

Projekti Bunkerizimit: The Strange Case of The Albanian Bunker

In 1944 in Albania, Enver Hoxha, first secretary of the communist Party of Labour Central Committee and political commissar of the Army of National Liberation, became prime minister of his country. His early tenure, which coincided with the global reorganization of nations after World War II, brought communist Albania into alignment with the Soviet Union, but after the death of Joseph Stalin, and then Nikita Khrushchev's revisions to original Marxist-Leninist principles, Hoxha was at odds with the larger community of communist countries in which the communist project, in his view, seemed to be softening. Maintaining Albania's hardline position against a shifting communist doctrine, Hoxha found himself increasingly alone in a dangerous world. Tensions came to a head in 1961 when he broke with Khrushchev and allied Albania with China, turning his back on the Warsaw Pact.

In the Western world this went largely unnoticed. After World War II Albania was seen by outsiders as an obscure and inconsequential place located somewhere hard to define. Hoxha's self-imposed exile amplified the nation's invisibility, but with this came a certain freedom that Hoxha exploited to increasingly bizarre ends. The 1970s found him pursuing all manner of strange ideas (born largely of his own paranoia), most of them to do with military defense. The strangest of all¹ must surely be his *Projekti Bunkerizimit*, or "bunkerization" project, in which tens of thousands of reinforced concrete bunkers were placed throughout the country to protect soldiers and citizens alike from attack by outside forces.² A military-industrial project at a grand scale, *Projekti Bunkerizimit* imagined a bunker for every Albanian, located to allow shelter at short notice. Hoxha and his military engineer Josif Zagali very nearly accomplished this goal, ultimately constructing over 700,000 bunkers across all of Albania, one for every four inhabitants. Coming in three basic sizes – small ("QZ," for individuals), medium ("PZ," for small groups), and large ("special structures" for large

1. With the possible exception of his installation of dense fields of arrowheads throughout the country's open spaces, pointed skyward, to discourage invasion by paratroopers.

2. The sources of this imagined threat were legion, sometimes specified and sometimes not, and included at various times the Soviets, neighboring countries, the United States, and occasionally Italy. Current scholarship indicates that no such threats ever existed. A recent, definitive account of Albania's place in the larger landscape of former Soviet states is found in Tom Gallagher's *The Balkans After the Cold War: From Tyranny to Tragedy* (New York: Routledge, 2003).



ENVER HOXHA, 1971.

groups of the most important military and political figures) – each type has its own logic of construction corresponding to scale and deployment.³

With the reopening of Albania in 1985, after Hoxha's death and four decades of impenetrable solitude, the world was baffled to discover a project of such magnitude, equal parts engineering efficiency and absurd rationale. An exercise in the kind of steroidal production that sometimes results from megalomaniacal delusion, *Projekti Bunkerizimit* can be compared to other compulsive projects of physical and social engineering found throughout history, different only perhaps in its obscurity and, ultimately, its utter uselessness. For as it turns out, Albania had no real enemies, its location and resources seen as inconsequential. An act of speculative realism of the most absurd variety, Hoxha's bunkerization served no purpose other than to exorcise the demons of an agitated mind, loosing them upon the landscape as mute sentinels of nothing.

The bunkers themselves appear, at first glance, brutally efficient for their apparent dumbness. Closer inspection reveals this not to be the case. They proved to be neither efficient nor functional, if only because they were never used for their intended purpose – defense – or even for deterrence.⁴ Nor did they instill confidence in a population fearful of imminent attack, since most Albanians had no such worries in the first place.⁵ Instead, visible as they were throughout the Albanian landscape they became a pervasive reminder of the inefficiencies of Hoxha's governance.⁶

The Albanian bunker is a unique and deviant case in the larger context of the European theater of war and resulting defensive projects. While sharing some of the most basic characteristics of bunkers built anywhere else – reinforced concrete construction, partial burial in earth, rounded surfaces, minimal openings, and so forth – the Albanian case seems an entirely other kind of thing. In his seminal book *Bunker Archaeology*, Paul Virilio defines this architectural object (the European bunker generally) as more or less homogeneous across regional or national specificities: “This homogeneity, this monolithic character, is useful for us in being able to reveal several factors at work in modern warfare.”⁷ Moving between the bunker and the evolving nature of warfare it reflects, Virilio builds a comprehensive theory of their relationship that, for all its depth and nuance, still describes an architectural object singularly rooted in military origins. Historical battles providing real proof of a bunker's efficacy reinforce the story of an object well-suited to its task, legible

3. For example, the smallest bunkers were prefabricated as a single unit offsite to be delivered and dropped simply in place with no further construction necessary, while larger ones were typically prefabricated in smaller slices (in the way one cuts an apple) for ease of transport and assembled on site. The largest bunkers were often buried for purposes of camouflage and increased protection from thermonuclear blast.

4. Except for a brief time by the Kosovo Liberation Army and Albanian refugees during the Kosovo War in 1999. See David Pike, “The Bunkerization of Albania,” *Cabinet* 50 (2013): 54, and “KLA Takes Cover in Cold War Bunkers,” *The Times* (London): May 25, 1999.

5. In fact, as Hoxha's reign wore on over decades many Albanians came to hope for an invasion – from anyone – to save them from the increasingly destructive policies of their irrational leader.

6. Farmers especially hated them since they were often placed in the middle of agricultural fields, interrupting the flows of planting and harvesting like errant boulders.

7. Paul Virilio, *Bunker Archaeology* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1994), 37. Virilio does not address the Albanian bunker specifically.



in its form, and enduring in its definition. Implicit here is the clear link between the form and its function, which Virilio calls instrumentality. “Defensive architecture is therefore instrumental, existing less in itself than with a view to ‘doing’ something: waiting, watching, then acting or, rather, reacting. To live in such a place is not so much to ‘dwell’ there as it is to ‘take it on’ for an act for which the casemate is the instrument.”⁸

8. *Ibid.*, 43.

The same cannot be said of the Albanian variety, for Hoxha’s bunkers never “did” anything at all, or at least not the kinds of things anyone would have imagined. It is true that they were originally conceived with military intentions in a militarized environment. However, after the first few years, any rational belief in the continued relevance of such motivators strained credulity. A rapidly diminishing concern for any real threat is often described by Albanians today: as they tell it, bunkerization’s pointlessness became clear almost from the start. Now, of course, the project’s status as an exercise in speculative hyperreality par excellence is quite clear, a position having little, if any, opposition. And so, if the singular and durable definition we expect of the bunker as a category of architectural object comes from its clear moorings in military history and planning, and these, in turn, are tied to real instrumentality, Albania’s bunkers do not fit. They are outliers: rogue objects in terms of form, function, reference, and legacy.

If these objects are not bunkers in any usual sense of the term, then what are they? For designers this question concerns where the “project” of bunkerization might go from here. The objectives and values that *Projekti Bunkerizimit*



HALF BUNKER OUTSIDE TIRANA.
MIDDLE: BUNKER NEAR DURRES. TOP:
BUNKER NEAR KRUJË.

9. Pike, "The Bunkerization of Albania,"
Cabinet, 59.

carried for Hoxha differed radically from those seen by others, and this latter definition of the project, generally referred to here as an act of speculative reality (or hyperreality), grew in strength with each decade. Only in the narrowest of terms was it ever really Hoxha's project. Strewn across the geophysical landscape like rockfall, its seizure of the collective, cultural imagination was all but inevitable. Hoxha's death, then, had no consequence for the life of the project, and in fact gave it powerful new energy. Political suppression turned overnight toward intellectual expression, and with this change, new definitions and directions for the project emerged.

In his recent essay on the history and contemporary status of Albania's bunkerization, David Pike presents a clear case for a four-fold definition. "We can distinguish four forms in which the bunkers persist as a spatial phenomenon in Albania: as ruins in the landscape; as lived spaces put to local use; as spaces converted to new uses proper to the consumption of the bunker fantasy; as spaces converted to reflection on the bunker fantasy and on bunkerization as such."⁹ The first three do not need much further explanation, familiar as they have become to those interested in the subject, scholars and tourists alike. All four have something to do with what Pike calls "bunker fantasy," a concept that captures various reactions to Albania's bunkers, an ever-expanding set of scenarios conjured by the imagination in the face of no clear or singular interpretation of the problem:

1. Bunker *appreciated* as ruin. Clearly this form has its precedents. Perhaps the closest is the depiction of the broken and abandoned castle in picturesque theory, which elevates a previously utilitarian instrument of fortification to the status of aesthetic object. Artistic appreciation is the closest approximation to function, as the bunker requires abandonment for its ruination.
2. Bunker *adapted* for practical reuse. This form existed even before Hoxha's death. Stories are frequently told of farmers in remote locations, far from the intrusive policing experienced closer to Tirana, using bunkers for all manner of utilitarian purposes, especially the birthing and calving of livestock.
3. Bunker *exploited* for consumerist reuse. An increasingly popular form intended mostly for global consumption, this is the sort of lemons-to-lemonade apologia we now expect from defunct infrastructures of the dirty and mean variety.

Designers are especially attracted to the possibility for clever turns toward unexpected value: hostels, hotel rooms, bars, and restaurants... awkward programmatic fits that for this very reason come at a surcharge.

4. Bunker *interpreted* as self-reflective institution. This form seems the least clear of the four, both in Pike's essay as well as in the larger world of the contemporary bunker project. Imagine museums of bunkerization housed in bunkers, for example, or exhibitions on the subject that travel from bunker to bunker. Variations on this theme abound. Differing from the more obvious form aimed at tourist/consumer culture, the audience here is imagined as more circumspect and scholarly. A case of "high" versus "low," some might say, if such distinctions matter.

And maybe they do. If this fourth type of bunker is to be fleshed out properly and rise to the level of realization already achieved by the first three, then something more must occur. Pike's fourth form is limited by the constraints of literal, physical embodiment: "spaces converted to reflection on the bunker fantasy and on bunkerization as such"¹⁰ confines an otherwise prolific, radically extensive form to the narrow set of built possibilities he cites by example, all retreats of industrial detritus-cum-public amenity.¹¹ Never mind the obvious, it will happen anyway, without our efforts. Instead, imagine this fourth category of bunker – crucial for its selfish introversion – as not necessarily physical in nature, and not so much a product, but rather as a project of interpretation. Whether there is any real future value to be found in Albania's bunkers, if it is to be worth the effort of uncovering, has less to do with practical applications and whatever associated monetizations might come of such schemes and more with a different form of speculation aimed precisely at problems of architecture. In other words, the value of the Albanian bunker lies in its architectural objectivity.

Three strategies for the future of bunkerization define current discourse among various interested parties (academics, policy-makers, designers, and citizens), each derived in part from one of the four forms outlined above. The first I call nullification. Held mostly by older Albanians who recall Hoxha's regime, this approach would remove the bunkers in an understandable yet hopeless impulse to erase reminders of the past. The second, which is growing in popularity (especially with designers), argues for various forms of adaptive

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid., 61. Here Pike cites such precedents for potential bunker museums as the Promenade Plantée atop the Viaduc des Arts in Paris, the Poughkeepsie Railway Bridge over the Hudson River, the Highline in Manhattan, and the Tate Modern Museum in the Bankside Power Station.

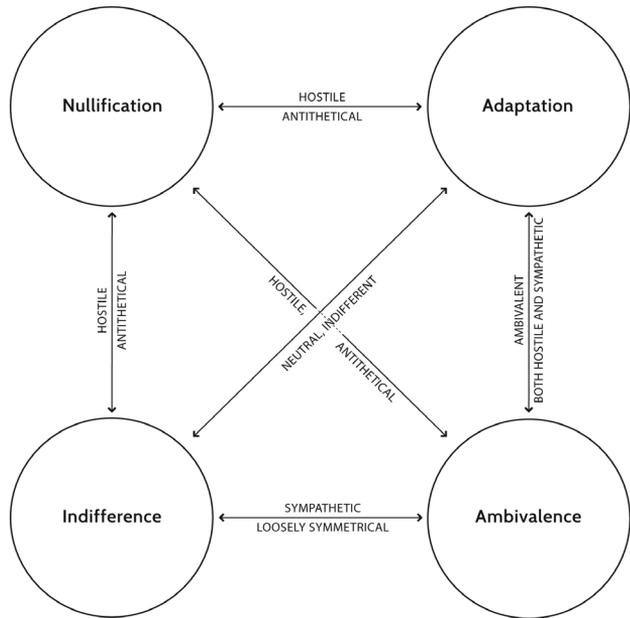
12. Imagine, for example, a bunker redone as a designer hotel bedroom, an idea as grim as it is inevitable.

reuse in an effort to overcome former trauma, not with erasure, but with something like overpainting. While reasonable, this approach remains blind to the dark sobriety of the bunker form itself. Its powerful effect cannot be ignored, and deflects this project's optimism toward something vaguely sinister, like a creepy clown mask.¹² The third proposal seems less an active approach than an attitude that can be called indifference. Growing in popularity, especially with Albania's younger generations, this strategy leaves the bunkers alone, in place, in the spirit of passive preservation. Advocates say they have grown up with these objects in their landscape (but did not grow up under Hoxha) and would like to keep them, not as cautionary reminders of the past but as the things that make their world unique to them, an attitude similar to the Easter Islanders' view of their moai statues.

Counterintuitive as it may seem, this last position is the most productive. Erasure is impossible given the physical durability of the bunkers themselves and the enormous costs associated with their removal, an unreasonable price to pay for a country that remains among Europe's poorest. Adaptation, as clever as some repurposed bunkers are, and setting aside the charge that such optimism is naive, seems too limited in scope to compete with the muscularity of Hoxha's original project. Bedrooms and bars in bunkers feel trite in the face of Bunkerizimit's monstrous ambition. So how could indifference could fare any better? What is the nature of its strength? These days it is common to hear young people drop the term *whatever* in response to all manner of affront. Those who take its use as a sign of intellectual laziness and its ubiquity as habit are wrong on both counts. Closer consideration reveals that indifference played well is a powerful position, an oblique trajectory past a problem rather than a confrontation.

Nonetheless, indifference is not yet a project. In its present form it is too passive, too diffuse, and too emotional. But from this attitude it is possible to suggest a fourth way, one that moves from impulse to something more effective, to an engagement with the bunker project very different from the others: to ambivalence.

Ambivalence describes an approach to the bunker project that actively promotes its vitality and durability even as it moves away from its origins. Seeing the bunkers as primitive objects worth inclusion in architectural discourse, this approach is primarily scholarly in nature, the rough conceptual equivalent to Pike's fourth category of bunker form, the self-reflective institution. The Albanian bunker is worth study



in its own right and should not be erased or overwritten in the ways advocated in current discussion. Where nullification and adaptation take an actively oppositional stance, its sympathies lie instead with indifference, but for its passivity. Albanians run the risk of losing any sense of these objects if they take them entirely for granted. The bunkers may seem like rocks in a field, but they are not rocks in a field; they are something else, and a project of ambivalence aspires to make their definition more clear. Finally, ambivalence proposes neither the subtraction of bunkers (nullification) nor the preservation of their original quantity (adaptation and indifference), but rather an addition to their numbers in the form of doppelgängers designed to raise the visibility of the object to another level of attention. These doppelgängers can be either new construction or speculative renderings that depict bunkers in new contexts.

The manifold nature of the bunker’s definition also illustrates its plural nature as an object. Its strange, quadri-polar symmetry can be seen as defining the bunker as a compound object, one that refuses the traditional oppositional model of “either one or many.” If there were +/-700,000 bunkers at the time of Hoxha’s death, quadrupling their definition multiplies their number to 2,800,000. This logic suggests that conceiving the bunker project’s future as an additive

enterprise is the most natural way forward, however audacious it may at first sound.

POSTSCRIPT

Beyond the more immediate value of the Albanian bunker as an object for scholarship, the larger objective here involves the reinvigoration of object study as a disciplinary activity for architecture. Attention to the status of objects in architecture waxes and wanes. The recent emergence of architecture's interest in speculative realism and object oriented ontology (OOO), a young but increasingly vocal addition to philosophy, suggests we are again at the front end of rising interest in the meanings and values of objects, in sharp contrast to the various field theories of the past 20 years. While this is not the place to define an architectural OOO, the bunker project alludes to it in a number of respects, revealing deep sympathies between OOO and architecture's own disciplinary treatment of the object. These include "weird realism," an approach to reality that does not exclude immaterial things that are nonetheless useful for architectural discourse on objects (such as the doppelgängers mentioned above), and Graham Harman's extension of Heidegger's theory of the broken tool toward a theory of the withdrawn object. For both of these, the Albanian bunker is the most perfect architectural example.