

# A Travel Captured in Correspondence

Preparations for the Training School

The Planned, the Unplanned,

and Everything in Between,

Kamza and Tirana, Albania

**Dorina Pllumbi and Willie Vogel**

The COST training school *The Planned, the Unplanned, and Everything in Between* took place in Tirana and Kamza on 24, 30 and 31 March 2023. Its topic stems from the DNA of the two hosting cities, their commonalities, but more evidently, their contrast and contradictions. Tirana developed organically until 1920 when it was declared the capital of Albania. Since then, planning ambitions to give the city an official face started to appear as attempts to represent the country, expressing the ideologies of the political regimes that Albania has gone through. Planning projects for Tirana during the rule of Ahmet Zogu (1922-1939) prepared the stage for the colonial projects during the Italian occupation (1939-1943), which sought to give the capital a Western appearance. The communist (state-socialist) regime (1944-1991) envisioned Tirana as the 'city for the new [socialist] man' and contributed extensively to giving it a new character. Today, three decades

after the fall of the communist regime and with a new neoliberal regime consolidating, the city resembles a palimpsest of erasure and overwriting, where visible and invisible, planned and unplanned traces overlap.<sup>1</sup> Kamza stands in complete contrast to Tirana: it is a city constructed by its inhabitants during the last three decades of political transition that followed the collapse of the communist regime. It was co-constructed as a result of a migratory wave of families from remote areas in the northeastern part of Albania that settled on the outskirts of Tirana.

While Kamza is probably unknown to most of the participants, Tirana has actually started to appear in the architecture media as the city is transformed by recent projects involving renowned architects, including MVRDV, OMA, Stefano Boeri, Archea Associati and BIG. The ambition for a Bilbao Effect has arrived in this long-forgotten city in the Western Balkans. For this training school, however, we are more interested in other stories, the ones that reveal the capacity of minor agencies to claim and arrange everyday life in these cities.

This exploration of how the planned and unplanned intersect within these two cities, how these concepts shape each other, gives a sense of the power relations that enable this process. As a method of exploration we combine psychogeographic walks and ethnographic film. During an intense research-creation process of *embodied exploration*, we immersed ourselves collectively in the local realities in these cities, with the aim of crafting stories of *commoning practices* and *material unrest*.

Willie is the only one in the organizing team who was not born and raised in Albania. She is visiting Tirana, Kamza and the surrounding areas for the first time, and will be staying there for a week.<sup>2</sup> The aim of her visit is to test the method of video-making to capture the dynamics of urban encounters. The focus would be a reading of the *material unrest* in/on these terrains, a concept proposed by Dorina as a characteristic of the current fast

pace of spatial and material changes in the area. Dorina, who used to live in Tirana and now is located in the Netherlands, initiated the training school and has been studying these fast-changing cities over the years. By sharing our daily correspondence with the reader here, we want to transmit a glimpse of Willie's encounter with the two cities and situations of thoughts exchanged between the two of us as organizers of the training school. Diana Malaj, who is a research and co-founder of the activist Grupi ATA based in Kamza, joined the organizing team of the training initiative subsequent to Willie's visit and the exchange of communications is documented in this correspondence.

#### Date\_22.12.2022 \_ Arrival

**Willie [W]** Dear Dorina, I have arrived in Tirana, your city. I took a taxi from the airport to the apartment. Driving on an empty motorway with flat grassland on both sides and mountains in the back, I had a conversation with the driver. He doesn't live in Tirana, it's too expensive and there's too much pollution according to him. You warned me about the pollution, and after settling down and going out to have something to eat, I immediately have to agree. Also, the construction sounds you mentioned are very prevailing. Almost everywhere you walk, buildings and roads are under construction, and the air is thick with cement dust and exhaust fumes. There are few main access roads in the city centre, and these are always full of cars. In their text 'Tirana Visible and Invisible', Rosen and Musaraj refer to the materialisation of the city as the *betonizim* by the 'concrete maffia'.<sup>3</sup>

**Dorina [D]** Dear Willie, good to hear you arrived in Tirana. Subconsciously, I feel the urge to explain the city to you who sees it with the foreigner's eye, so you do not judge it right away. But I will refrain from that as I want you to have the full freedom of your own experience of encountering Tirana. It is the place I miss the most while living abroad. It is true that Tirana gives its inhabitants a hard time, but many cities do, right? You will

see that there is a continuous struggle to improve, the aspiration and the energy is there. In the process of transitioning, we celebrate the gains and mourn the losses. I know this will sound pretty romanticized, but the concern among many that have Tirana in their heart is of the city losing its soul.

**[W]** The first encounters with the city reminded me of Istanbul, maybe not so odd considering its history, right? In Tirana, the bustle on the streets late at night, the many coffee shops, how packed it is, but also the city layout seems to be an amalgamation of a bazaar city and a Mediterranean culture of living outside. The streets of the neighbourhood Don Bosko contain quite some similar looking concrete apartment blocks. When were they built? How was the city developed in this area and similar ones? Tomorrow I plan to go to Kamza, the adjacent city, where your friend Diana will show me around.

**[D]** I totally understand flashback memories coming to you from Istanbul. Indeed, in Tirana you see a mixture of influences. The inner city was an Ottoman-influenced town with its bazaar, but in the *mahalla* (neighbourhoods), the inner roads between the houses were not curated like the façade streets. The inhabitants would give much more attention to the interior of their wall-fenced yards, which were usually semi-private spaces of gathering; they can be considered commoning spaces in the city. On the other hand, the living in the street indeed comes from the Mediterranean characteristic. Here, influences from the East and the West entangle. As you know, Albania had an immense influence from Italian culture as well, not only during its occupation, but also during the totalitarian regime that followed. People could listen to Italian radio stations through frequencies that would enter the territory, which had a huge impact on Albanians who wanted to keep some connection and dream of the Western world. *Xhiro* (*la passegatta / strolling*), as it is called in Albanian, was also an important ritual during totalitarianism, and interestingly enough, the place for it to happen was the main colonial boulevard, which was built in times of Italian

occupation. The Albanian writer Ardian Vehbiu has written extensively both about the influence of the radio during times of isolation, but also about the ritual of walking on the main boulevard.<sup>4</sup> Also, New York-based Albanian historian Elidor Mëhilli in his piece called 'Socialism with a Fascist Façade', he explains how the monumental 'fascist buildings' of the boulevard were suitable for the totalitarian state-socialist regime that followed.<sup>5</sup> I will propose these texts as readings for our training school. During the training school, Arba Bekteshi will talk about the culture of walking in the city, and she will explain how she used it as an exploratory method in her own work.

Instead, the area of Don Bosko where you are staying, as many other areas outside of what is known as the (inner) ring, were urbanized after the socialist regime collapsed and when Tirana expanded because many people were free to move and to live in the city. At first, mostly one-family houses appeared, and then apartment buildings, or apartment blocks, took over.

**[W]** It is wonderful to read your affection for your city. It is something I could read through the line of the contemporary poet Lleshanaku (2018). Although she does not write specifically about Tirana, some of her writings helped me to understand the ambiguous affection towards your city and country. For example, in 'Cities' she writes about how every city is 'more or less the same', but then continues with specificities regarding her own experiences.<sup>6</sup> What comes through is that although there are similarities, each sameness is different by details of the lived experience built with historical and social layers.

#### **Date \_ 23.12.2022 \_ Kamza**

**[W]** I travelled by foot through the self-made settlement of Kamza. Some of the houses are big and spacious, yet most of them remain unfinished. A well-known example are the outside staircases as unrealized dreams of parents wanting their house to grow along with

the family, vertically, stacked on top of each other (Fig. 1). On the main streets, connecting Bathore – one of the neighbourhoods – to the centre of Kamza, I found many little shops selling different building parts and materials. From all sizes of sinks to second-hand window frames, everything you could imagine to build your house with, is available in these small shops. It is an interesting phenomenon, as they are not only tapping into the common pool of resources and recycling them, it also gives agency to the inhabitants since they can extend, change and adapt their house the way they wish. It prompted me to think through an alternative, playful aesthetic in which the innovative, practical and communal effort weigh much more than coherence, alignment or proportion (to name just a few aesthetical criteria we use to value architecture). It reminds me of the plea by architect and educator Jeremy Till in which he warns that architecture as a practice is ruled by specialist artisans who set up their own problems by creating static objects rather than performing a much more needed fluid practice. He states that: 'The creative brief is about negotiating a new set of social relations, it is about juxtapositions of actions and activities, it is about the possibility to think outside the norm, in order to project new spatial, and hence social, conditions.'<sup>7</sup>

**[D]** These small shops that sell tools, building parts or accessories are ubiquitous, and stand along with grocery stores, cafés, barber and tailor shops. Construction in Kamza is an everyday activity that merges with life itself. To live in Kamza still feels like living on a terrain under construction, where everyone participates in its making, although it has been illegal and prohibited by law since 2014 to construct without permission. ALUIZNI (The Agency for Legalization, Urbanization and Integration of Informal Areas and Buildings) was a governmental agency that used areal photographs of the entire territory of the Republic of Albania to understand when the construction was made in order to legalize it or not. The first aerial photographs were taken in the year 1994, and later in 1999, 2001 and 2007. Although as a process it might sound fair on



Fig. 1. Self-made home. Photo: Willie Vogel, Kamza, Albania, 2022.

paper, the legalization of buildings has often been arbitrary, and used as a tool to capitalize on electoral votes, often through unmet promises. The banning of construction has operated in waves, as the state has sometimes applied strict rules from fines up to imprisonment for construction without permission, and sometimes has tolerated the construction before the elections. The use of aerial photography by the state has also influenced the form and process of construction. As you might have noticed in Kamza, some of the houses have their roofs completed, so the house looks finished in the aerial photography, whereas the construction inside the houses is actually still ongoing. Of course, the application for legalization was not only dependent on the aerial view, but other photos of the house would be required to be submitted by the owners. Those extra elements would be easier to be substituted or negotiated with the state officials at some other moment, which often would be the start of a negotiation through corruption.

The aspiration of *becoming* is part of the landscape, although the agency of the inhabitants has shrunk considerably and the time of full autonomy of communities and families over the territory is coming to an end. Small-scale constructions are in Kamza's DNA, but upon closer observation it is possible to read the role of the state in the process, often not as an entity that wants to improve the life of the citizens, but as a superstructure that operates with the purpose of regaining control over the territory, while in a way becoming a threatening force.<sup>8</sup> The dilemma is whether this newly configured state will recognize the struggle and the capacities of the communities to self-organize and create a city from scratch, or reinforce the fabricated stigma on these areas. Unfortunately, so far, we have seen the latter happening, when those in power label these areas as illegal, abusive, cancerous, informal, therefore keeping the inhabitants outside of legal rights.<sup>9</sup>

I'm curious, why did you start your exploration in Kamza and not Tirana? Usually it's the other way around.

**[W]** My start of the exploration from the peripheral areas rather than from the centre is related to my interest in communal living, especially in relation to material resources, which is often more explicit in these areas. For quite a long time now I've been interested in the materials used to build urban settlements. Why are certain materials standard and others abandoned? How is the fabrication and organization behind these materials structured? In a way the material assemblages of a city express the cultural, political, economic and environmental structures of society. By thinking through assemblages, through the many networks material holds, we can maybe better understand what 'writes' the city. It's like how Anna Tsing follows one specific mushroom, but by doing so unravels world politics, global environmental issues and cultural specificities.<sup>10</sup> You told me that after the fall of the communist regime people from all over Albania moved towards the capital with the prospect of finding economic luck. Since the government was not prepared for this large migration, people had to organize themselves. Kamza is one of the great examples of this effort. Cow stables were transformed into human homes, as your friend Diana told and showed me. I wanted to see this phenomenon with my own eyes. Also because it has been criticised a lot by, among others, West European architects operating in Tirana. The well-known Belgium office 51N4E called this a 'falling victim to cancerous illegal settlements. People were building everywhere: on rooftops, in courtyards, parks and riverbeds'.<sup>11</sup> With these kinds of stigmas I can only imagine gruesome futures.

**[D]** Exactly. There is a lack of recognition of inhabitants creating things themselves, their own attempts to improve their material conditions, the way that communities are created along with the co-creation of an urban settlement – Kamza became the fifth biggest city in Albania.

It is remarkable that these urban formations, which emerged in a time when the state was almost absent, were labelled as illegal. A problem that comes with this labelling and reproducing a stigma, defining them as ugly, disastrous, an anomaly, is that it shows how the professionalization of our (architecture and planning) disciplines is becoming detached from the material culture of the people and communities they are supposed to serve. This is indeed easily recognizable in Kamza, when the inhabitants, besides having to arrange their lives without any institutional support, also had to cope with this stigma, and a lack of professional interest in their needs. Instead of acknowledging the capacity and the situated knowledge that these communities produce and operate with to be able to create these settlements, instead of looking into this immense capacity and empowering it, the professional looks at such forms of living with contempt. This is a widespread problem that is not only encountered in Albania, and in general the issue is kept outside of the discipline of architecture.<sup>12</sup> Now, within academia, we are hopefully speaking about changing the mindset and seeking the cooperation of our discipline with other disciplines that study society from a cultural point of view, like anthropology or cultural studies. This will help us as architects and planners to connect better with reality.

**[W]** What surprised me was the antagonism of the young inhabitants of the neighbourhood. For example, I had a conversation with a young guy, aged 12 or so, and while he was standing next to his grandmother who made such an effort to build and sustain their community, he told me that he disliked his house and expressed his wish to move abroad. Something common in these neighbourhoods where there is an extensive migration to England. People dangerously cross the North Sea in small boats to try to get asylum or use the registration period to work and earn some money to bring back home. In almost all families there is one member who moved abroad. Yet, those who stayed had a robust, powerful attitude and worked to improve their country from within.

[D] As an Albanian that has emigrated herself, I understand the inner call to take that path as an escape route. Many have left, but the connection to your family, your culture, to your place is still very strong. Those houses you see in Kamza and other areas in Tirana, for example the 5 Maji neighbourhood along the river, are a material witness of this connection. Most of them were built with money earned abroad. These areas are a materialization of many sacrifices. And as belonging to a diasporic country, that's how each of us contributes with their own 'brick' to construct something, a house for the family, a collective community archive, a chapter in a book, a protest in the street, an article in a magazine . . .

[W] The whole morning I've been strolling around with Diana. In the afternoon she took me to a theatre play in the forest set up by the collective Grupi Ata, an activist group of which she is a member. It is such a wonderful initiative. The organization is based in a normal apartment in Kamza where they have been hosting a great number of activist events involving citizens. The play I was invited to was a recapitulation of the community resistance against a meat company that wanted to tear down their own grown forest. It was performed by three youngsters from Kamza and the audience consisted of other activists or people from the targeted neighbourhood. From some freestanding houses we were brought to their little forest next to the riverside. With the splash of water in the background, grandmothers, mothers with children and old men sat down and watched. The compassion and anger was present when an old lady started to mingle with the play and was willing to start an argument with the actor playing the mayor (Fig. 2). Even if I didn't speak the language and couldn't capture the jokes it was such an empowering scene.

[D] In relation to the mainstream tendency of the youth to leave, as you say, you met yourself with people from Grupi ATA, a grassroots form of commoning that shows attempts to do the opposite. They aim to connect



Fig. 2. A play by Grupi Ata.  
Photo: Willie Vogel, Kamza, Albania, 2022.

with the place in a profound and meaningful way, to weave a community that shares the struggles of living in a city like Kamza and still go through the challenges together. As an interdisciplinary collective, they conduct activism through art and research, and are working on a new understanding of their urban reality. As you saw, during their theatre performances, unexpected places in the city become improvised stages of art and activism. Also, as Diana may have shown you, they periodically do fieldwork for their Laboratory of Urban Anthropology, in which I have participated. This annually organized laboratory is an invitation to meet the city differently, through ethnographic encounters, together with others that have an interest in participating. Beyond this, they offer activist and legal advocacy for environmental causes in support of communities, like the case of Zall Gjocaj to protect the river from a hydro plant that puts water in pipes, taking it from the community that relies on it for living.<sup>13</sup>

**[W]** On this note I want to express my joy to have met these wonderful people. Coming from a Western privileged position, growing up in a small town between the capital of the Netherlands and the sea, my economic, cultural and urban environment has been quite stable my whole life. Although having travelled and lived in other countries I am still figuring out what my position is when I move to different places, how much space I can take. I hope that the curiosity and respect for other ways of living came across during my conversations. I did not want to come with facts, nor did I try to research or point to a mere cause and effect situation for the film I will produce. It links to what I have been reading throughout Le Guin's work. She sees that we are often taught (in Western schools) to 'crave objectivity because the subjective is to be embodied, to be a body, vulnerable, violable'.<sup>14</sup> Something to unlearn when travelling.

**[D]** Also, the work of ATA reminds me of bell hooks' reflection on choosing the margin as a place of radical openness.<sup>15</sup> Their work is a continuation of their parents' struggles and autonomy. It is intergenerational,

it is subversive of the stigma, it comes from a place of resistance, the resistance that for years has been silenced by the dominance of centralities of power. The inhabitants of Kamza are seen as *them, ata* in Albanian, the 'Others', that are not supposed to have a voice: them, coming from the mountains, the primitives, that aspire to be modern, but that still cannot escape the framework and fate of their tribe. As Pratibha Parma – cited in the same book by bell hook – would say, 'they appropriate this space of marginality as a political act!<sup>16</sup> We, and everyone that enters that space has to be aware of where they are entering and where they are coming from. For me, my position as an insider and an outsider simultaneously often puts me in dilemmas of positionality. For all of us organizing and participating in the training school, to go there from TU Delft or other well-known European institutions, we have to be careful to not think of ourselves as the liberators. They do not need us for that, they are capable of liberating themselves and they do it every day. We go there to learn through and with them, to make sense of things, to co-produce some situated knowledge that can only come from the *radical openness* of these places. That's how I see the positionality of this training school we are organizing, while I cherish the autonomy of places like Kamza.

**Date \_ 24.12.2022 \_ Tirana**

**[W]** During my first day I learned a lot about the peripheral areas of Tirana and how this capital of Albania turned into this mid-sized European city. It was my second day when I stepped onto the colourful tiles of the main square in the city centre of Tirana (Fig. 3). I was told that the colours resemble all the different parts of Albania – the square symbolizing the togetherness of a nation (to follow this metaphor one should not look too closely since many tiles are dirty and broken already). As you mentioned the city centre itself showed many different time influences.

The transition from Kamza to Tirana is interesting. Either you take one of



Fig. 3. Main Square, design by N51E4.  
Photo: Willie Vogel, Tirana, Albania, 2022.

the main car veins to the city centre, or you walk along the river through the self-made neighbourhoods, trying to cross a self-made bridge.<sup>17</sup> As soon as you come into the inner ring you feel the long history of the city. A patchwork of different architectural styles, shops at every corner, higher apartment blocks all indicate that Tirana is a different city.

Maybe it is only now, looking back, that one can distinguish some sort of timeframes. As the previously mentioned article by Rosen and Musaraj, 'Tirana Visible and Invisible', explains so beautifully, the city of Tirana can be historically read through its several architectural articulations. In their case the Bazaar City, the Boulevard City, the Concrete City and the City of Cafes. If we stick to their interpretation for now (although they don't identify settlements like Kamza), I think one of the proposed 'cities' is dominant at the moment: the Concrete City.<sup>18</sup> This kind of city is planned, dominating, economically driven and composed by many non-Albanian architects. To explore this phenomenon I moved from the periphery and the 'unplanned' Kamza to the centre of Tirana. How do you relate to these 'different' cities? And how do you remember the city centre of the early 2000s?

**[D]** Tirana has a complex and complicated history and material legacy, unfortunately not so democratic. The city we have today is marked by a transformation from an organic development to ambitious planning actions aimed at Westernizing it. As mentioned by many, the city has now become a palimpsest of erasure and overwriting, with planned and unplanned traces coexisting. That is mostly evident in the city centre within the ring. Professional planning in Tirana has often been done violently and at the expense of the unplanned, through shrinking or erasing the agency of inhabitants and minor and less powerful actors in the city. This has been a common denominator of all the regimes that have ruled in Tirana, including the current one. In his book-length essay *Kulla e Sahatit* (the Clock Tower), Ardian Vehbiu speaks about how during state-socialism



Tirana was transformed from a city of artisans to a city of professionals and bureaucrats. He also describes how the city centre has been used as the scene for a political theatre of symbolisms, of influences and for cryptic communication signals.<sup>19</sup> Something similar is happening nowadays with an allegedly apolitical design for the central square, or with nationalistic symbols in tower façades that aim to distract the discussion from more important questions that would help understand where the pressure on the city comes from. A pressure that is usually justified in the name of development and progress. But my question is whether progress can arrive without democracy. Can progress come through violence? Is that real progress?

**Date \_ 25.12.2022 \_ Tirana**

[W] I made my way to the neighbourhoods next to the boulevard (Fig. 4). Self-made villas are under threat of being torn down and replaced by the white, supposedly green, urban plan of Boeri. It was a good site to film the main theme of my investigation: material unrest. There was a constant noise of construction sites, in which buildings were being demolished or rebuilt. There were spraypainted texts on the metal sheets protecting the new buildings showing the resistance to these transformations. I know that many protests have taken place here, but nothing succeeded to withstand the political incentives (Fig. 5). The state of unknowing is the main struggle people have. They don't understand why this transformation is happening, when their house will be next to be demolished and where they have to go. We might call this short period of transformation and reordering a shifting of baseline syndrome. The term comes from the field of geology and is used to address the changing of the environment in such a way that we forget how it looked before and thus privilege some assemblages over others.<sup>20</sup> Albania is executing a huge metamorphosis and this is mainly initiated, visible and brought about through matter. Where ideologies differ it is material that matters, that enforces statements.



Fig. 4. Boeri redevelopment. Photo: Willie Vogel, 5 Maji Tirana, Albania, 2022.



Fig. 5. A sign of protest against the Boeri redevelopment. Photo: Willie Vogel, Tirana, Albania, 2022.

Moving through the city I was drawn to the concrete city since this is so present. This material is widespread because it is relatively easy to make since the infrastructure and market are in place. Yet it is damaging in many ways. Taken from the riversides, whole ecosystems are transported to the periphery of Tirana to be mixed with cement and aggregates. Poured in the ground and rising up to the sky, concrete establishes a mark for many years. When new ideas have to be concretized and old buildings have to go, the waste materials are dumped into the river again, functioning as foundations for a new ring road. In the best case scenario if the loop is closed, the material value has gone through many stages. The research has given me several insights into these stages and explained to me quite some aspects of a country and its inhabitants. I can't wait to share these with a larger group and discuss other findings during and after the training school!

With special thanks to our conversation partner Diana Malaj (Activist and PhD candidate Law, Graz University, from Albania living in Kamza) who became a substantial part of the organizing team of the training school.

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- 2 Willie's visit is supported by an STSM (short term scientific mission) of the COST action *Writing Urban Places*.
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- 4 Ardian Vehbiu and Elona Pira run an influential Albanian essay-oriented online magazine, [peizazhe.com/](http://peizazhe.com/).
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- 17 Lorin Niculae, professor at the 'Ion Mincu' University of Architecture and Urbanism in Bucharest and one of the participants in the training school was

inspired to write about lessons learned about this self-made bridge and the way it works as a self-managed and commoning piece of infrastructure. Online: [dilemaveche.ro/sectiune/societate/un-pod-si-citeva-invatamint-2259717.html](http://dilemaveche.ro/sectiune/societate/un-pod-si-citeva-invatamint-2259717.html).

- 18 Rosen and Musaraj, 'Tirana Visible and Invisible', op. cit. (note 1).
- 19 Ardian Vehbiu, *Kulla e Sahatit* (Tirana: Çabej, 2018). Selected pieces from *Kulla e Sahatit* are to be published in English in *Other Destinations*, a publication supported by the COST Action *Writing Urban Places*.
- 20 Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing et al. (eds.), *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 6.