

# Cities in Evolution. Diachronic Transformations of Urban and Rural Settlements, IV

VIII AACCP Symposium, Proceedings

Edited by Ö. Özkuvancı, A. Camiz and Z. Ceylanlı

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**DIACHRONIC TRANSFORMATIONS OF URBAN AND RURAL**  
**SETTLEMENTS**  
**Proceedings Volume IV**

VIII AACCP (Architecture, Archaeology and Contemporary City Planning)  
symposium, Istanbul 2021

Edited by

**Özge Özkuvancı, Alessandro Camiz and Zeynep Ceylanlı**

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VIII AACCP (Architecture, Archaeology and Contemporary City Planning) symposium, Özyeğin University  
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**VIII AACCP (Architecture, Archaeology and Contemporary City Planning) Symposium  
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## Constructing landscape: Traces of modernist rural landscapes in Albania

Federica Pompejano

Instituti i Antropologjisë Kulturore dhe Studimit të Artit (Akademia e Studimeve Albanologjike),

federica.pompejano@gmail.com

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### Abstract

During the 20th century, embedded in the spirit of the nation- and state-building logic, Albania underwent three profound social transformations (Bardhoshi, 2011) based on state-driven development and modernisation projects and articulated by specific ideological perspectives governments had on society, culture, and people and that materialised into its rural landscape and architecture. Through the introduction of chosen representative macro-areas as case studies, this preliminary contribution investigates Albania' countryside as a modernist rural landscape example. In fact, since independence from the Ottoman Empire (1912), modernity seems to have been regarded in Albania chiefly as a state-based ideological project. The past communist regime's nationalistic emphasis enclosed existing rural villages within state-controlled collective farms and agricultural cooperatives, while planning the "urbanization" of the countryside and the industrialization of the country as a declared and tangible project towards the modernization process of a new classless society (Rugg, 1994; Lelaj, 2015). Then, in the early 1990s, at the dawn of its collapse, the communist government started the de-collectivisation of the agricultural lands following the principle of land distribution, denying any prior inheritance rights; a process that during the first years of the post-socialist era took a drastic turn, basing itself on the opposite principle of land restitution (Bardhoshi, 2013). In this context, rural landscape and architecture underwent a further reshaping process that demonstrates all the difficulties involved in addressing and incorporating the memories, material culture and societal histories of the Socialist remains in the new democratic present (Lisjak, 2009; Myhrberg, 2011; Iacono and Këlliçi, 2016). Through the ongoing literature review and archival research processes, this contribution intends to generally illustrate the state-of-the-art and provide a wider overview on studies about socialist transformation in the Albanian countryside. The general purpose is not to cover all the contributions ever published on the topic, rather to combine different perspective and insights, initializing preliminary considerations while questioning further research developments and introducing the selected areas of study. Thus, stemming from the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Action EU funded project "Materializing Modernity – Socialist and Post-socialist Rural Legacy in Contemporary Albania", this paper aims at introducing and setting a debate on the Albanian modernist rural landscapes' legacy.

### Introduction

In 1991 the mass of protesters in Albania marked the end of the harsh communist dictatorship by toppling down the statue of Enver Hoxha that stood in Skanderbeg Square in Tirana. In the attempt of creating a communist-free national identity, since the 1990s several buildings representative of the socialist era were often destroyed by crowds, or privatized, transformed and reused by inhabitants. Still, traces of the socialist transformation of the country in terms of architectural remains and landscape evidence can be clearly observed and testifies the difficult passage from dictatorship to present democracy.

Although a few studies already started to be published in the early 1960s (Blanc, 1963), 1970s (Brochert, 1975; Sivignon, 1975), and 1980s (Hall, 1986; 1987), literature about Albanian socialist transformation of the landscape has known an increasingly flourishing period since the end of the dictatorship (Sjöberg, 1992; Rugg, 1994; Turnock 1994, Cungu and Swinnen, 1999). Those contributions integrated aspects related to the administrative, economic, and political change process to social issues, land uses and urban morphology (Gentile and Sjöberg, 2006).

In 1994, Rugg already pointed out how, immediately after the end of the regime, elements of the socialist constructed landscape were disappearing fast, underlining the importance of documenting them to distinguish legacies of communism in the country (Fig. 1). In fact, in the impelling post-socialist period, socialist legacies, both at the landscape and architectural level, were altered or destroyed, mirroring the attempt of freeing the country from the regime imprints while struggling to embrace western European conditions. By

introducing chosen representative macro-areas as case studies, I am going to investigate Albania's countryside as a modernist rural landscape example.

Through the ongoing literature review and archival research processes within the wider research context of the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Action EU funded project "Materializing Modernity – Socialist and Post-socialist Rural Legacy in Contemporary Albania", this brief contribution intends to generally illustrate the state-of-the-art and provide an overview on studies about landscape socialist transformation in the Albanian countryside. The general purpose is not to cover all the contributions ever published on the topic, rather to combine different perspective and insights, initializing preliminary considerations while questioning further research developments and introducing the selected areas of study.

### **The construction of a socialist rural landscape**

The agrarian reform as a premise to modernization processes. Since independence from the Ottoman Empire (1912), modernity seems to have been regarded in Albania chiefly as a state-based ideological project. The Italian agronomist Lorenzoni, commissioned by King Zog I to study the Albanian agrarian question and to prepare a draft law on Agrarian Reform visited the country in 1929 reporting how Albania was '[...] remarkably close to us in space and extremely far from us in time [...]' (Lorenzoni, 1940). A land of beautiful landscapes where the main economic activities were agriculture and pastoralism together with an irrational use of forests. Already then, the Myzeqe Plain, part of the flat coastal region that extends from the bend of the Buna River, just below Shkodra Lake, to Cape Treport in Vlorë, was identified as the centre of gravity of Albanian agriculture, but also of its greatest problems caused by frequent flooding of its rivers and marshes, including the largest Swamp of Tërbuf.

The intention to reclaim the Myzeqe plain as well as the other vast Plain of Maliq in the Korça area, was already a priority under the brief reign of King Zog I and then during the Italian protectorate. Thus, extending therefore the soil to put under the plough and obtain the maximum of that already cultivated terrain, were the two basic problems of agriculture to be solved without neglecting pastoralism and forestry.

Another important problem was the land ownership, that before 1945 was dominated by *çiflig* land tenure system in which peasants were working under the rule of a private landlord and contribute to the state and religious institutions, as well as the landlord himself (Cungu and Swinnen, 1999). This was abolished in August 1945, by the issuing of the Law No. 108, August 29, 1945 "About the Agrarian Reform" which foresaw the confiscation of land from large owners and the distribution to the peasant families. The Agrarian Reform was declared concluded in November 1946 and immediately the collectivization began, starting from the coastal plains and later also involved the hilly and mountainous regions. By the end of the 1970s, the collectivization resulted into a nationalization of the all land and by the mid-1980s there were about more than four-hundred agricultural cooperatives (AQSH, 1985). For more than forty-five years, under the motto '*Let us turn every inch of land into a source of prosperity!*'<sup>1</sup>, the past communist regime's nationalistic emphasis planned the "urbanization" of the countryside and the industrialization of the country, as a declared and tangible project towards the modernization process of a new classless society (Rugg, 1994; Lelaj, 2015). The French geographer André Blanc, who visited the country during the early 1960s, already noticed that 'the progress under the influence of the Soviet, the efforts to modernize agriculture brought about the brutal transformation of rural societies [...]' and that those changes were already reflected in the landscapes (Blanc, 1961).

The five main processes that involved the modernization of the countryside landscape were: the reclamation of the major marshy areas and their conversion into arable lands; the progressive and total collectivization of the lands; the transformation of rivers into sources of hydroelectrical power; the establishment of new rural agricultural centres as focal point for the urbanization of the countryside; the establishment of new socialist cities associated to the building of industries.

### **Traces into an everchanging present**

The present Albanian rural landscape reflects the history of the country's social condition and the economics behind it. Building upon previous studies and unpublished archival resources and with the aim of exemplifying those modernization processes, I am going to introduce five representative Albanian macro-areas that will

<sup>1</sup> The original motto in Albanian is: "Çdo pëllëmbë toke ta kthejmë në burim begatie!"

be the object of the forthcoming research. The selection of the following representative cases has been driven by the need to cover different geographic regions extending from north to south Albania and, at the same time, to be significant in relation to the abovementioned modernization processes. Another important criterion has been to investigate areas that had been already studied by the first Albanian ethnologists during the regime, such as Andromaqi Gjergji and Fiqiri Haxhiu that were the first to research about the new socialist rural life in the agricultural and livestock cooperatives and state farms. Finally, the chronological criterion has been also important to cover the periods since the rising of the regime until its collapse and the very first years of post-socialist transition phase, so that to capture the nuances and narratives from people that experienced those periods.

### **Case 1: The reclamation of Maliq marshy area in the Korça district (1946-1970s)**

Among the significant landscape transformation actions planned and carried out in the aftermath of the liberation by the Socialist regime, the reclamation of the marshy areas was among those that most physically changed the natural, hydrogeological, and biological aspects of the country. Despite a first attempt to start the reclamation works in 1927 by the "Maliqi" enterprise (Hoxha, 2017), the reclamation of the Maliq marshy areas was the first major reclamation work carried out by the regime in 1946 and which continued in several successive phases, the first of which ended between 1947 and 1948. In the meantime, agricultural cooperatives and state farms were established in the surrounding area as well as the first sugar beet processing state factory, *Kombinat i sheqerit "8 nëntori"*, inaugurated in 1951. Among the first agricultural cooperatives to be founded, the one of Rëmbec was also among the firsts considered as the subject of ethnographic studies carried out by the Albanian ethnologist Andromaqi Gjergji between the 1950s and 1960s. The former *çiflig* of Rëmbec, became the first agricultural cooperative in the Korça area, immediately after the implementation of the 1945's Agrarian Reform, in 1948. In 1959, the agricultural cooperative of Rëmbec was enlarged, including the near villages of Rov and Orman forming the joint agricultural cooperative 'Shkëndia' (Gjergji, 1963). The study of the today conditions in the rural village of Rëmbec, together with its surrounding plain landscape, will allow deepening those previous studies. At the same time, the collection of people's memories who experienced the Maliq Plain both during the socialist and post-socialist periods, will allow to bridge the past to the present rural life.

### **Case 2: The reclamation of the Myzeqe plain in the Fier district (1950s-1970s)**

Alongside the Maliq plain's reclamation works, the socialist regime turned Myzeqe plain, the largest plain arable area in Albania, into one of the most important agricultural areas of the country, with modern socialist agricultural and livestock cooperatives and state-farms. Hectares of land were reclaimed from lakes, marshes, and swamps and improved into arable fields. As part of the plain called *Myzeqe e Madhe*, the former marshy areas known as *Fusha e Tërbufit* (1954-64), *Fusha e Roskovecit* (1958-65) and *Fusha e Hoxharës* (1962-76), constitute an example of those reclamation works carried out by the regime for the transformation of Myzeqe plain from a malarian swamp into irrigated fields. The interest of analysing the reclamation of the Myzeqe marshy areas relies on the fact that they covered a quite long period in the history of the regime, ranging from the 1946 and the 1990. The construction of irrigation and drainage canals contributed to a significant expansion of arable land and an increase in crop. Moreover, the reclamation of the Myzeqe paved the way to the massive collectivization of the land into large, mechanized state-farms and agricultural cooperatives (Rugg, 1994). Further, in order to populate the new reclaimed land, internal population migration policies did not allowed peasantry to move to cities (Hall, 1986). The socialist rural settlements established in Tërbuf (Fig. 2), Hoxharë and Roskovec demonstrated the will of the dictatorship to transform a backward agricultural society in an industrialized agricultural class-less society.

### **Case 3: Transformation of Drin River in the Kukës district (1970s-1980s)**

Between 1967 and 1985, the Drin River was deeply transformed into a source of hydroelectrical power. The first hydropower plant, the "HEC i Vaut të Dejës", was built in 1967 in correspondence with the Drin River's downstream. Then, in 1971, the hydropower plant "HEC-Drita e Partisë" followed on the upper part of the river and with its dam, it formed the reservoir nowadays recognized as Lake of Fjerzë. The last hydropower plant, the "HEC-Enver Hoxha" was built in 1979-1980, in a strategic position in the middle of the first two and, entered in function between 1985-1988. Following, the construction of those three hydropower plants, existing rural villages, and the old citadel of Kukës were flooded, submerged by the creation of the new reservoirs. As consequence, the Party planned to re-build them as new rural villages that, together with the new town of

Kukës were aimed to reflect the socialist urban planning imprint. Within the continuation of this research, investigation of the current condition of some of the new re-built villages, such as Fajza, Shikaj, and Gostil will allow to explore the narrative of those who experienced that flooding initiative, and reconstruct memories related to the former pre-existing rural settlements.

#### **Case 4: The establishment of the new agricultural rural residential centre of 'Asim Zeneli' in the Gjirokaštër district (1947-1972)**

The past communist regime's nationalistic emphasis included existing rural villages within state-controlled collective farms and agricultural cooperatives economies while planning the "urbanization" of the countryside and the industrialization of the country as a declared and tangible project towards the modernization process. At the same time, it also established new rural residential centres that were aimed at acting as operative, administrative, and socio-cultural centres for surrounding villages converging in the same agricultural or livestock cooperative. The planned socialist rural centre of "Asim Zeneli" is in the Drinos Valley (Fig. 3), near the historic citadel of Gjirokaštër. It has been founded in 1947 as a first breeding collective cooperative in the People's Republic of Albania and, in 1972, evolved into a planned socialist rural centre for the near collective villages of Krinë, Saraqinishtë, Trenesishtë, Lazarat, Suhë, Stegopul and, Labova e Libohovës. Besides new socialist rural houses, the centre hosted an elementary and middle school, a cultural centre, and the main commercial and administrative services. As it was for the agricultural cooperative of Rëmbec, it has been among the first agricultural cooperatives to be studied by the Albanian ethnographer Fiqiri Haxhiu, in the 1960s. As in many other examples in the countryside, "Asim Zeneli" rural centre and its buildings testify how, despite the socialist ideals inspired by scientific, technological, and cultural progress pushed towards a new Albanian urbanized rurality, de facto the tension between tradition, nationalism and modernity shaped a new hybrid and modest rural architecture. However, "Asim Zeneli" village was also an incredibly interesting example of unforced internal migration on a voluntary basis and for grazing reasons. The reconstruction of memories related to the everyday life in the agricultural cooperative and in the first years after the collapse of the regime will be interlaced with current inhabitants' present everyday life and future hopes.

#### **Case 5: Post-earthquake rural villages reconstruction in Shkodër district countryside (1979)**

On 15 April 1979, Shkodër and Lezhë countryside was hit by a severe earthquake with an intensity corresponding to the VIII grade of Mercalli intensity scale. Villages such as Samrisht, Dajç and Obot were destroyed, and severe damages were observed also in the near agricultural cooperative of Koplik. On 3 October 1979, the reconstruction of the rural villages hit by the earthquake was declared complete. Homes, schools, and farm buildings were rebuilt in just over five months and a half of reconstruction works, in which groups of people from all over the country took part. The flash post-earthquake reconstruction in Shkodër countryside was another opportunity to reaffirm the new rural modernity reflected in the urbanization of the countryside and in the striving for reducing the differences between urban and rural areas. Nevertheless, more importantly, it represented the timing opportunity to demonstrate the efficiency of the self-reliant policies in building socialism, adopted by the People's Socialist Republic of Albania in the aftermath of the Sino-Albanian split in 1978.

#### **Conclusions**

In this brief contribution I attempted to illustrate my current five research case studies, providing a wider overview on studies about socialist landscape transformation in the Albanian countryside. The general purpose of this paper has been to combine different perspective and insights from some of the previous published sources on the socialist and post-socialist transformations in the Albanian landscape. Borrowing from Treib's landscape architecture subdivision (2013), 'to be modern or modernist, one need looks forward rather than backward, expressing the condition of modernity rather than the conditions [...] of prior 'eras.' In this sense, socialist modernization processes and transformation in the countryside, indeed generated what shall be identified as an extensive modernist rural landscape. The character and the peculiarities of those modernization processes based on a specific ideology shaped for more than forty-five years the Albanian 20<sup>th</sup>-century rural landscape and still can be read in the territory at the architectural and urban and rural landscape scale, as well as in the memories of the people who experienced those transformations.

At the architectural level, in the aftermath of the regime collapse, faced with the question of what to do with those traces of a painful and still recent past, the Albanians mainly chose three main options: (1) to destroy, (2) to seize and reuse or (3) to abandon. The first option, i.e., the destruction, was and still is the result of spontaneous attacks of anger carried out mainly immediately after the collapse of the regime and, later, often upon of governmental decisions. Especially in the early 1990s, destruction was random and hit also common services, economic-productive, and administrative buildings, and public spaces. The reuse was often not consistent, but rather alternative and especially concerning former state properties, it followed the seizing of the public properties. Small local trade buildings known as 'mapo', and socio-cultural buildings known as 'vatra e kulturës' were reused as club or café, if not as makeshift stable for cattle and poultry, satisfying in this way the new societal individual, rather than collective, practical needs. In many rural villages, the standardized single-storey rural houses were object of substantial transformations made according to the new financial capacity of each single family, often relying on incomes earned abroad and sent back home, because of the massive emigration phenomena. The abandonment phenomena went along with the abovementioned two. The survival of remnants and the difficult memories attached to them, were both part of a difficult transition from dictatorship to democracy as much as the privatization of the former collectivized land, the neglect of cultivated fields and the massive abandonment of the countryside and the consequent hyper-urbanization of the major cities' centres and suburbs, especially the capital Tirana. As also Bardhoshi (2011) pointed out, during the 20th century, embedded in the spirit of the nation- and state-building logic, Albania underwent three profound social transformations, the last of which started in the early 1990s when the Albanian communist regime started to lose control in many of the key-governmental issues. In that context, the Albanian government started the de-collectivisation of the agricultural lands following the principle of land distribution, denying any prior inheritance rights; a process that during the first years of the post-socialist era took a drastic turn, basing itself on the opposite principle of land restitution (Bardhoshi, 2013). This reflected in the urban and rural landscape, as much as the previous socialist modernization processes. As also Müller and Munroe (2008) stated, land fragmentation, land-cover and land-use in the post-socialist period, were a result of the previous land policies and were both associated to and affected by the abandonment of rural zones. Nevertheless, providing that landscape continuously changes and represents the dynamic interaction between natural and socio-cultural forces in the environment, then also the socialist construction of a modernist rural landscape, and its traces in the Albanian present rural and urban landscape, can be conceived as an important historic layer in the present rich Albanian cultural landscapes. This follows the notion of cultural landscape as 'result of consecutive reorganizations of the land in order to adapt its use and spatial structure better to a changing societal demands' (Antrop, 2005). Moreover, in the 2000's European Landscape Convention the definition of *landscape* is broad: 'Landscape means an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors' (ETS no 176, 2000), as much as its scope is inclusive: 'covers natural, rural, urban, and peri-urban areas. It includes land, inland water, and marine areas. It concerns landscapes that might be considered outstanding as well as every day or degraded landscapes' (ETS no 176, 2000). Relying on the previous statements, what do we perceive and value of a 20<sup>th</sup>-century modernist rural landscape? Conceiving them as a layer in the everchanging Albanian cultural landscape, a holistic and multiscale approach should also be adopted that also includes the collection of memories, perceptions and narratives, and their consequent participant interpretation, of those who experienced the socialist and post-socialist changes.

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Fig. 1. View of the Fusha e Çajupi, behind the Mount Lunxhëri, part of the mountain chain Shëndelli-Lunxhëri-Bureto chain, Federica Pompejano, 2021.



Fig. 2. View of the two-storey housing complexes built in the rural centre of Tërbuf that has been established following the reclamation of the swamp as part of the livestock state-farm "29 nëndori", Federica Pompejano, 2021.

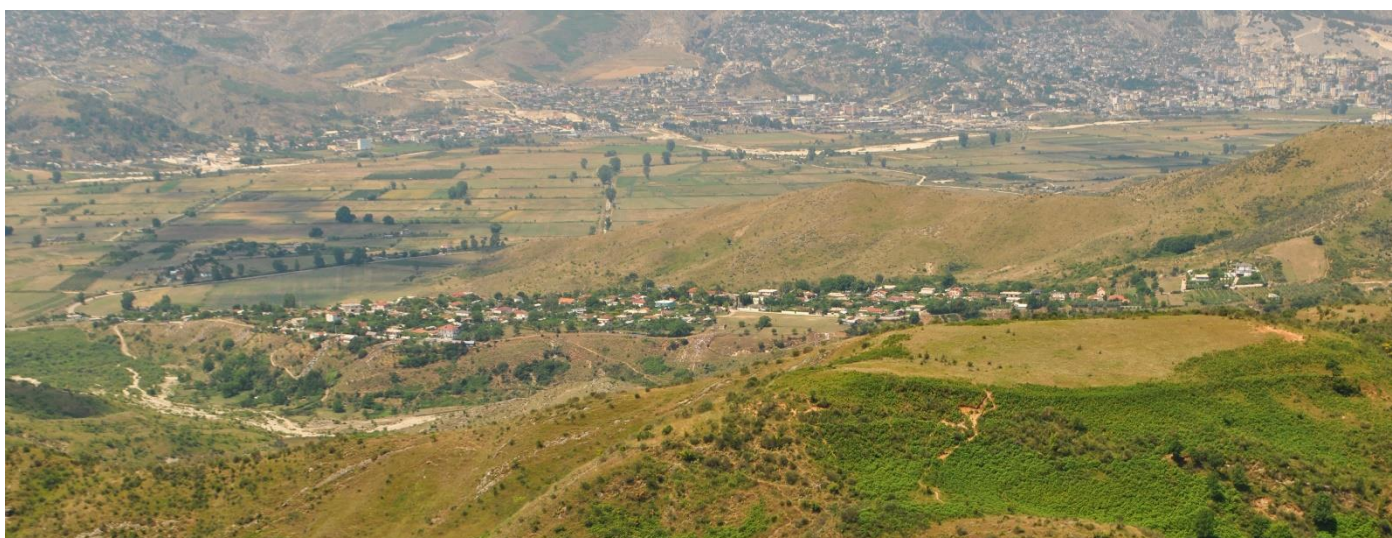


Fig. 3. View of the former planned socialist rural centre of "Asim Zeneli" is in the Drinos Valley, Gjirokastrë, Federica Pompejano, 2021



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