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## Concrete's material agency: and the 200.000 Albanian bunkers

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**SPECIAL ISSUE:  
HOW MATERIALS SHAPED  
THE HUMAN WORLD**

**THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF  
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**POTTERY IN THE DIGITAL AGE**  
*Nina Škerjanc*



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# CONCRETE'S MATERIAL AGENCY

## AND THE 200.000 ALBANIAN BUNKERS

SVEN VAN MARIS

### ABSTRACT:

Thousands of concrete bunkers, built during the communist dictatorship of Enver Hoxha, are scattered all over Albania. Previously, they have mostly been examined on the basis of their symbolic meanings, but not on their materiality. This essay investigates this materiality by exploring the concept of material agency and examining concrete, the bunkers' defining material. During the 'bunkerisation' of Albania, concrete's agency was somewhat limited. The communist dictatorship could use the material at their will. It was after the dictatorship however, that concrete's agency became apparent. As a result of concrete's properties the bunkers are now involuntary monuments to the past.

### KEYWORDS:

Concrete, Material Agency, Bunkers, Communist Albania, Monuments

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### INTRODUCTION

Albania, the small and mountainous country in Eastern Europe, is littered with concrete bunkers (e.g. Figure 1) built during the communist dictatorship of Enver Hoxha that lasted until 1985. Documents show that 173,371 bunkers were constructed in 1983, out of a planned 221,143 (Veizaj et al. 2020, 1011). The bunkers have mostly been examined for what they as physical objects symbolise. Galaty et al. (1999) investigated how the bunkers have been deployed by Albania's communist dictatorship to impose its ideology on the Albanian people. They argue that they were constructed to stand for social solidarity and defence, but have since the end of the dictatorship stood for an overthrown and openly mocked political regime (Galaty et al. 1999, 209). This theme comes back in the many journalistic travel pieces that are written about the bunkers every year: the bunkers are 'concrete testament to the paranoia of Enver Hoxha' (Eilers 2016), and '[b]urrowed between an isolated past and a reinvented future' (Crevar 2017).

Less focus has been on the materiality of the many concrete bunkers. The bunkers have not been studied principally on the basis of what they are as physical, material objects. This lack of considering the material intrinsically ties into New-Materialisms' challenge of the anthropogenic view of materials, a view in which human ideas about material take precedence over the material itself (LeCain 2017, 16). Boivin states that materiality and its ability to impose constraints and enable possibilities have been overlooked (Boivin 2008, 168). A neglect of



Figure 1. Bunker in the city of Korçë, photo courtesy of Wikipedia.org

materiality is also prevalent in archaeology, argues Olsen in his aptly titled *In Defence Of Things* (2013). According to Olsen, archaeologists recurrently interpret material culture and landscapes as 'metaphorical "stand-ins" that always represent something else' (Olsen 2013, 3), moreover, 'the "social," the "cultural," the "political," and so forth [are] all implicitly conceived of as extramaterial entities' (Olsen 2013, 3).

An idea that helps emphasise the importance of materiality is the concept of material agency. It is the idea that material has agency and impacts humans emotionally,

sensually, socially and even physiologically. This agency is given by its physicality, meaning qualities like its colour, weight, and strength (Boivin 2008, 129-130). The fact that material has agency does not entail that we should see this deterministically. Humans are able to shape material and likewise, material shapes humans, making it a two-way relationship. With the acknowledgement of material agency, justice is done to the things themselves.

In this essay I explore the concept of material agency in relation to the Albanian bunkers. The defining material of the Albanian bunker is concrete: it gives it its look, its strength, and its shape. While the materiality of bunkers could also lie in their geological setting as it is rock that shelters the bunker (Garrett and Klink 2019, 1071-1073), this is not true for the Albanian bunkers. These bunkers were placed everywhere, in urban as well as rural environments, near the coast as well as inland. The geological setting thus varies greatly, making it not geology that defines the Albanian bunker, but concrete. By using material agency and focussing on concrete, it is possible to inquire into the materiality of the Albanian bunkers. To what extent did concrete's material agency shape the programme of 'bunkerisation' by the Hoxha regime and the bunkers' existence afterwards?

### CONCRETE AND THE BUNKERISATION PROJECT

Concrete is a combination of cement, aggregates (such as sand and pebbles) and water. Concrete starts as a liquid, which later solidifies. This flexibility means that it can achieve any shape in its liquid form. This is where concrete's appeal lies (Bartolini 2015, 196). The most important component, cement, is made up of a finely ground mixture of lime, clay and metallic oxides, fired in a kiln at a high temperature (Smil 2014, 19). Cement that was satisfactory to produce reliable concrete was available after 1824. From then on, it was possible to make concrete that is strong under compression; however, the material is weak in tension. To combat this flaw, the concrete can be reinforced with iron. Concrete and iron bind solidly and the iron is protected from rust by the hydraulic cement. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, reinforced concrete steadily developed, its popularity growing. By the twentieth century, reinforced concrete was well in place and became the basis of huge urban expansions (Smil 2014, 28-37).

There is a strong connection between communism and reinforced concrete, and one could state that the use of concrete by Albania's communist dictatorship is part of a tradition. On the 7th of December, 1954, Nikita Khrushchev, first secretary of the Communist Party Central Committee of the Soviet Union, gave a speech about concrete and its use in construction. The speech was the starting point for the famous Soviet apartment blocks made of reinforced concrete panels. Khrushchev declared that concrete was to be used for everything possible; if something could be made with concrete, it should be made with concrete. For the sake of efficiency, prefabrication should take precedence over *in situ* production. Furthermore, the importance of standardised designs was emphasized (Forty 2012, 149-159).



Figure 2. Medium bunker, photo courtesy of Wikipedia.org

The Albanian bunkers fit into this tradition. The Albanian bunkers were built during the rule of Enver Hoxha, which began in 1944 and lasted until Hoxha's death in 1985. The context in which they were built was one in which Albania became more and more isolated. Albania's alignment with the USSR, formed in the years after the Second World War, broke down in 1961. An alliance with China followed, but in the late 1970s this partnership fell apart, too (Payne 2014, 161-162). The bunkers were the result of a plan by the communist leadership in 1971 to solidify the country's defence. Significant to this plan was the idea that the entire population was to be prepared militarily. The resulting project was implemented in 1975, and consisted of placing bunkers throughout the country to protect soldiers and the civilian population in case of an attack by foreign armies. This lasted until the mid 1980s (Veizaj et al. 2020, 1010) and was known as the 'bunkerisation project' (Payne 2014, 161).

The Albanian bunkers have been tentatively categorised into three groups, based on size: small (Figure 1), medium (Figure 2 and Figure 3) and large bunkers (Veizaj et al. 2020, 1011). The small bunkers have a diameter of 3 m and the medium bunkers a diameter of 8 m (Stefa and Mydyti 2009, 74-75). The large bunkers vary in size. Up to 1983, roughly 160,000 small, hemispherical bunkers were built. They were prefabricated and then transported to their intended location. Meant for soldiers and civilians, these bunkers were everywhere: in urban and non-urban areas, in the mountains, and on shores. The medium bunkers, on the other hand, were only placed in strategic positions. They were to be used by the military and designed to withstand attacks from tanks. They were typically mushroom-shaped, but other shapes were possible too. The different elements of the bunkers were prefabricated and then assembled on site. Almost 10,000 were made until 1983. The larger bunkers were designed to be used as military control centers or storage of military equipment. These were tunnel bunkers composed of both prefabricated elements and parts that were made on location. Roughly 2,000 were made (Veizaj et al. 2020, 1011). It is possible to zoom in on the production process of the mushroom-shaped medium bunker, which was put together by combining up to seven different reinforced concrete parts. Very fine concrete was used for

the parts, which set in large metal moulds. The setting in the mould could take weeks; the cap element had to set in a mould for up to 18 days. After all the parts finished setting in the mould, they were ready to be transported (Glass 2017, 147-148).

If we consider the concept of material agency and Albania's bunkerisation, it would seem that concrete's agency was secondary to the agency of the dictatorship. Just like the Soviet Union, Albania's communist dictatorship was able to successfully manipulate and use concrete, with the help of methods like prefabrication and standardisation. The communist regime could take great advantage of the properties of reinforced concrete: its strength under compression and tension and its ability to be poured into any desired shape. Yet concrete had some agency too. It had influence on determining the time parts needed to set, and concrete's weight put constraints on logistics. Without concrete's properties it would not be possible to conceive very large projects such as the Soviet Union's apartment blocks and Albania's bunkers. The project of building the many bunkers was facilitated by the material. However, it was Albania's dictatorship and its ideas that were decisive in the end. In the next section, concrete's material agency is really demonstrated.



Figure 3. Interior view of a medium bunker, photo courtesy of Wikipedia.org

## INVOLUNTARY MONUMENTS OF A COMMUNIST DICTATORSHIP

The thousands of bunkers were never used for their intended purpose during the communist dictatorship. No attack ever came and the population never had to resort to the bunkers. With the death of Enver Hoxha, the bunkerisation project of Albania was terminated. The country was filled with bunkers that served no apparent purpose, with the exception of reminding the Albanians of the dictatorship. What was to be done with them? Architect and researcher Jason Payne puts forward four possible strategies: nullification, adaptation, indifference, and ambivalence (Payne 2014, 165-166). By considering concrete's material agency, it is possible to determine which option has the most merits.

The first strategy, nullification, involves the elimination of all bunkers from the landscape (Payne 2014, 165). This would remove the reminders of the communist past. In

this scenario every bunker would have to be located, disassembled, and destroyed or recycled. This way, every physical reminder of a bleak period in the country's history is gone. This strategy has enormous downsides however. Here concrete's material agency is crucial. First of all, because of concrete's weight, the costs and difficulties of logistics would be enormous. Yet the most important factor, because we are dealing with reinforced concrete here, are the costs of separating the concrete from the metal. These costs are very high on account of their solid bond (Smil 2014, 56). So, because of concrete's agency, locating, transporting and recycling every bunker is just too expensive. Nullification is not possible.

The next strategy, adaptation, would see the bunkers adapted and reused (Payne 2014, 165). There are also problems that stem from the concrete's materiality in this approach. To begin with, because of concrete's properties, particularly its colour and texture, the options for reuse are limited. The bunkers cannot be made into comfortable dwellings and cannot be modeled easily. The many bunkers found in urban spaces cannot be turned into benches or other street furniture. However, even more important is the state of many of the bunkers. The 160,000 small bunkers of Albania were never needed and there was no reason to maintain them after the dictatorship. This leaves the assumption that many bunkers are not suitable for reuse because of the state the concrete is in, as concrete is very susceptible to deterioration, exposed as well as buried. This causes concrete to look ugly and lose strength, causing unsafe conditions. If concrete is not adequately maintained or repaired, the replacement costs are enormous. This is especially the case with concrete that is of poor quality (Smil 2014, 56). Concrete's agency makes the strategy of adaptation unviable.

As the result of concrete's properties, two final, workable strategies are left: indifference and ambivalence. Indifference is a sort of passive preservation and leaves the bunkers alone. Ambivalence is like indifference, but without the passivity. If the bunkers were just left alone, there is the risk that Albanians forget what the bunkers are, argues Payne. The strategy of ambivalence aims to promote the continuity of the bunkers and to investigate what the bunkers mean (Payne 2014, 165-167). Indifference is about forgetting as time passes by, ambivalence is about trying to remember. Concrete's properties cause the strategies of nullification or adaptation to be impractical. So, due to concrete's agency, the bunkers are there as reminders of the communist dictatorship, for the time being at least. The Albanian bunkers are involuntary monuments. Choices in the future will determine if the Albanian people are willing to forget the bunkers and what they stand for, or if they will try to remember.

## CONCLUSIONS

Research on the many bunkers built in Albania during the communist dictatorship has predominantly focused on what they, as physical objects, symbolise. This essay addressed the bunkers' materiality by considering the concept of material agency. This concept refers to how material influences humans and has agency of its

own. Humans and material come together in a two-way relationship: material shapes humans, just as humans shape material. The bunkers of Albania illustrate this neatly. The bunkerisation of Albania was initially a project thought of, and executed by, humans. In this process the agency of concrete, the bunkers' principal material, was secondary to the agency of the communist regime. The ideas of Enver Hoxha were leading, but facilitated by concrete and its properties.

However, it was concrete that ultimately influenced the afterlife of the bunkers. Albania is now stuck with numerous bunkers, whether the Albanian people like it or not, and part of this is to blame on the materiality of concrete. Material agency is a suitable concept to demonstrate that humans do not just impose their will on the material world, but that material considerably influences humans too. Archaeology has been somewhat dominated by research that interprets material things as representations of something else, insofar things like politics and culture almost seem to exist independently of the material. By employing the concept of material agency in relation to the Albanian bunkers, it is demonstrated that politics and the material are (of course) closely related. It is a gentle reminder to archaeologists that materiality matters.

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