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ARCHITECTURE

Legislating ARCHITECTURE



“I would say a political program is more important than new rules or replacing rules with other rules.”

— REM KOOLHAAS

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ARCH+50 features

**Erica Overmeer
on Brandlhuber+**

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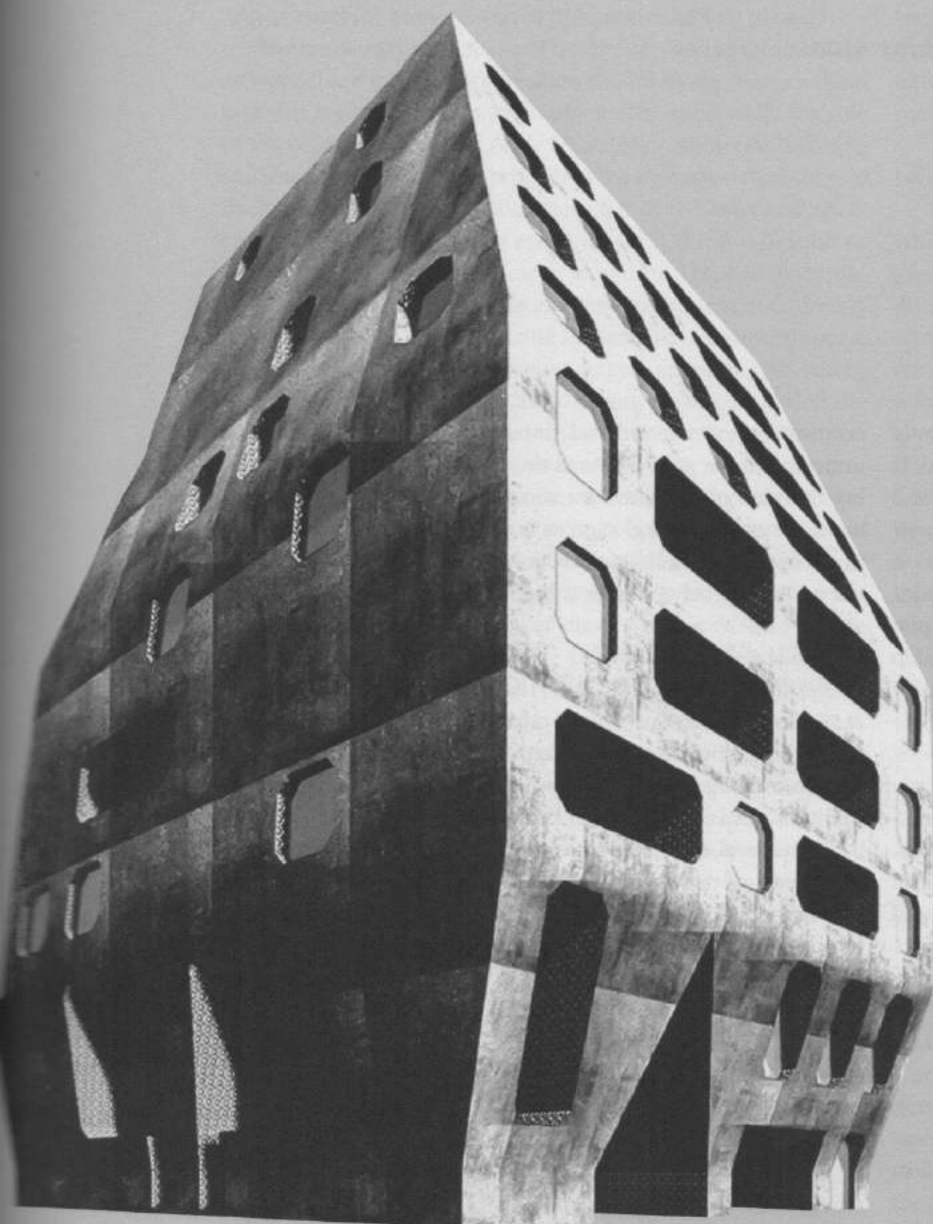
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This publication attempts to interrogate the immanent meaning of societal regulatory systems as they relate to architecture. While the introductory section employs a series of case studies to explore how the built environment and the practice of architecture are shaped by law, this section asks how architects and planners can start appropriating regulations like zoning and building codes and use them as pro-active instruments or design tools, rather than obstacles. How can we understand the confrontation with regulation as a creative endeavor—"not as remainder, as if creativity occurs despite regulation, but instead as operator, as if creativity occurs within regulation," as Nick Beech writes in the lead-out of this issue?

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THE KOLUMBOON KAMP
AND OTHER ARCHITECTURE
IN THE REFUGEE CRISIS



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Gentle ALIEN

If we interpret the phenomenon of real estate, for a moment, from a purely mechanistic perspective, it's possible to argue that all the private buildings erected in Tirana over the course of the first decade of the new millennium were, in essence, the very same building. Indeed, every one of these buildings in Albania's capital city was shaped by a finite and relatively pedestrian set of ambitions and constraints: the desire on the part of developers to build as many square meters as possible on any given plot (while spending the minimum amount of money and time), and the resistance offered by a rudimentary regulatory system that capped maximum height at eight floors and determined a maximum envelope by applying two simplistic algorithms.

The first algorithm related the footprint of each successive floor to the height of the floor itself and its distance from the axis of the street: $L=i+1$, with L defined as the minimum distance from the axis of the street, and i defined as the specific floor of the building. The second algorithm determined the minimum distance from the opposite building in relation to the number of floors: $S=i+j+2$, where S was the minimum distance between the buildings, i the number of floors of one building, and j the number of floors of the opposite building. These basic mathematical operations were carried out in a perfectly abstract, "legal" space, given that illegal or partially illegal buildings were not meant to be factored into the calculations—a circumstance that often produced paradoxical clashes between the official situation and the real conditions on the ground. The complete uncertainty of the cadastral map of Tirana made these operations even more complicated. It wasn't just that property ownership was a convoluted question after half a century of Communism; it had also been extremely unclear in the pre-Communist days. Albania, in fact, had no cadaster before World War II. The final result of this complex history was that, over the first decade of the new

The form, in an act of radical realism, was no more than simply the contorted and "excavated" prism that most strictly conformed to all the city's building regulations

millennium in downtown Tirana, property was *fragmented* (on account of archaic agricultural uses), *contestable* (due to confused nineteenth-century mapping), and *forgotten* (thanks to collectivization under the Communist era).

Endless cadastral disputes were the *modus operandi* in Tirana, at least as soon as developers focused their attention on any given plot. Blurred documents from the thirties, multiple claims, improbable witnesses, and important friendships were all part of the real estate game. The market was booming, after making a quick recovery from the collapse caused by the nationwide Ponzi

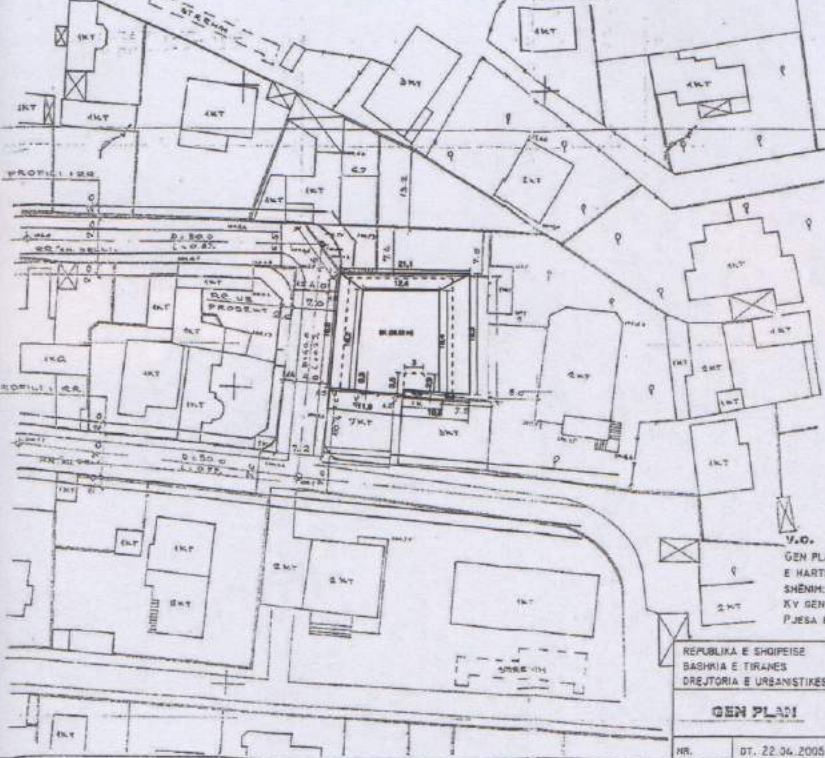
scheme of 1997, when the country stood on the verge of civil war. Cash sent back to Albania by expats was in abundant supply. For Albanians, both inside the country and abroad, investing in housing in Tirana seemed like an extremely good idea, given the attractive combination of prices that were still low and the market's consistently upward trend. In 2005, the mayor of Tirana at the time, Edi Rama, after aggressively painting over the facades of the old socialist housing blocks, decided to go full bore with the city's spatial renovation, pushing local developers to work with foreign architects.

Under these conditions, baukuh designed four residential buildings in Tirana over a two-year period. Only the first two buildings were realized, as the economic and political situation had deteriorated again by 2007. The deal with the developers was clear from the very beginning: we were only there to get the projects approved by the municipality; construction was entirely their province. Our first project—vaguely inspired by a toned-down modernism—was definitely too delicate to stand up to the intricacies of a building process over which we soon realized we had, quite literally, no control. The evidently fragile equilibrium between



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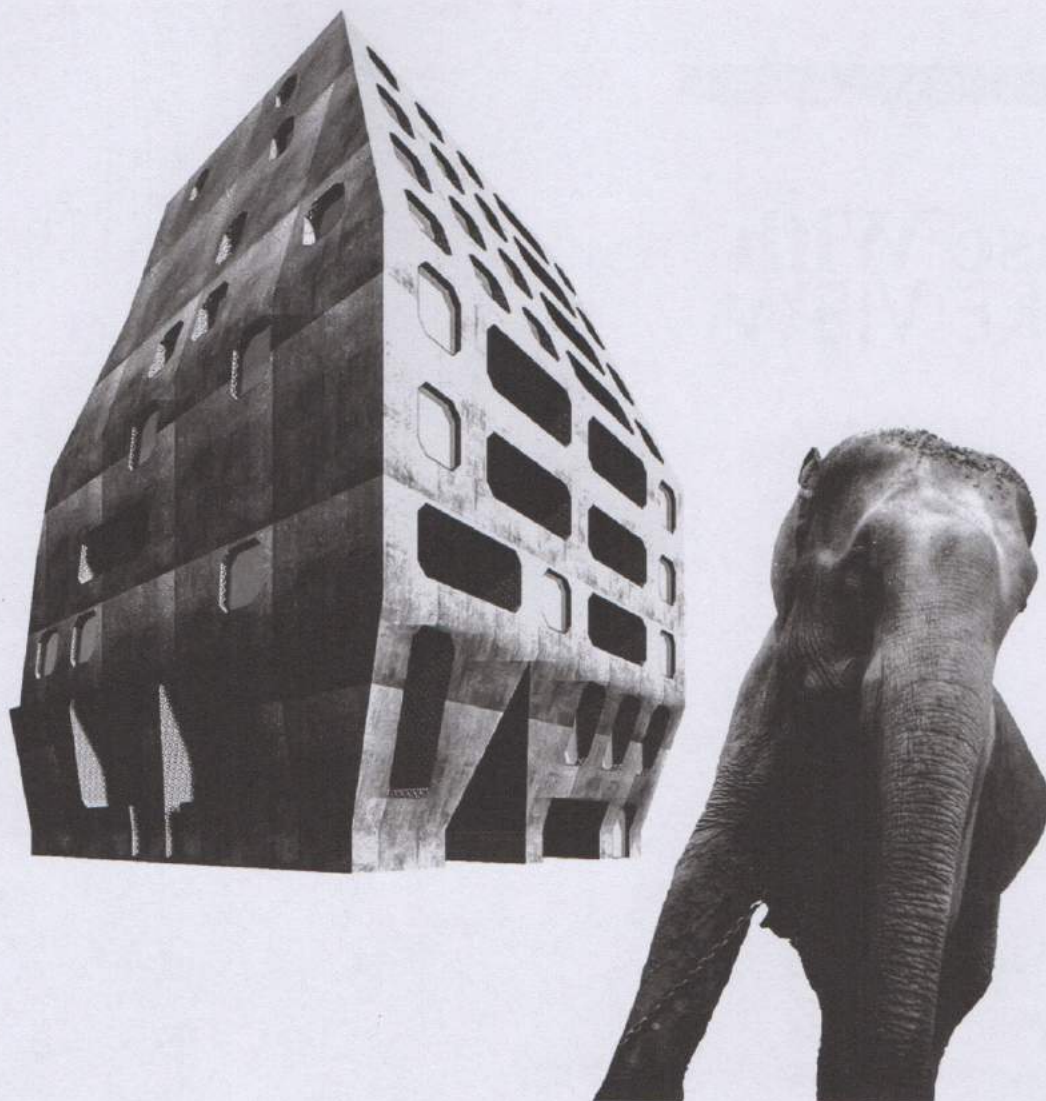
Project Name: Housing
in Xhezmy Delli Street
Architect: Baukuh
Location: Tirana, Albania
Year: 2006-09
Photos: Giovanna Silva
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e plan



unpredictable adaptations somehow served to tame the project, lending it a contextual touch

The building on Xezhmy Delli Street was designed with the idea of producing a "figure" strong enough to withstand the unpredictable building process in Tirana. The form was therefore presented with highly aggressive imagery.



the size and position of the openings, the step-back profile (dictated by the regulations), the urban moment of the grand entrance, the two oversized chimneys on top of the roof, and a bizarrely contextual color choice (Yves Klein blue) were all easily destroyed by few wrong decisions during construction, coupled to the usual gross inaccuracy of building techniques. The first building was quite a failure—yet, for our second building, it proved to be a highly valuable learning experience.

From the very outset, the second building, the one on Xezhmy Delli Street, was designed with the idea of producing a "figure" more than a real "project," and then seeing if this figure would be strong enough to withstand all the unpredictable episodes within the process leading up to the realization of the building. No subtleties here: the form was the only thing that mattered from the very beginning, and it was presented with highly aggressive imagery (something we normally tend to avoid). And the form, in an act of radical realism, was no more than simply the contorted and "excavated" prism that most strictly conformed to all the city's building regulations—a mold that crystallized the abstract rules of the inscrutable legal apparatus that shaped

the city, revealing, in the process, how antithetical, how alien these rules were within the concrete fabric of the city itself. The overall shape coincided with the maximum possible envelope, with minor adjustments here and there to avoid compromising its proudly barbaric aesthetic—Hugh Ferriss, revived a century later and half a globe away from Manhattan. And considering it was Lilliputian in scale, we felt justified stressing the violence of this image—because, in the end, a building its size could harm nobody.

The specific context called for a few modifications to the shape—in particular, the continuous balconies of the existing building adjacent to the main facade (which projected illegally over the narrow street) motivated us to successfully petition the municipality to exceed the maximum envelope, and design the building so the two facades were consistently aligned. The stubborn process of digging to find a design produced an archaic animal form that only became gentler where it came in direct contact with the city. Concrete was cheap in Albania, and the Albanians were good at building with it; therefore, we intended the originally structural facades to be built in exposed reinforced concrete. In turn, the inset

balconies, windowsills, and sides were meant to be covered by traditional colorful local tiles, to soften the harshness of the building. The entrance was a large triangle, adding a surreal Minoan tone to the overall composition: the Treasury of Atreus, simply there because it was so incongruous.

Obviously, what was later built differed significantly from what the municipality had approved. However, it didn't necessarily differ from what we had designed, given that we just defined an attitude for the building and left the final configuration up for grabs. The developer who employed us sold the project before beginning construction, and the new developer started building it without our knowledge. Nearly everything was changed: The structure reverted from a central core, plus structural skin, back to a more traditional pillars-and-slabs scheme. There was no longer exposed concrete on the facades; instead, the surfaces were clad with standard red tiles. Yellowish plaster was substituted for traditional ceramic tiles in the recessed balconies and windows. The shape of the windows themselves was heavily simplified, and their disposition and sizes were heavily altered to conform to the new arrange-

ment of the apartments. During construction, a whole new floor was added on top, crowned by a low, pitched roof. In the end, the construction was clumsy but not careless, and, strangely enough, everybody on the construction site loved the building. Somehow, everybody involved in the process had to find a way to produce the image we had devised at the beginning. So, in between that initial image and the final built mass, a plethora of adaptations took place, mostly performed by people we never met. These adaptations, amounting to rude gestures of love by the Albanian workers, somehow served to tame the project, providing it with a contextual touch as well—something it had striven for from the beginning.

At the end of this entire process, the building remains something that displays, on its rigid body, all the contradictory requirements imposed on it. Somehow, the building is made in the same way as the buildings where it belongs—here, ontogenesis and phylogenesis perfectly coincide. The building now stands in Tirana as if it has always belonged there: uncannily familiar, a gentle alien.

Baukuh