

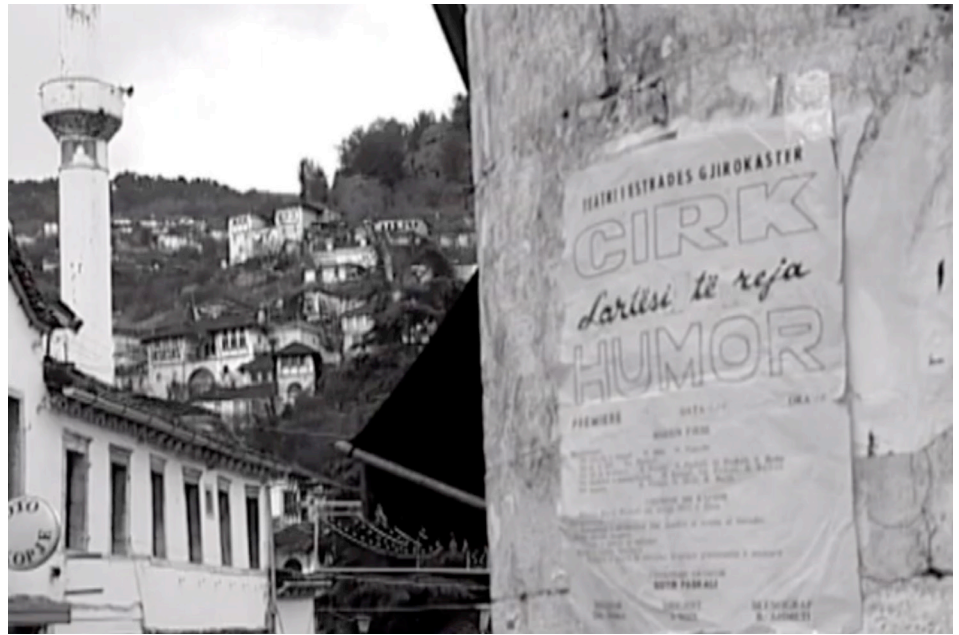
# The Mosque that became a Circus: Re-programming religious architecture and the Institute of Cultural Monuments in Communist Albania

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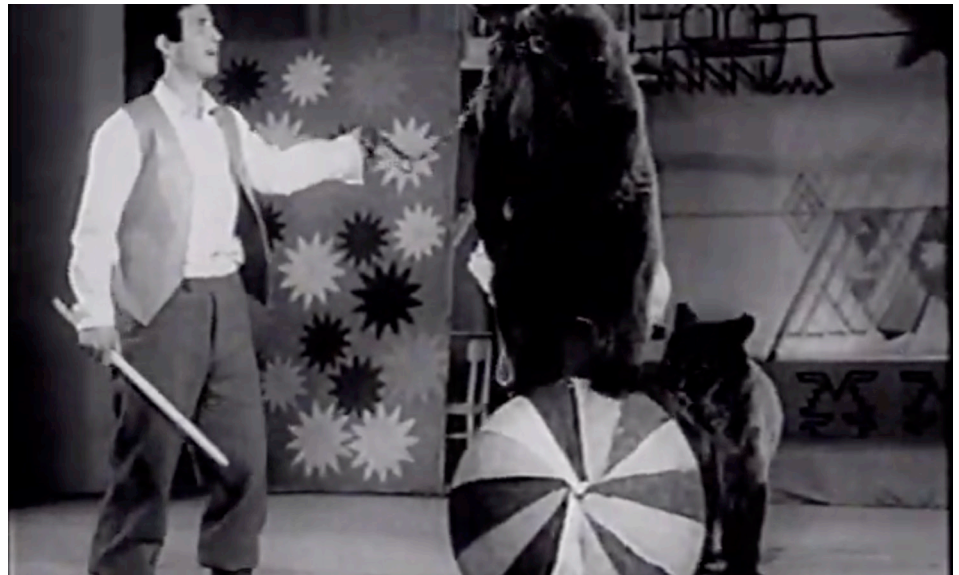
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In 1973, Old Bazaar Mosque in Albania's southern city of Gjirokaštër was removed from a list of historic cultural monuments slated for destruction. The list, drawn up by the government's Institute of Cultural Monuments—launched in 1965—formed part of the Communist dictator Enver Hoxha's intense campaign to secularize the state. It is unknown why the mosque in Gjirokaštër was removed from the list. The logic driving its re-programming is even more opaque. For almost two decades, the mosque became a training hall for acrobats who used the dome for practice. Our project questions why, amidst a spree of destruction, during which hundreds of places of worship were eliminated, Old Bazaar Mosque survived. We attempt to read the mosque's survival against changing definitions of a cultural monument during Hoxha's four decade regime (1944-1985), and the ideological importance of a national architectural heritage. We read the mosque-cum-circus as an awkward balancing act between preserving an "ancient" Albanian past and promoting a new secular future. Ultimately, our project aims to contribute an original piece of research on an underanalyzed building, and more broadly, on the intersection of architecture, violence, and monuments in twentieth century Communist Albania.

1 Circus advertisement in front of mosque 2, 3 circus acrobats, Gjirokaštër  
4 dome and minaret of Old Bazaar mosque



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# Objectives

There are three objectives to our project. The first is to understand at a formal level the specificity of Old Bazaar Mosque. The second is to situate its specific architectures within the broader discourse on cultural monuments during Hoxha's regime and the ideological importance of heritage and secularism. The third is to engage with the issue of collective amnesia in Albania concerning Hoxha's violent legacy and strategies of control, by recording a history of a building so far undocumented.

## 1

The first objective is to document Old Bazaar Mosque and the history of mosque typologies in Gjirokastër. This history will explore the town's other fourteen Ottoman mosques, which were destroyed in 1967, and how they compare formally to Old Bazaar Mosque, focusing (but not exclusively) on features including their domes and minarets. The history will also investigate the mosque's relationship to the city, particularly its dual function as bazaar and place of worship, and whether it was connected to the city's defensive network of bunkers and tunnels. Attention will be paid to the *waqf*, a Muslim tradition and legal deed of charitable property and land ownership, and how/if this changed under the regime's collectivization policies. Through oral histories, site-visits, and archival research (including maps, plans and photographs), we aim to build a picture of the mosque's architectural, legal and management history. Part of this will involve exploring the 1961 designation of Gjirokastër as a "museum-city" by the state "for its historical and cultural values."

## 2

The second objective is to unpack the changing criteria of a cultural monument as defined by the Institute of Cultural Monuments. We question the alignment of the Institute with Hoxha's desire to eradicate religion from Albanian society. Was Old Bazaar Mosque's re-programming symptomatic of a compromised agenda? Or was the mosque-cum-circus a model deployed by the regime to mobilize heritage and new secular ideals? We intend to explore similar instances across the country where religious spaces were co-opted. St. Stephen's Cathedral in the north, for example, was transformed into a "Palace of Sports" in 1967; its interior was gutted for volleyball, basketball and weightlifting and the belfry was removed. We trace the regime's emphasis on athleticism (e.g. circus acrobatics and sports) and the work it did in re-orientating the body away from religious icons towards state sponsored collective activity.

1 basketball tournament in the “Palace of Sports,” a converted St. Stephen’s Cathedral, Shkodër 2 The south-west façade of the Old Bazaar Mosque in Gjirokastër 3 The plan of the Old Bazaar Mosque (M. Kiel)

### 3

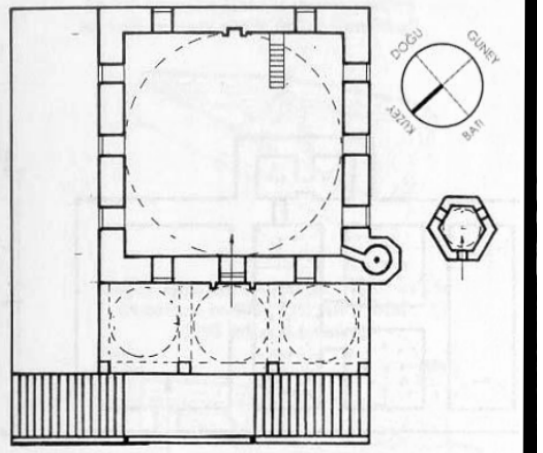
The third objective is to engage with the notion of collective amnesia in Albania, which a number of scholars and public intellectuals argue troubles the country’s relationship with Hoxha’s violent legacy (this is most present in discussions around the still-secret Sigurimi state archives). By recording a history of the mosque and its re-programming, we ultimately engage in the political act of remembering. Some questions we will pursue include whether the circus was maligned or loved, or a mix; and how patterns of worship at Old Bazaar Mosque changed after Hoxha’s dictatorship ended.



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## End outcomes

### Short-term

- a long-form article for an architectural publication in English accompanied by photographs, drawings and maps

### Long-term

- an exhibition in Tirana or Gjirokastër, Albania to exhibit research
- an Albanian translation of the long-form article



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