity for shelter in anarchic times when the state was absent. They

Inauguration day,
Stalin Textile Factory ('Kombinat'),
Tirana,
8 November 1951

The statue of Stalin stood in the main square of Kombinat, which was considered a model working-class neighbourhood by the Communist state, embodying the transition from an agrarian to an industrial Albania.[2]

Kombinat,
Tirana,
photographed in November 2019 and June 2021

A continuous arcade of the ex-industrial building has been fragmented into smaller segments of three arches for every house created. Stair elements have been located inside the arcade to access the second floor of the house.



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A large hall has been used as inner courtyard for the houses attached to the building. The residents, especially children, have a particular connection as they used to play in these spaces during rainy days.

were there, silent, forgotten, but magnificent, protective and rough at the same time.

A special encounter occurred between these human bodies and the forgotten buildings, and a particular relationship started to crystallise. It was not a romantic or reverent relationship, nor was it based on nostalgic sentiments. The buildings had no love to offer, but neither did the new residents adore these weird structures; they needed a house, and these wild giants were beyond that – oversized, to say the least. The new inhabitants never saw these buildings as untouchable; on the contrary, their relationship with them was based on a constant effort of appropriation through transformation. Children were born inside the buildings and grew up playing close to the machines, in big halls and tunnels. Weddings were celebrated in the alleys, not far from enormous chimneys, and funeral rituals were held here. What many consider weird, scary, unbelievable, is actually home for the inhabitants of these structures, the place where they grew up; it is life itself, the world they know, which is often despised and stigmatised, but so rich when one gets to know it.

The buildings described here may not exist by the time this text is published a few months after writing: the area's inhabitants are living with the uncertainty of eviction and displacement. As the pace of reterritorialisation in Tirana is currently fast, the only certainty is that the city will be drastically different in a few months.

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## MAKING ARCHITECTURAL ODDKINS

The forgotten industrial Soviet architecture with its massive, rough spaces became a place of human–nonhuman encounter with *designerly opportunities* of interventions that are certainly not perfect, not professional, but rather intuitive, based on common knowledge accumulated over time. The builder-inhabitants build directly on site, without drawing up plans or designs and without work schedules. They build their architectures at 1:1 scale when a new room is needed for a newborn, or a couple is about to get married. Through tacit, situational and common knowledge, construction episodes occur simultaneously, resonating with life itself, with practices of eating, working, partying, birthing, playing, all intertwined in the process of space creation. As Tim Ingold would have observed, making and using merge into one here; the material of building and the material of living are strongly entangled.[3] Dealing with mould and humidity while sharing construction skills with each other is part of material engagement and community bonding, which go side by side, never along separate paths.

Builder-inhabitants here operate with the materials around them, which professional architects often do not consider or dare to experiment with. To think with Donna Haraway in material and spatial terms, *making oddkins* entails a paradigmatic shift to disturb the canonical ordered hygienist design model commonly taught in architecture schools and typically practised in the built environment.[4] In Kombinat we see this material and spatial kin-making process as an entanglement of a purist, clean, functional Soviet-style architectural language with a messy, dirty, situational, need-oriented one. These oddkins courageously challenge and expend our aesthetical understandings.

**The Soviet architectural structures of Kombinat afforded a possibility for openness, and enabled the freedom of genuine involvement. The architectural oddkins challenge our understanding of ownership, authorship and aesthetics**

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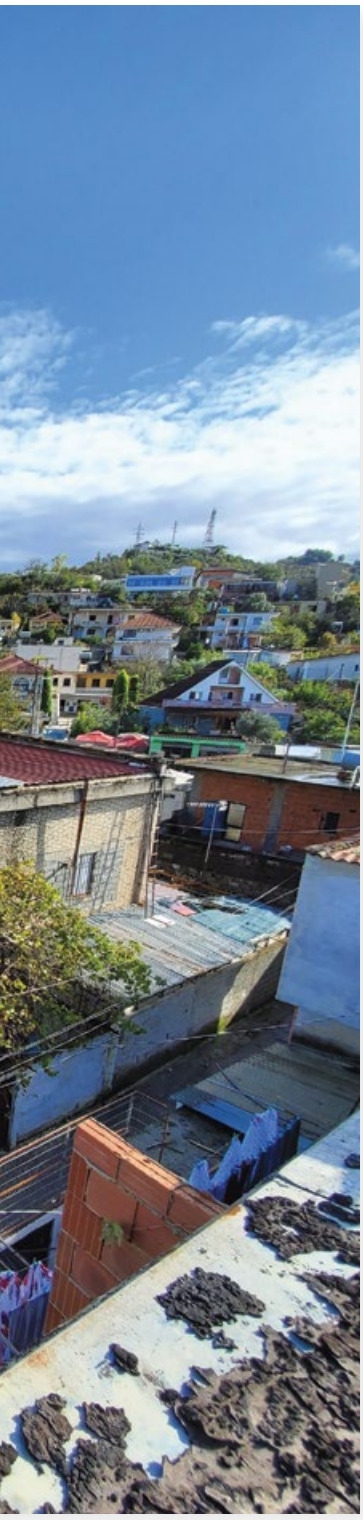

Kombinat,
Tirana,
photographed in
November 2019 and June
2021

*above:* Architectural entanglements of the large-scale industrial buildings with the small-scale interventions by those who have taken up residence in them.

*left:* A community of residents created the entrances of their houses to face each other. This turned an empty street between two industrial buildings into a vibrant space for gathering, playing, caring for plants, and so on.

## THE POLITICS OF THE UNSEEN

The open and unfinished structures embody a slow-pace lifestyle. Building two columns on one day, then after two months a slab, then the stairs, then the grapevine, time becomes an important architectural component, allowing the inhabitants to generate memories and strengthen a special relationship with each of the elements that compose their home. Recognition of the role of time and the importance of allowing things to settle in their place stands in contrast to Tirana's speedy transformation and the threatening development machine, with disproportionate power often exercised as a form of violence towards the city.

The Soviet architectural structures of Kombinat afforded a possibility for openness, enabled the freedom of genuine involvement. The architectural oddkins challenge our understanding of ownership, authorship and aesthetics. They shift the discussion beyond form and the market. It is time for architecture to see these other forms of spatial and material engagement, and see them differently. AD

**Notes**

1. Elidor Mëhilli, *From Stalin to Mao: Albania and the Socialist World*, Cornell University Press (Ithaca, NY and London), 2017, pp 98–109.
2. The Agjensia Telegrafike Shqiptare requires a watermark in this image to verify its authenticity.
3. See Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*, Routledge (London and New York), 2013.
4. Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Duke University Press (Durham, NC and London), 2016, pp 99–103.

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