

# Elisabetta Terragni “How One Architect Turned Albania’s Dark History into Art”

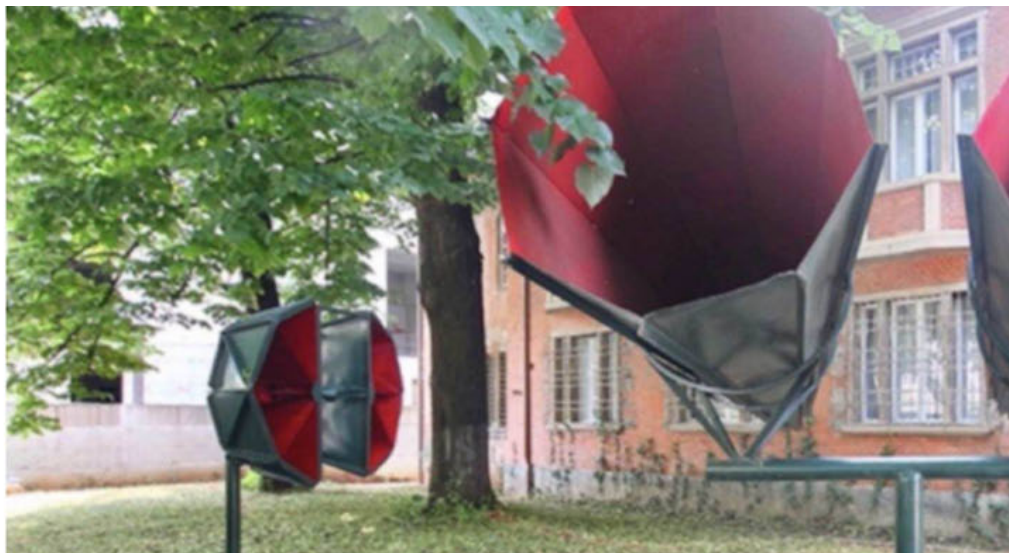
SUM Cuny Graduate Center, New York, Feb 26th, 2020.

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## How One Architect Turned Albania’s Dark History Into Art

February 26, 2020  | The City College of New York



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It was five years ago that Albania's Ministry of Culture called on architect and City College (<https://www.cuny.cuny.edu/>) Professor **Elisabetta Terragni** to restore the "House of Leaves" — the abandoned headquarters of Albania's old secret police, the Sigurimi. She and her team transformed the villa into a museum.

The Council of Europe recently awarded Terragni's creation, The National Museum of Secret Surveillance "House of Leaves," with the coveted 2020 Council of Europe Museum Prize (<http://www.assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/News/News-View-EN.asp?newsid=7721&lang=2&cat=21>).

The newly minted museum serves to commemorate the "physical violence and total control of citizens (<http://www.assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/News/News-View-EN.asp?newsid=7721&lang=2&cat=21>)" in communist Albania. Communist dictator Enver Hoxha ruled Albania beginning in the 1940s, disposing of his rivals and throwing thousands who opposed him into prison, according to *The Associated Press* (<https://ap-news.com/38aa27b4e98471696bdf9e72a8e71bef>).



Surveillance equipment inside "House of Leaves"

Through Hoxha's Sigurimi police force, 6,000 people were executed and tens of thousands more were sent to work in labor camps — 4,000 people remain missing, per *NBC News* (<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/communist-era-secret-police-files-reopen-old-wounds-albania-n884946>). The communist era lasted until the early 90s.

"We want people to know, to develop their own opinions about things that happened in history," Terragni tells SUM. "It's a demonstration that if a country's open to talking about the past, it means they really are on the right path to overcome what has happened to them."

Leaders asked Terragni what she hoped to do with the building, and Terragni told them "not to remove anything." And, instead, to transform the villa into a museum.



Terragni and her three-member team at [Studio Terragni Architetti](http://www.terragni.eu/) (<http://www.terragni.eu/>) worked with a graphic designer and a group of historians and former political prisoners from Albania to properly display everything they found in the abandoned house. They set out to “reconstruct the story of what happened in the building.”

“There was a state of complete paranoia,” Terragni says of the communist era. She adds of the abandoned villa: “The building had all the technical devices for espionage. It was a tangible reality that let people know they weren’t just paranoid. It was true. So we kept the pieces.”

The process took two years and the museum opened in 2017 in Tirana. The museum has been praised for its structure remaining virtually intact for decades.



The original equipment of the Sigurimi is on display and secret police recordings are now stored in archives. Locals have long called the building the “House of Leaves” due to the greenery that clings to the villa’s façade.

Terragni says she and the team decided to keep the nickname as an homage to Albania’s citizens. People visiting the museum can even leave comments in a book inside.

“There are older people, people that were prisoners, also guiding kids [in the museum] and explaining to them what happened,” Terragni says. “So, it’s really becoming an educational tool to overcome what happened, but not to forget.”

#### Beyond SUM

##### Work By

Elisabetta Terragni (*National Museum of Secret Surveillance “House of Leaves”, Architecture*) | Profile 1 (<https://ssa.ccnycuny.edu/people/elisabetta-terragni/>)

##### Colleges and Schools

The City College of New York (<http://www.ccnycuny.edu>)

##### Bonus Content

“Spitzer architect Elisabetta Terragni wins European museum prize” (<https://www.ccnycuny.edu/news/spitzer-architect-elisabetta-terragni-wins-european-museum-prize>) (The City College of New York)

“National Museum of Secret Surveillance “House of Leaves” ” (<https://www.tirana.al/en/points-of-interest/museums/the-museum-of-secret-surveillance--house-of-leaves>) (Tirana tourism)