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## Albania's industrial past and its potential present



*Derelict steel works, Elbasan*

One of my most vivid memories of family road trips in Albania was the countless abandoned factories that dominated the rural and urban landscape. The most thrilling of these was the skyline of the Metallurgical Complex, a view signalling that we were approaching Elbasan, the city where I was born and where I lived for the first years of my life before my parents emigrated to Greece.

What made this even more intense in my childhood imagination were all the stories that my father told us every time we passed by the ruined industrial landscape. He would tell us how he started working there when he was still young, describing in every possible detail the functions of the different parts of the Metallurgical Complex, and remembering old friends he had lost contact with since everyone had emigrated after the collapse of state socialism. I could read in all these sometimes nostalgic, sometimes melancholic, and sometimes painful narrations what would follow me growing up as a child of Albanian immigrants in Greece: two languages, two identities, memories of crossing borders, stories of a political reality that I never experienced but whose outcomes became inevitably part of my life. Suddenly, the industrial ghost in Elbasan came to offer a tangible explanation to all those difficult memories of displacement; it was the flow of history itself shaping and affecting lives.

Rapid industrialisation took place in Albania between 1968 and 1980, reaching its peak with the completion of Kombinati Metalurgjik in Elbasan, the largest industrial complex in the country. Kombinati Metalurgjik processed and produced all the heavy metals that the country needed, including materials and equipment for other factories across Albania. Every town, from north to south, had a factory that specialised in manufacturing, processing and producing specific materials, from textiles and hydroelectric plants to ferrochrome mining and metallurgy. The industrial complexes that were built on the outskirts of cities and towns across the country shaped the urban and rural landscape of Albania. These industrial complexes were almost satellite independent towns, separated from larger cities by agricultural fields. As urban centres expanded in size and population, industrial areas became integrated neighbourhoods of towns, as is the case with the former “Stalin” Textile Factory in Tirana. Since factories employed large numbers of people, they became an integral part of everyday personal and working lives.



*Steel production at Elbasan in the 1980s and the complex now.*

The collapse of state socialism and the transition to neoliberal democracy in the 1990s brought instability and decline of industrial production. Factory closures resulted in unemployment and large migration flows of Albanian populations who were forced to seek employment abroad. The former industrial giants have turned into ruins of a long-gone past. The closures, destruction and privatisations of the industrial plants resulted in an alteration of the social, cultural, and economic fabric of the former industrial cities, as well as the relationships and interactions that bonded its local communities together. This becomes even more visible when we consider the same state of abandonment and ruination which is also present in the former industrial centres that once buzzed with populations and have now turned into deserted “ghost towns”, to borrow the term that Luljeta Lleshanaku, Christian Filips, and Ben Andoni use in their publication *Ghost Villages: Emigration versus Potential Resources of Albania* (2020). Ruined industrial locations bear witness to the transformations that Albania has undergone in recent years: from absolute state ownership under the oppressive socialist regime, to intense and rapid privatisations during the times of transition, to the current state of abandonment that reflects progress and economic growth that is yet to come.

So, how should we approach Albania’s industrial heritage? Why is it important to engage with this short, yet significant chapter of Albania’s history? More crucially, what is to be done with it in the present?

Albania’s industrial past is a difficult and an unwanted heritage since it still carries connotations of historic trauma and state violence associated with an oppressive dictatorial regime. However, engaging critically and meaningfully with the visual and material remnants of Albania’s industrial past can offer a rich entry point to explore aspects of collective memory, the alterations of the social and urban fabrics that occurred during the years of transition, as well as pertinent environmental concerns that remain present despite the closure of factories.

More crucially, though, the very available spaces, infrastructures and histories of the industrial past contain a valuable resource for the present and the future of neglected rural areas. In addition, scholars such as Artan R. Hoxha, in his recent book *Sugarland: The Transformation of the Countryside in Communist Albania* (2023), which examines sugar production in Maliq in south-eastern Albania, points out that industrialisation was a modernity linked with the socialist ideology, and equally, the state of ruination resembles a second modernity associated with Albania’s leap to catch up with Europe. As such, acknowledging Albania’s industrial past deconstructs given stereotypes that read the country with vocabularies of “backwardness” or “underdevelopment” since the same history of industrialisation and de-industrialisation is evident in both Eastern and Western Europe. Similarly, the state of ruination challenges us to re-consider both past and present ideologies and utopias, including the consequences that these have for communities.

The ambiguous relationship between past and present that is inscribed in industrial ruins has driven many contemporary artists and curators to creatively re-engage with abandoned factories in Albania. For instance, the contemporary art festival, *Informal Mind* (2014) that took place in the Metalurgjiku in Elbasan aimed at bringing life back to an area that remains deserted and neglected by local authorities. In 2005, with the performance piece *Welcome dear workers (Mirësevini të Dashur Punëtorë)*, Albanian artist Enisa Cenaliaj stood on a pedestal in front of the derelict former “Stalin” Textile Factory in Tirana. Although the artist posed as a socialist worker, her performance was not about the socialist past, but rather about the precarious present of the changing working-class population of Kombinati, a neighbourhood in Tirana which took its name from the textile factory.

More recently, contemporary artist Driant Zeneli in his two-channel video installation entitled *Maybe the Cosmos is not so Extraordinary* presented at the Albanian Pavilion of the Venice Biennale in 2019, re-visits the mines of Bulqizë, a northern Albanian town that was once a ferrochrome industrial centre, as well as a detention point for those internally exiled by the regime. This artwork explores past and present failed utopia, while also raising questions about the dangerous present working conditions of mineworkers in northern Albania. These visual art practices demonstrate that the industrial landscape still contains a knowledge resource that can offer a better understanding of both the socialist past and the rapid changes that occurred during transition. This closer engagement with the outcomes of transition might also be a way to tackle current problems that exist in the Albanian society, such as unemployment, precariousness, continuous migration and decline of urban peripheries.



Poster of *Informal Mind International Contemporary Art Exhibition, Metalurgjiku Elbasan, October 2014*. Image by M.A.M Foundation.

The lack of public social and community spaces in Albania, especially in Tirana, which is currently undergoing a process of regeneration and privatisation, has led a younger generation to repurpose abandoned industrial factories. For instance, *Hapësira Kulturore Uzina*, a community centre in Tirana, was opened when a group of volunteers reappropriated a former industrial space that manufactured tractors. Interestingly, the volunteers who established *Uzina* describe their endeavour as a practice rooted in the idea and the principles of the “commons”. The commons include spaces and resources that are open and available to the broader community. More crucially, the commons also include a set of collective practices that are necessary in generating and maintaining spaces for sociability and gathering.

Could this be a way to reclaim Albania’s industrial landscape? Collective actions such as *Uzina*, demonstrate that industrial ruins, even in their state of abandonment, can still be useful resources. When the rest of available spaces have clear distinctions of ownership, industrial ruins, bearing signs of abandonment and neglect from their local authorities, offer grounds for reappropriation by local communities. It occurs then that the post-industrial landscape is not only a bridge to understand Albania’s turbulent past and the sudden rupture and transition from one socio-political reality to another, but also a “common” heritage that can be re-purposed and re-used in the present by its initial communities.

There are many examples of former industrial sites across Europe that have been transformed into cultural centres, art institutions, museums of local industrial history or even contemporary art biennials (for instance, the Industrial Art Biennale in Croatia that revitalises rural areas that once were industrial centres). Such cultural policies have the potential to revitalise areas that have been affected by socio-political transitions, financial instability and crisis. More crucially, industrial remnants need not always be associated with past regimes. Since they occupy space in the present and are still part of existing ecosystems and landscapes, they can also allow for reconfigurations that are directed towards understanding the present and imaging a possible future beyond, or better, *after* the moment of ruination.

**Dimitra Gkitsa**



*Hapësira Kulturore Uzina, Tirana.*

For more information about *Informal Mind*, click [here](#)  
For more information about *Maybe the Cosmos is not so Extraordinary*, click [here](#)  
For more information about *Hapësira Kulturore Uzina*, click [here](#)

Dimitra's article is based on research for a chapter entitled "Reclaiming industrial heritage through affect: Art interventions in the ruined factories of post-socialist Albania" that she has written for an upcoming book edited by Frances Guerin and Magda Szcześniak.

You can listen to Dimitra's original presentation at LSE given on 8 March 2023 at:  
[https://richmedia.lse.ac.uk/europeaninstitute/20231402\\_LegacyPostIndustrialismAlbania.mp3](https://richmedia.lse.ac.uk/europeaninstitute/20231402_LegacyPostIndustrialismAlbania.mp3)