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# Re-use and Revitalization of Military Bunkers in the Albanian Riviera

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## Abstract

*The Albania of today is littered with many used and unused buildings - such as bunkers, former industrial buildings - places and spaces which are the legacy of almost 50 years of communist rule. However, these structures are only part of the vision that dictator Enver Hoxha had for the future of Albania during The Cold War. The other portion of the story is partially or fully underground, hidden within subterranean bunkers and tunnels built to protect Albanians in the event of an invasion or aerial attack. Some of these reinforced concrete structures were created to shelter civilians, but most were designed for military training, storage and guns for the defense of the Albanian motherland. These were the most visible and substantial 'products' of the intensive industrialization program, today appearing like mushrooms dotted across the Albanian landscape. The reuse of these buildings in the Albanian Riviera is a major design challenge key to any larger agenda regarding Albania's emerging identity in terms of design and development, urban or otherwise.*

## Introduction

Industrial development arrived late in Albania. Prior to independence one hundred years ago – beginning of the 20th century - the country was essentially an agricultural economy and, while its few towns held a small, aspirant merchant class, exploitation of wealth and potential wealth in the new nation was largely confined to traditional farming and fishing, supplemented by similar activities such as salt manufacturing.

Late development does not, however, equate to unimportant development. Indeed, far from it. Albania is a young country but it is a country which already has a rich and vibrant history, one which is a microcosm of the often terrible history of Europe in the 20th century. Moreover, the path of this emerging nation can be charted through the growth, decline, and more recently, nascent revival of its

industrial economy. Indeed, Albania's industrial heritage is a tangible expression of its history since independence, evidenced by investment in the extraction of its raw materials<sup>1</sup> from the 1920's onward: infrastructural development under the colonial eye of Italy in the 1930's, wartime exploitation by hostile powers<sup>2</sup> in the 1940's, massive industrial expansion under Communism between the late 1940's and 1980's, and renewal of infrastructure since the 1990s.

This industrial heritage is one which is particular to Albania and its communities. A poignant example is that of Hoxha's bunkers, the concrete and steel defensive works which still dominate large parts of the Albanian countryside. Their manufacture, a major drain upon the national economy at the time of their construction, was only made possible by control of the supply of raw materials,



Fig1a / Bunker in the Albanian inland  
source / theapricity.com

prefabrication in purpose-built factories, and distribution of the finished products, all organized as industrial enterprises. It is understandable that the continuing existence of many bunkers can be an affront to Albanians, bringing with them reminders of an all-too unloved, recent and painful past. However, their manufacture and construction was a stupendous remarkable national undertaking, one which engaged many members, a great portion of the community's population, and this investment of human concretized in the form factories and bunkers themselves, are certainly worth noting.

Such remembrance, essentially the intangible heritage of industrialization in Albania, created from the memories and meaning attached to industrialization, is certainly as important as the tangible heritage. Entire communities were forged through their links to this industrial activity and its physical manifestations. Many such industrial sites are now closed and derelict but the communities which they fostered continue to exist. These communities face pressures in the modern world as Albania continues to its adaptation to a free market economy. It is easy in such circumstances for communal roots to be lost but industrial heritage can assist the maintenance of social cohesion through a shared physical reminder of community origins.

Enver Hoxha initiated the 'bunkerization' of Albania during the late 1960s as a means of defense, but it also served to keep the population in fear of the outside world. The sheer number of bunkers and fortifications that were built created the most extensive level of protection Albania had ever experienced, although its effectiveness was never tested as the country was not invaded during the Cold War<sup>3</sup>.

Bunkers were installed as a response to a number of perceived foreign threats to the sovereignty of the country. This defense/paranoia reached its height during the 1968 Warsaw-Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia where the Soviet Union and her main allies successfully halted attempts for Czech liberalization. The Warsaw Treaty Organization was a collective defense treaty between communist states during the Cold War, of which Albania had been a founding member in 1955. Shortly thereafter, however, Albania severed ties with the USSR in 1961 and formed a new relationship with the People's Republic of China. Due to strained relations between Albania and other Eastern Bloc countries, Hoxha believed that Albania would be the next target of the Warsaw Pact under attack and thus prepared the country for invasion.

Initially, bunkers were produced and

1 / Raw materials such as copper, chrome, iron, coal, bitumen, etc

2 / Nazi invasion

3 / It actually was invaded once, in a minor way, by English spies running Albanian insurgents in an effort to overthrow Hoxha's government - see Ben Macintyre, *A Spy Among Friends: Kim Philby and the Great Betrayal*, pp.121-123. However, this "invasion" was quickly ended through Soviet counter-espionage.

installed on a relatively moderate scale, focused along land borders with Greece and Yugoslavia and the coastal border with Italy. Military zones, ports, towns and main roads were also protected with bunkers and gun emplacements for military use and to store ammunition and equipment. However, by the late 1970s and early 1980s Albanian bunker production went into overdrive. Concrete factories began to use large molds to prefabricate bunker parts which would be fitted together like a jigsaw puzzle during installation. This meant that bunkers could be created quicker than ever before and were installed across Albania's entire landscape. The vast scale of this bunker program consumed substantial amounts of state finances and labor resources at a time when the country's aging infrastructure and industrial equipment was in dire need of investment. This situation became more acute after Albania finally split with the People's Republic of China in 1978 and embarked on a period of self-imposed isolation without any outside protectorate for the first time (Fjalori, 2008).

The actual number of bunkers produced in Albania during this time is unknown and estimates can range up to as many as 1 million, although the amount usually quoted is somewhere between 400,000 and 600,000. Upon the death of Enver Hoxha in 1985, his bunker-building legacy died with him. Albania could not afford this costly expense any longer. After the Communist leadership finally collapsed in 1991, the bunkers were viewed as an obsolete legacy of an era that the country would best leave behind. During the 1990's and 2000's, Albania's bunkers were left to decay. They became overgrown and were viewed with suspicion for their connection to Hoxha's paranoid regime. The robust nature of their concrete and steel construction made them very difficult to destroy, and so post-communist life grew up around the bunkers and they became as embedded in the Albanian landscape as they were within the national mind (Fjalori, 2008).

### Current situation

The legacy of Communism remains quite visible across Albania's countryside where over 600,000 concrete bunkers mark the landscape. Constructed by Enver Hoxha's regime over 40 years, these bunkers were intended to prevent a military attack on the country. While they were originally of modest defensive value to Albania, today they present a curious appeal to the country's visitors, their strange history

and form, as well as their sheer number, a singular case in the world. The bunkers have been built into the very fabric of everyday life in Albania. To understand why these bunkers were built is to understand the totalitarian, communist regime. Continuously suspicious of an invasion by a foreign supremacy, the Hoxha dictatorship mandated the construction of a defensive infrastructure so complicated that it would make it inappropriately costly for any would-be aggressor. Building hundreds of thousands of concrete fortifications, despite nearly bankrupting the country in the process, was his coping mechanism for this terror. However, when we consider that Albania was never invaded during Hoxha's tenure in power, one cannot but wonder whether or not his bunker-building campaign wasn't successful after all.

In more recent years, bunkers in some locations have been destroyed with heavy machinery to extract the metal reinforcements contained within them, leaving only a pile of concrete behind. Those bunkers that remain are often reused for practical purposes such as animal shelters or for storage and as places to brew raki and use as cooking sheds. Large and small bunkers that are located in tourist areas are often brightly painted or have been converted into beach bars or restaurants. The act of painting or reusing the bunkers makes a novelty out of these Cold War structures and reduces the level of fear that they once caused (Parangoni, 2010).

In inhabited areas, especially in large cities, the bunkers have been decorated, at times, to get rid of the militaristic image they still carry. The use of vivid colors contrasts with their degraded state.

The bunkers have also been the objects of quite a few graffiti writings, whether it artistic or political, and sometimes even commercial advertising has been sprayed on them. Some of the bunkers were transported and destroyed – the obvious approach according to many Albanians, but the fact remains that these bunkers, built to bear fire weapons, are almost unfeasible to destroy. Indeed, to do so is highly unproductive, as a huge effort is required to break apart just one of them, let alone 600,000.

Despite this, many have been destroyed, however difficult. The most diffused method of achieving this difficult goal is simply burning combustibles inside the bunkers until the temperature of the



Fig1b / Dhermiu Beach Bunkers  
source / bunkeralbania.com

concrete is sufficiently high and then immediately pouring cold water on the surface of the concrete until it breaks apart, the smaller pieces rendered easier to remove. This process is repeated until the bunker can be taken apart in pieces. An arduous process to be sure, this process is undertaken only for the most inconveniently placed bunkers (ACI)

The urban counterpart of the forgotten rural and mountain bunkers are the ignored ones. In the same way that the bunkers in the countryside are located in unexpected areas with little concern for the inhabitants of the area, bunkers in populated areas are treated like boulders: natural artifacts of little or no significance. Objects that are simply there - nothing more, nothing less (Stefa and Gylser, 2009).

The most significant issues for the future of the bunkers are: how might they be used in a present and future Albania, if at all? Taking in consideration that many of them are still surviving in different original sizes, and spread all over the landscape, with no regard to Albania's geography, they could be transformed either to cheap rooms for the travelers that are fascinated by their existence, or to useful functions according to their location. Are they an opportunity for professionals like architects, engineers, planners, artists, students, economists, politicians, and perhaps even non-professionals to express their ideas for a

future for the bunkers that might improve Albania's prospective developments and to break any sense of fear and isolation that bunkers might still hold.

### Case study

Albania's bunkers can be found in all different shapes, sizes and colors. Some projects exist aiming to change the bigger ones into basic hotel rooms, while others have already been transformed by enterprising Albanians even into businesses like drink stands and burger shops.

In this paper, I will focus on the re-use and revitalization of the Dhermi Beach Bunker and Buneci Beach Bunker. These bunkers are of the same typology: triple series, strategic points, linear bunkers. This organizational typology is found along the entire coastline of Albania, with triple series of bunkers all along the coast, composed of groups of three small (1 soldier) bunkers (each accommodating a single soldier) connected to one another by a tunnel. The distance between each group of three is 150 meters such that they served the tactical function of "qendra zjarri," or "fire centers." The original function of this trio of bunkers was "Qendra Zjarri – Fire centers". These bunkers are objects which are produced as prefabricated elements with various geometrical shapes starting from the semi hemispherical to the cubic one. The shape depends on the primary function of the

4 / The medium-sized bunkers are originally designed to host a family or about four to five people. They are usually found in lowlands in huge amount of numbers, or in high lands. The third grouping of bunkers according to their size is the large ones, which are originally designed to host heavy artillery or armaments, or to host more than 10 people. They can be found in the highlands and lowlands





Fig2 / Buneci Beach Bunkers, the reuse process  
source / bunkeralbania.com

bunker. These bunkers were transported and are assembled onsite through large machines built for this purpose, capable of lifting these reinforced concrete parts despite their heavy weights. Each bunker is a combination of three main components: a semi-sphere (or dome) of a diameter of 3 meters with an opening that serves as a gun turret; a cylindrical foundation below to support the dome that is partially embedded in the ground; and an outer wall with a radius roughly 60cm larger than the foundation cylinder that is filled with soil. It should be noted that these bunkers are, relatively, all small bunkers. These small bunkers were originally designed to host a single soldier. They are generally found in lowlands and are especially prevalent along the Albanian Riviera. In these areas, they usually exist groups of three, connected to each other by a tunnel (Stefa and Gyler, 2009).

### **Programme of re-use and revitalization of the Riviera's beach bunkers**

A short period of time (1972-1984) and an enormous number of bunkers lead to a high level of unproductivity in Albania. This stagnation, starting in 1985, became painful for every Albanian. Albanians have spent much of the last decade doing their best to remove any reminiscence of Hoxha's dictatorship. But, even if Albanians could crash the statues and burn the photographs, they could not avoid perceiving something they coexist with, something that serves as a tool to fulfill various necessities, very expensive to remove and hard to destroy. Since the fall of Communism in 1991, bunkers have

lost their military duty to become the venue for lovers' trysts and, in the most desperate cases, homes for the thousands of internal refugees. Farmers use them for chicken coops. Neophyte businessmen have converted well-located bunkers inside the cities into kiosks, burger bars, shoeshine stands, even discos. Up close, most are crumbling and weed choked, memorials to an age of terror long gone by.

For almost seven - eight years, we have experienced a revival of several actors' attention regarding these areas and abandoned structures. The first is the private actor, who has begun to reuse some of the bunkers of the Riviera area. The second actors are local institutions and those studying urban issues. The third actors are the residents of the area who have an already greater awareness and care for life in the community and seek, claim, public spaces and structures for their social activity.

Many are used as trash baskets or latrines. But in an undeveloped land struggling to become modern in a hurry, the bunkers have also acquired some new, and unique, uses. Some very large, room-like facilities have been turned into the Bunker Restaurant. Others are painted with psychedelic colors to resemble large flowers.

The bunkers in Bunec, for example, has been re-used as restaurants with an adjacent campsite, one of several examples of the transformed and well-used bunkers in the Riviera zone.



Fig3 / Riviera Beach Bunkers  
source / bunkeralbania.com

Despite such examples, however, most bunkers found in the Riviera area are not reused or revitalized and remain abandoned. These, then, might be re-purposed in similar ways to those mentioned above, or perhaps in other ways yet to be imagined. That is why we can forecast several possible ways of transformations

All kinds of bunkers, small, medium and large, can be found in the lowlands of the Riviera zone.

The small-sized bunkers which can be seen in lowlands can be transformed into info points, public WCs and kiosks.

The large-sized bunkers in the Riviera zone can be transformed into cheap hostels and café-restaurants. A SWAT analysis of this area and its bunkers would suggest the following<sup>5</sup>:

**STRENGTHS:** What new opportunities might we find in the Riviera beach bunkers?

- Spread all across this part of Albania, they are found in an abundance of sites and contexts; and can be found in abundance in all kinds of different typologies;
- Given the remote location of the Riviera, most bunkers here remain in good shape, ripe for re- purposing in any number of ways; There are many bunkers that are in quite a good state to be re functionalized;

- Uniformity of construction (self-similarity) of the bunkers along the Riviera lends to prototypical approaches to re-purposing and hence is economically viable. There is uniformity in their construction.

**WEAKNESSES:** What are the potential problems associated with re-purposing Riviera bunkers? What should be avoided?

- They are difficult to remove (in terms of labor and cost);
- They continue to carry the stigma of Hoxha's approach to communism/ communist era

**OPPORTUNITIES:** What are the interesting trends regarding bunker re-use?

- Tourism: they are extremely interesting to foreigners;
- Relative ease of prototypical re-use due to their uniformity;
- Durability: their life-span is essentially infinite...this suggests either 1) re-purposing to a program of permanence, or 2) re-purposing to programs that would change over time; they have a long life-span.

**THREATS:** What are the obstacles the Riviera and its bunkers face?

- Disregard of the Albanian people towards

5 / A SWOT analysis (is a structured planning method used to evaluate the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats involved in a project or in a business venture. A SWOT analysis can be carried out for a product, place, industry or person. It involves specifying the objective of the business venture or project and identifying the internal and external factors that are favorable and unfavorable to achieve that objective

6 / The bunkers generally are prone of the Ministry of Defense, some of them are privatized and some of them are just used for private business



Fig4 / Riviera Beach Bunkers  
source / bunkeralbania.com

the bunkers;

- There is no clear "ownership", not only for bunkers but generally in Albania<sup>6</sup> which is also an obstacle for foreign investments and integration of the country.

### Conclusions

Bunkers are a reality, a reality that Albania went through with challenges and barriers for a better one! Today, even though Albanians ignore them or have just forgotten about them, they are there, still trying to show their potential and disposition to be used. Bunkers seem to be happy about being born and living in Albania, and above all proud to be Albanians. But in fact their happiness masks an enormous sorrow tied to the past which would be healed by their contribution to Albania.

This research tries to give a personalized and acceptable solution to these critical topics and asks the following questions: What can be done with Albania's abandoned military structures, specifically the bunkers found along the Riviera? Can they simply be handed over to private stakeholders which do with them what he/she pleases and for as long as he/she wants? Do these structures still have any value in their context? Are they historical artifacts in need of preservation or, conversely, are they available for adaptive re-use? Could be they industrial heritage as are hundreds of such objects for other countries? These questions and those associated with them have been the leading lines of this research and this project. The touristic character of the

area and the residents deeply impacted the project program which includes and considers the relationship between the sea, the tourists and the Riviera Beach Bunkers. This project aims to enhance the military historic layer of the Riviera zone through the revitalization and re-use of these magnificent structures.

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*Fig5 / BED&BUNKER is a project of the University of Applied Sciences Mainz and POLIS University  
source / workshop students*