

# TIRANA. ARCHITECTURE AS POLITICAL ACTOR



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# KADARE HOUSE STUDIO

MARVIN BRANDT, KATHARINA WITTKE

*On 26 May 2019 the current mayor of Tirana Erion Veliaj posted an picture of himself on Twitter with author Ismail Kadare, his wife Helena Kadare and the Italian architect Elisabetta Terragni in front of a white bookshelf.*

This scene served as an occasion to publicly reveal the author's former flat, his living and working space in Tirana, and present the results of its converted function and purpose as a museum. In order to set up the "Studio House Kadare", the city of Tirana had purchased the flat along with its interior furnishings and transformed it into an exhibition space under the supervision of the architect Elisabetta Terragni. The tweet highlighting Veliaj and the municipality of Tirana in their endeavours to develop this new exhibition site emphasises the cultural-political publicity efforts connected to this place and reveals the complex agency inscribed there. During our research on location, we would soon discover an extensive system of multi-layered (and coded) figures and things. However, our two-person team that carried out the investigation under self-restricted conditions over three days in discussion with experts (Arba Baxhaku, Maks Velo and Erilda Selaj) on site was only able to superficially explain such a complex system. Accordingly, the text below is a first approximation of this place with examples detailing how architectural artefacts themselves act as actors, constructing, reproducing or rewriting reality. For this purpose, three time-cuts were made. On the basis of these three defined phases – construction phase, living phase and the phase of the site made accessible in a new public realm – we shall discuss the enhancement and transformation of the network constituting to this place.



## BETWEEN POLITICAL AND SPATIAL ESTABLISHMENT

The edifice in the *Rruga e Dibrës* was designed by the young architect Maks Velo beginning in 1971. By the time it was completed, it came to embed a foreign body in the otherwise one- to two-storey environment, a formerly Ottoman-precinct east of *Skanderbeg Square*. In the immediate vicinity of Albania's political centre of power, Velo created an *enfant terrible* for the Ministry of Construction which sought to standardise and functionalise the housing industry from a purely technocratic point of view, allowing an idea of architectural expression only in the predefined frame of social building. Velo's compact six-storey building with protrusions and recesses, spacious balconies and a dynamic facade (so-called "*Dice Residential Building*") prominently stands out in the cityscape and contradicts the dogmas of a social realism (Ndreçka & Nepravishta 2014, 30).

Yet the really controversial aspect of this building is harboured in the inner structure of the house. Only when looking at the blueprints does it become apparent that the literary figures Kadare and Agolli were accommodated here in particularly spacious premises, transforming two residential units into one four-by-one apartment in total. This allowed these two writers to set up work and reception areas in their own four walls with maximum comfort. Hence from 1973 onward, Kadare and his family lived on the second floor in a flat extending in full width between the two circulation cores of the housing block. The poet Dritëro Agolli lived on the floor above him. Kadare was already a successful author at the time, and his works had been published abroad on a larger scale. He constantly had to walk a tightrope between demonstrating loyalty to the regime and expressing criticism. Since 1970 he was a member of parliament under Enver Hoxha, yet simultaneously parts of his work were massively censored and sporadically banned. Maintaining close relations with people in power at the time was in

itself part of his ambivalent relationship to the totalitarian system. We can say that he literally "settled in and fitted" under and alongside the dictatorship. The local residential conditions clearly demonstrate what special freedoms the writer enjoyed as a figurehead of the Albanian cultural enterprise in those years. Kadare spent his days writing within a totalitarian system. By focusing on historical subjects, he could write about existential questions and threats. Thus in 1971, the novel *Chronicle in Stone* was published which deals with his childhood in Gjirokastër in the south of the country. The motif of the fireplace as an element of the regional-traditional construction or building culture was echoed in Maks Velo's design in an anachronistic manner by Kadare's decision to install a fireplace in his workspace. Helene Kadare described it as a special place within the apartment, and its installation was Kadare's "project". Marble and fireclay bricks were not available on the market, but acquaintances and friends helped to procure them from other parts of the country. From today's perspective, we can venture diverse speculations about this idiosyncratic architectural artefact and its impact on the author's conduct and output, as well as his private and professional surroundings. On the one hand, the fireplace was a modest luxury object, but on the other hand, it served as a placeholder for history, origin, identity, ritual and spirituality within one's own four walls. The fireplace was an antidote/anti-programme to the rationalisation of everyday life and became part of the Kadare's character and his work processes:

"[Is[mail, ed.] attached great importance to the fireplace in his studio. Whenever he noticed that I was annoyed by the whole mess created around the pieces of marble and wood and mortar littering the ground, he kept arguing that the fireplace, more than any other part of the apartment, would be vitally linked to his creative work. As time has shown, this turned out to be completely true." (Kadare, H. 2011, 329)

The interior fittings, including the completion of the chimney, was en-

trusted to the architect Koço Çomi, who also designed the furnishings for government buildings and villas. Between the shared family living area, the living room and the studio, there was a wide, four-winged, large glass panelled folding door that allowed for a flexible room configuration while providing an expressively inviting entrance or amplified threshold to Kadare's studio space. The result was a kind of salon with bourgeois attributes that absorbed and hosted the social life of the writer, the reception of visitors and the business of writing. Part of the salon was also a built-in wardrobe wall with elaborately veneered fronts which served as a library and later became the background of numerous photographs. In the ductwork of the interior doors and built-in customised furniture, the soffits of the windows and balcony doors were also lined with solid wooden frames. The fireplace in the studio also received an appropriately curbed, framing mantelshelf. These individual components were produced by the "Misto Mame" combine. From the 1970s on, the combine was the only remaining production facility for furniture for domestic use. The combine's standardised furniture portfolio containing only a handful of designs for beds, tables, chairs, sofas and shelves, had a major impact on the uniformity of Albanian everyday life under the communist dictatorship. Custom designs made by Misto Mame were reserved for the country's political elite and influential figures.

## TRAPPED BEHIND BOOKS

In 1981 Kadare's parable "The Palace of Dreams" got published and was immediately banned. For almost a decade, he lived with his family in the Dice Residential Building under constant observation of the Politburo. For the architect Maks Velo, who had designed a whole series of expressive, geometric buildings with a contemporary international attitude, the universal need for state control had meanwhile become a nightmare. In 1978 he was sentenced to ten years in prison

and forced labour for the modernist tendencies in his work. According to Kadare, his literature saved him from this kind of penalty: "In 1970, after the translation into French, I suddenly became famous in the Western world. The paranoid state was completely unprepared for this success. Around my person, there was only silence. At a much later time I understood that I was expected to say to the Western bourgeoisie: I may please you, but I am your enemy... which never happened" (Kadare, I. 2017). Beyond all ambivalence regarding his behaviour, his insights into an oppressive system and his translated editions of his books were one of the few proofs of a nation's existence, one that had presumably been erased from the map. On the surface, Kadare maintained his relationship to Enver Hoxha, while withdrawing intellectually into the field of literature: "I was a normal writer in an abnormal country. Under dictatorship, a poet's homeland is nothing but language. As a result, we read a lot. Too much. The reality disappeared behind books" (Kadare, I. 2011). After studying in Moscow from 1958 to 1960, Russian translations became Kadare's key to the international literature scene. From the desk in his apartment, Kadare always had an eye on his books right in front of him. The white shelf that served as a library in his studio was an exotic design object among the wooden surfaces of Koço Çomi's interior details. Kadare, who was allowed to travel abroad for business trips, brought it from Italy. The modular system with a few coloured drawers was more flexible and sober than its surrounding area. One of the archive photos by his photographer-friend Petrit Kumi depicts Ismail and Helena Kadare in front of the packed shelf with dozens of books in double rows and personal items like a collection of pipes. Next to the fireplace, the white bookshelf was another curious and rather contrasting detail of Kadare's workspace. "Palace of Dreams" caused tempers to flair, and the goodwill of the regime towards the author crumbled away. In 1990 after 17 years in the Dice Residence Building and only few months before the implosion of the communist regime, Ismail and Helena Kadare de-



decided to ask for asylum in France. Without faith in the political transformation process, the writer left his apartment to his sister. As she only inhabited the smaller bedrooms and kitchen, the large living room and studio space became an indoor time capsule. Even after returning to Albania in 1999, Kadare never lived there again.

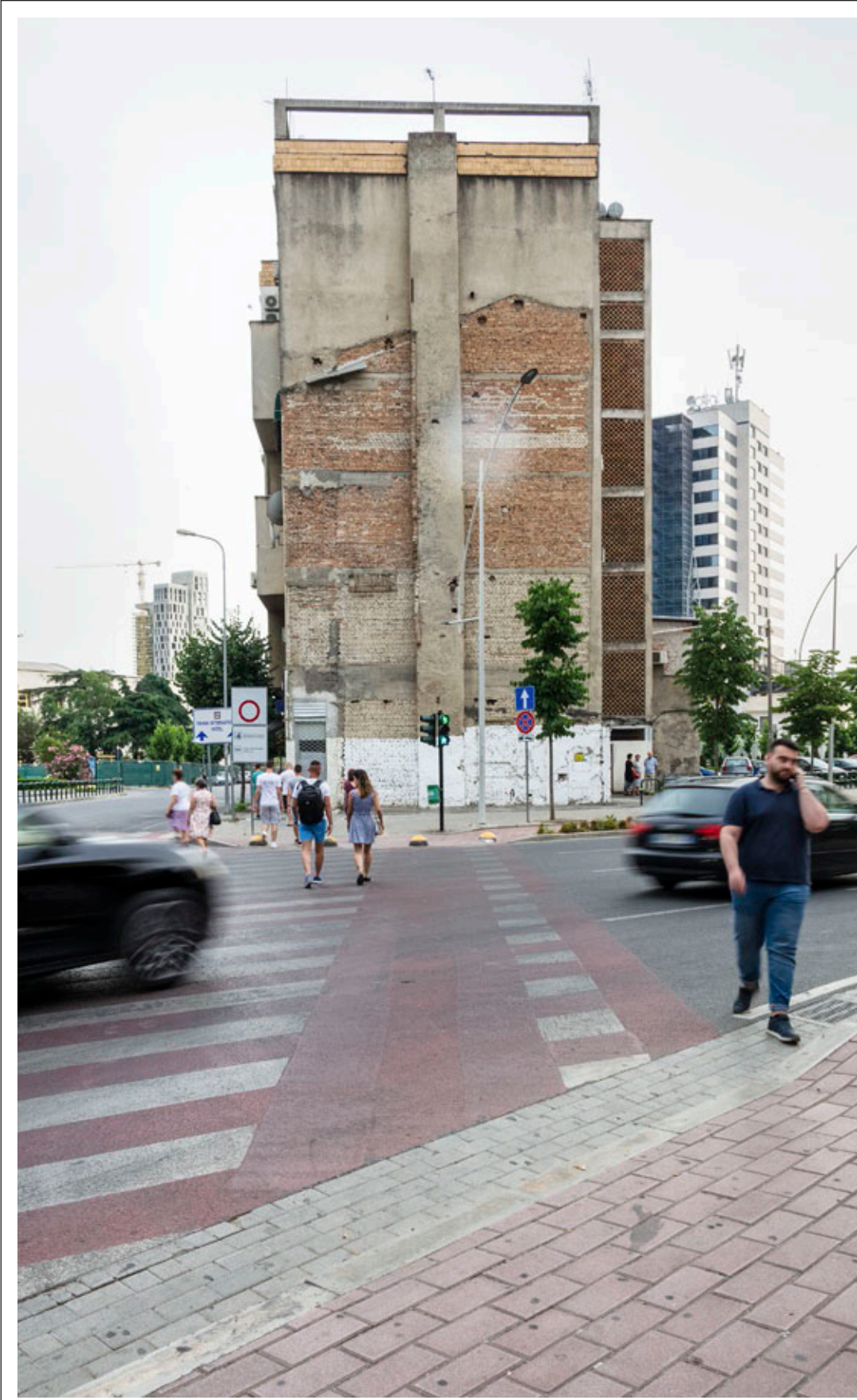
#### KADARE AS A PUBLIC TOPIC

Today the city of Tirana is seeing tremendous growth in population and economy, and the municipality and government are constantly creating venues of cultural consolidation, not only in response to calls to make life in Albania more attractive to its well-educated youth which is massively moving abroad, but also to cater to the burgeoning tourism market. The omnipresence of communist heritage has become part of this cultural landscape. With a distance of three decades, new perspectives and methods of appraisal are emerging. The Dice Residence Building is one of many examples that highlight the architectural heritage of communism era in a differentiated manner. And the architect Maks Velo has returned to the public stage, fighting for an adequate conversion by emphasising the aesthetic and urban values of his buildings. The Dice Residence Building has survived the radical breakdown of buildings around Skanderbeg Square in favour of a large roundabout and now stands as a solitary edifice once again – surrounded by main streets and post-communist commercial real estate. The back of the house has involuntarily become a front facade. In street-art style, a huge “K” had been applied to the staircase, calling attention to the newly installed “Studio House Kadare” that was opened in May 2019. The 83-year-old Kadare has become a key figure of local popular culture, replete with contemporary attributes: pro-European, cosmopolitan and patriotic (Röhm n.d.). The reconstruction of the author’s birth house in Gjirokastër opened to the public in 2016 when the city celebrated his 80th birthday. Following the death of Kadare’s sister, the Tirana’s municipal government

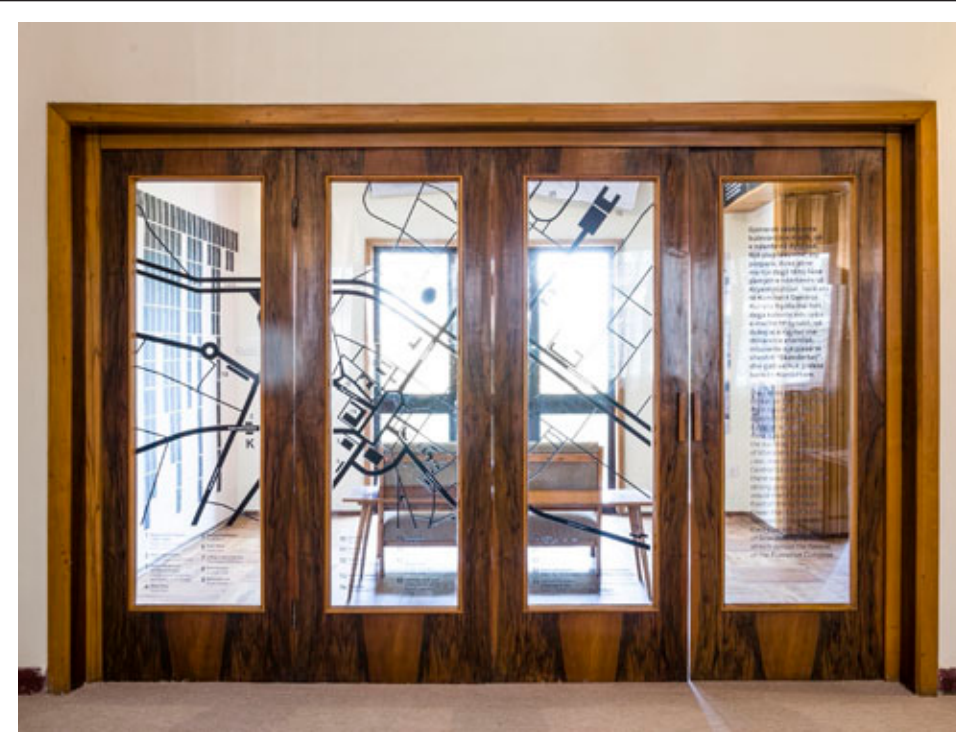
decided to buy the flat in 2018 and convert this once private residence into a place “to preserve and further promote the work of Ismail Kadare” (Studio House Kadare 2019). The Italian architect Elisabetta Terragni, who had previously designed the Museum of Secret Surveillance “House of Leaves” in Tirana, turned the place into a showroom for the author and his work. As visitors, we arrived in a space that operates somewhere between authenticity and nostalgia. Items were added to the walls, windows and furnishings, including private pictures of the writer’s family life, stills of movie adaptations, archive materials about Tirana, quotes and infographics. Both bookshelves were refurbished and filled not only with Kadare’s book collection but also personal objects. One can use this private library now for study purposes and the organisers plan to hold readings here. The furniture and chimney, which is out of order, are now part of a scenography that tries to embed something intangible like novels and biography in a very dense spatial situation where preserved traces overlap and blur with Kadare’s works. Especially the tangible and occasionally ambiguous objects offer a rich source for further exploration of the author’s complex life under totalitarianism. Thanks to its multiple layers and projection surfaces, the “Studio House Kadare” becomes a place of civic inclusion, addressing different social and political classes and biographies. That makes it an appreciative symbol of the socio-cultural agenda of Tirana and its mayor Erion Veliaj who is fostering a proactive heritage policy in a global setting that communicates via medial representation and the “eventisation” of culture. Veliaj’s tweet on the opening day included both the announcement of the further conversion of the Dice Residence Building with a similar space dedicated to the poet Dritëro Agolli who lived on the floor above Kadare and the restoration of the housing complex according to the instructions of Maks Velo (Veliaj 2019). The network expands spatially and agency-wise, multiplying the omnipresent links between the global and local, reality and fiction, history and story, construction and re-construction.







VI.



Kadare House Studio



VI.



