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# The Planning of Socialist Urbanity: The New City of Kukës in Albania

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## **Abstract**

*After the end of the Second World War, Albania stepped into one of the harshest dictatorships in Europe during the twentieth century. The communist regime led by Enver Hoxha soon implemented large modernisation and industrialisation schemes, transforming the entire territory into a vast construction site. Among those modernisation processes, the exploitation of the huge water network to produce hydroelectric energy was one of the regime's main objectives, to supply electricity to the entire country by 1971. Thus, between 1960s and the 1980s, the Drin River, one of the main rivers in Albania, was deeply transformed into a source of hydroelectrical power. After the construction of the hydropower plant "HEC-Vaut të Dejës," the hydropower plant "HEC-Drita e Partisë" followed on the upper part of the river and with its dam forming the reservoir that nowadays is called Lake of Fjerza. The filling of the reservoir caused the flooding of the old citadel of Kukës, submerged by the creation of the new lake. As consequence, to reiterate and imprint the ideal of a new classless society, the communist regime planned to build from scratch the new city of Kukës, hence reflecting in its urban planning and architecture the socialist ideology. Through the analysis of archival sources and literature on the case study, and the extensive documentation collected during recent fieldwork activities, the paper aims to explore how the entanglement of architecture and urban planning took part in shaping the new socialist urbanity in one of the most remote mountainous areas of Albania.*

## **Introduction**

The onset of modernity came to the small Balkan country of Albania at the dawn of the end of the Second World War. The construction works implemented before and during the Italian Protectorate and, earlier, King Zog I's modernisation efforts, fade by comparison with the huge socialist modernisation interventions put in place by Enver

Hoxha from November 1944. The construction of socialism in a backward and peasant country such as Albania in the first decades of the twentieth century called for an extensive transformation of the landscape. Land reclamation of marshy areas, the establishment of new urban and rural residential centres, and the transformation of main water resources into sources of hydro-electrical power stood as the cornerstone of the regime's ambitious modernisation plans. However, among those, the urbanisation of the countryside was probably the most important task of the Albanian Labour Party, which sought to create a new agrarian-industrial society out of a population composed of the peasantry.<sup>1</sup> Conceived as a process involving not only the relocation of the population, but also, and especially, the development of rural and urban areas, urbanisation was a declared project aimed to bridge the gap between urban and rural contexts,<sup>2</sup> that went in parallel with the industrialisation of the country. In this context and under Soviet-type central planning, new urban centres were established as focal points for economic development, encompassing both agricultural and industrial centres, and providing housing and service facilities for workers.<sup>3</sup> Associated with copper mining, the new city of Kukës, located in the north-east mountainous territory, can be considered the most significant urban planning intervention, reflecting in its urbanity and architecture the Albanian socialist aspiration.

### **Supplying Electricity: The Exploitation of the Drin River**

By the end of the 1980s, the Albanian territory was constellated by hydroelectrical and thermal power plants. Nevertheless, the major hydro-electrical exploitation reflecting also the most impressive, dammed works on a river, occurred in North Albania. Between the 1960s and the 1980s, the Drin River, which with its length of about 160 kilometres is the longest river flowing in the Albanian territory, was dammed and deeply transformed into a source of hydro-electrical power. The hydro-power scheme on the Drin River comprised five hydro-power stations in Skavica, Fierza, Koman, Vau i Dejës and Shkodra, and, still today, the chain of artificial reservoirs created by the dams in Fierza, Koman and Vau Dejës supplies water to the three large hydropower plants of the Drin cascade. After the construction of the hydropower plant "HEC-Vaut të Dejës," which started in 1967, the hydropower plant "HEC-Drita e Partisë" followed in 1971 on the upper part of the river and with its dam formed the reservoir, the artificial Lake of Fierza. The filling of the reservoir caused the flooding of the old town of Kukës and 28 other villages located in the gorge of the Drin River, out of which eight were totally submerged and 20 were partially submerged by the creation of the new lake.<sup>4</sup>

### The Youngest Town of Socialist Albania

The first documents on the establishment of the new city of Kukës date back to 1956 when the Bulgarian architect Dimo Angelov and the Albanian Zija Ftera were appointed to identify a possible location for the relocation of the inhabitants of the old town of Kukës, located in the far north-east of the country, to be flooded by the water of the new reservoir. Angelov and Ftera took into consideration some aspects such as the topography of the land, the wind exposure, the proximity to sources of potable water, and the vicinity to the future new artificial lake. The administrative-territorial centrality also competed as an important factor, as well as the proximity to mineral resources and to agricultural areas.<sup>5</sup> Five years later the Council of Ministers issued the Decision no. 152, on 2 June, in which it decided the location where the new city would rise.<sup>6</sup> The chosen zone is the plain area near the rural village of Ramhasë, indicated with the letter "A" in the sketch of the project idea attached to the project proposal (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** The proposals for the location of the new town of Kukës for the Decision of the Council of Ministers no. 152/1961 (AQSH, F. 499, D. 548, v. 1961).

Moreover, the Decision appointed the Ministry of Construction to the drafting of the masterplan by November 1961, and the new buildings had to be built accordingly. Almost one year later, 22 July 1962, marked the beginning of the construction works of the new city, located 3 kilometres from the old town. Practically, it was also the beginning of a parallel life for the inhabitants, who slowly moved to the new mass housing complexes that were under construction, while still benefiting from the administrative and socio-cultural services in the old town. The urban planning of the new Kukës had to mirror the societal changes of the population due to the growing mining economic production activity of the region. The masterplan had to consider three important activities of the new Albanian society: *punë*, *banim* and *pushim*, i.e., to work, to dwell and to rest.<sup>7</sup> The masterplan designed by the architect Misto Mele in November 1961 structured the residential area into seven housing blocks (*kvartall*) and indicated the administrative and socio-cultural buildings, leisure and retail buildings, green areas, the road network, and a small marina on the shore of the lake south of the site that “remained on paper.”

However, despite the effort to rush the construction of the new town, still in 1969 a letter from the First Secretary of the Party Committee of the district, Izet Dyrmishi complained that the main issue was the slow housing construction pace and the lack of qualified local technicians and professionals promptly available to face any construction problem.<sup>8</sup> The report underlined that, since the beginning of the new town’s construction works, only 272 apartments were built. It urged to increase the construction pace in view of the flooding of the old town planned for the year 1978, by building 1,500 apartments to house 7,500 persons within six to seven years.<sup>9</sup> However, until 1969 most communal, administrative and socio-cultural services were still located in the old town, practically forcing the already displaced inhabitants to deal with difficult living conditions. De facto, the *lagjes nr.1*, i.e., the first housing block, started to be built in 1962 (Figure 2), was only completed in late 1973 and the urban studies for the construction of the second housing block (*lagjes nr. 2*) only ended in 1971 and its construction continued throughout the year 1973.<sup>10</sup> To give an idea of the construction workspace, Thomai et al reported that:

According to the information contained in a minute from the Directorate of Civil Constructions of the Ministry of Construction from January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1973, to December 31<sup>st</sup>, 1976, the state construction companies had to build 876

apartments, while 200 apartments [were built] with voluntary contributions. From this, until January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1974, a total of 667 apartments were under construction ...<sup>11</sup>



**Figure 2.** The first housing block (lagje nr. 1) under construction in the new town of Kukës. The graffitied words “Lavdi P.P.SH.” on the wall means “Glory to the Albanian Labour Party”; P.P.SH is the acronym of “Partia e Punës e Shqipërisë” (Courtesy of Arkivi Qendror Teknik i Ndertimit, AQTN, Fototeka, v. 1964).

To accelerate the displacement of the communal, administrative and socio-cultural services, in 1974 architects Faik Alimehmeti and Antigoni Zoto were appointed to draft the masterplan of the city centre and of the housing block no. 4. Alimehmeti and Zoto proposed three design variants considering:

... the creation of an urban complex with the best possible living comfort [to be achieved] through the right placement of the housing against the best exposure, the direction of the prevailing winds, as well as the supply of daily service departments; [the use of] 1973’s design-types; ... the creation of outdoor [resting and leisure] spaces and playgrounds for children and for adults; the achievement of compositional requirements through the juxtaposition of [different] long housing complexes with different housing design-types and buildings composed of a single housing design-type.<sup>12</sup>

In 1978, the old town was finally flooded, and the displacement of the population concluded. However, as can be observed from the scenes of the brief documentary titled *Kukësi i Ri*, produced by *Kinostudio "Shqipëria e re"* in 1977, construction works in the new town could not be considered completed.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, the *youngest town*<sup>14</sup> in Socialist Albania with no private houses, but collective mass housing, was growing, slowly outlining a new urban landscape and industrial city life in the mountainous district of Kukës (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** The skyline of the new town of Kukës (Courtesy of Arkivi Qendror Teknik i Ndertimit, AQTN, Fototeka, v. 1974).

### **Shaping a Socialist Urbanity**

The case study of the construction of the new socialist city of Kukës demonstrates how urban planning was a practice that had no roots in Socialist Albania. As Mëhilli notes, with no professional city planners, for more than three decades after the end of the Second World War, the chaotic construction and planning of cities and villages were the consequence of “an uncertainty about where urban planning belonged.”<sup>15</sup> Albania had to rely on foreign literature and codes and borrow construction technology from the East Bloc.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, because the regime considered architecture and urban planning secondary to industrial plans, a professional and theoretical debate was absent. Only in the second half of the 1970s, the debate around the role of urban planning and architecture started to gain interest although always remained



subordinated to production and economic purposes in relation to the industrialisation of the country.

Through the examination of the documents and drawings emerges how, since the very beginning of the urban planning of the new town of Kukës, the idea of creating an urban environment for a new classless society was pivotal for the Party. The masterplan had to synthesise the new society's actual and prospective needs, considering all the material, societal, cultural and economic aspects of the socialist life.<sup>17</sup> The subdivision of the residential zone in smaller areas defined as *kvartall/kuartall* or *lagje* (housing block) was conceived to simplify the housing complexes' construction and to frame them organically within the masterplan. In Socialist Albania, housing and urban planning were understood as a means to reshape the material and social conditions of the population, providing them with dwellings and public social spaces as well. In Kukës' housing block, the space between the buildings was designed as shared green courts, playgrounds and pedestrian circulation; each housing block was also provided with its own kindergarten.

Furthermore, the housing construction constituted the significant aspect that characterised this masterplan. The increasingly mining industrial vocation of the region emphasised by the regime's economic investments slowly changed the daily work and family life of the population and affected the housing planning of the future town. At the architectural level that meant the designing of standardised apartment buildings. The masterplan foresaw different type-designs of housing complexes in the seven blocks forming the residential area of the masterplan that still today are clearly recognisable in the urban matrix of the contemporary city.

To briefly conclude, the construction of the *Youngest Town* of Socialist Albania lasted more than 20 years and continued to be a construction site also in the last decade of the dictatorship. The new city of Kukës was among the 41 new urban centres established in a supportive role for the regional and national economic development.<sup>18</sup> As for new towns in other countries of socialist Eastern Europe, the layout was similar among these new urban centres, providing planned residential and services facilities for the workers involved in the economic activities. Nevertheless, the establishment of the new city of Kukës stands in Socialist Albania as the most mature effort of shaping a *socialist industrial urban experience*, in terms of spatial and architectural novelty, in one of the most remote and mountainous areas of the country. It can be considered



the last ambitious attempt, in terms of architectural and urban planning, to materialise the socialist ideology and the Albanian aspiration to a classless society by manufacturing a modern urbanity, at the dawn of the last decades of the regime.

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### Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Derek R. Hall, “Albania,” in Andrew H. Dawson (eds.), *Planning in Eastern Europe* (London: Croom Helm, 1987), 36.

<sup>2</sup> Arqile Bërzhholli and Perikli Qiriazhi, *Albania: Profilo Geografiko* (Tirana: 8 Nëntori, 1988), 64.

<sup>3</sup> Dean S. Rugg, “Communist Legacies in the Albanian Landscape,” *Geographical Review*, 84, no. 1 (1994): 63. See also Sivignon Michel, “Tirana et l’urbanisation de l’Albanie,” *Revue de géographie de Lyon*, 50, no. 4 (1975): 333-43; and Derek Hall, “New Towns in Europe’s Rural Corner,” *Town & Country Planning*, 55, No. 12 (1986): 354-56.

<sup>4</sup> Report “Mbi vlersimin e objekteve ekonomike, administrative e social-kulturore që përmblyten si rezultat i krijimit të Liqenit Kukësit nga diga e H/Centralit të Fierzës. Nevojat dhe fondet për ngritjen e objekteve të reja në qytetin e ri të Kukësit, masat për stabilizimin e populates që përshin zona e ekspansjonit liqenit,” Executive Committee of the People’s Council of Kukës District, 15 April 1969, Arkivi Qendror Shtetëror (AQSH), F. 495, D. 32, v. 1969, fl. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Report “Mbi vendosjen e qendrës së re të qytetit të Kukësit,” 4 September 1956, AQSH, F. 499, D. 941, v. 1956, fl. 1-2.

<sup>6</sup> Decision of the Council of Ministers no. 152, “Mbi caktimin e vendit të ri për ndertimin e qytetit të Kukësit,” 2 June 1962, AQSH, F. 499, D. 548, v. 1961, fl. 34.

<sup>7</sup> Faik Alimemeti and Maksim Mitrojorgji, “Fytyra e re e qyteteve dhe fshatrave tona,” *Shkenca dhe Jeta*, 3 (1974): 10.

<sup>8</sup> Letter no. 179, 21 April 1969, sent by the First Secretary of the Party Committee (Kukës district) to the Central Committee of the Party of Labour of Albania (PLA) and attached Preliminary Study (Secret), AQSH, F. 14/APSTR, D. 28, v. 1969, fl. 3-4. See also Gjergj Thomai, Fatlinda Struga, Iva Mëzezi and Nerxhana Tallushi, *Kukës – Zhvillimi Urban 1945-1990* (Tirana: FLESH, 2021), 150.

<sup>9</sup> AQSH, F. 14/APSTR, D. 28, v. 1969, fl. 7-8.

<sup>10</sup> Report “Mbi punën e bërë dhe problemet që dalin për përballimin e përmblytjes që sjell krijimi i liqenit të H/Centralit të Fierzës,” AQSH, F. 14/APSTR, D. 577, v. 1973, 4.

<sup>11</sup> Thomai et al, *Kukës – Zhvillimi Urban 1945-1990*, 170.

<sup>12</sup> Thomai et al, *Kukës – Zhvillimi Urban 1945-1990*, 174-75.

<sup>13</sup> “Kukësi i Ri,” 1977, AQSHF, [www.aqshf.gov.al/arkiva-kerko-1.html?movie=409&category=2&title=KUKESI%20I%20RI&screenwriter=&description=](http://www.aqshf.gov.al/arkiva-kerko-1.html?movie=409&category=2&title=KUKESI%20I%20RI&screenwriter=&description=)

(accessed 25 July 2022). See also Gazeta Dita, *Shpërngulja nga Kukësi i Vjetër për në Qytetin e Ri*, YouTube video, 18:58, posted by “Gazeta Dita,” 22 February 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lgrKMJJTaQ&t=978s>.

<sup>14</sup> “The Youngest Town,” *New Albania*, 6 (1976): 23.

<sup>15</sup> Elidor Mëhilli, *From Stalin to Mao: Albania and the Socialist World* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2017), 162.

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<sup>16</sup> Technicians and professionals borrowed and translated technical terminology from the Soviet literature. Hence, for instance, in the Albanian documents one read *kuartall* or *kvartal* (housing block), *tipizimi* (typification) and *projekt-tip* (type-design).

<sup>17</sup> Faik Alimemeti and Maksim Mitrojorgji, “Fytyra e re e qyteteve dhe fshatrave tona,” 9.

<sup>18</sup> Dean S. Rugg, “Communist Legacies in the Albanian Landscape,” 63-64.