Lapidars and Socialist Monuments as Elements of Albania’s Historic Cultural Landscapes

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“With the passage of years, time corrodes the memory and lays down its patina, and the past, whether remembered in the mind, or visible around us, becomes more and more obscured and fragmented.”

Fatos Lubonja, “The Ironies of Transition”

Introduction: The collective memory on cultural landscapes

Once, while buying olives at Tirana’s Pazar i Ri (New Market), I discerned an abstract shape behind the sellers (ALS–2). “What is this?” a friend who was visiting from Germany asked me. After I tried to explain him briefly what a “lapidar” is, my friend wanted to take a picture of it. The surrounding sellers’ faces clearly expressed incomprehension about why a foreigner would care about this concrete structure, against which they used to stack up their cardboard boxes and fruit trays. A little later, on the way to Krujë, we again encountered several of those strange sculptures and obelisks of different sizes, shapes, and forms, dominating the Albanian landscape that passed by our bus window. Some of them were in bad shape (e.g., ALS–596) another one had been recently transformed into a stele covered with smiling, ghost-like faces (ALS–594). “Why are they in such different conditions if they are all from the communist period?” was my friend’s legitimate question.

In order to approach an answer to this question, this paper deals with lapidars and socialist monuments as elements of Albania’s cultural landscapes and discusses the role of lapidars and socialist monuments in the perception of the historic cultural landscapes of contemporary Albania, the necessity of starting a discussion about its material socialist heritage, and its meaning for the conservation and valuation context of the lapidars and socialist monuments as elements of the historic cultural landscapes and the context.

Most of the lapidars and other monuments built during the communist period still exist today, making them anything but a “lapidary” element in the Albania landscape. They are much more than mere constructions of stone, concrete, and metal. Following Maurice Halbwachs’s thoughts on what he called collective memory, it may be suggested that they are an element of common knowledge, common memory, and foremost of a common Albanian identity.¹ Jan Assmann further differentiates collective memory into communicative and cultural memory. Communicative memory refers to orally transmitted, individual memory.² Therefore, it endures no longer than 3–4 generations or around 80–100 years.³ Cultural memory refers to an objectified, physically present culture that transmits knowledge about past and present societies. It includes, for example, stamps, posters, pictures, costumes, monuments, buildings, or in fact entire cities, as well as landscapes. Lapidars and other socialist monuments, together with the cultural landscapes they shape, are thus part of Albania’s cultural memory. Although cultural memory may be based on materialized objects, this does not imply that they are also perceived objectively. Like communicative memory, cultural memory is group- and identity-specific as it represents the expression of just one group, transmitting the message of “this is us” or the opposite (“these are the others”).⁴ Thus a native citizen would perceive the same cultural landscape different from a foreigner, an urban citizen different from a rural citizen, or a socialist different from a democrat, and so on. But at the same time, the production of an object-based culture is used to selectively support and (re)produce identities; they create “fixed points” of history and figures of remembrance that become “islands of time,” which induce a retrospec-


⁴ Jan Assmann, “Kollektives Gedächtnis und kulturelle Identität,” p. 11.

⁵ Ibid., p. 13.
tive consideration. Another attribute of cultural memory is its reproduction of memory itself. Therefore, the perception of cultural memory evolves over time. So, neither by perceiving objectivized legacies of the past, nor by communicating about them, are we able to reach absolute "truth."

On cultural landscapes
To discuss lapidars and their role in Albania’s contemporary, post-socialist cultural landscapes, it is necessary to understand the definition of cultural landscape. The term cultural landscape is highly amorphous, owing to an often significant discrepancy between the scientific and general use of both the terms “culture” and “landscape.” For the purposes of this paper, we will define “culture” as every creation of mankind, regardless of the idiosyncrasies of its creator. Although there are many scientific definitions of “landscape,” which often describe a landscape as a piece of the earth’s surface that is dominated by a distinct “total character,” it should be pointed out that these definitions never consider a landscape to be predefined and bordered by nature but always as existing as a manifestation of human assessment. Cultural landscapes are therefore pieces of the earth’s surface that form sources and testimonials of the past and present cultural production. Hence their inventory, according to functional connections of their elements, historic layers, and risk potentials, is one of the most important aspects of knowing cultural landscapes. These aspects can be only partially observed through physiognomic examination, as older and newer elements are often layered like a palimpsest. Only through the consultation of maps, writings and statistics, these different elements can be distinguished from one another, as has been done in case of the Albanian Lapidar Survey.

Cultural landscapes may be distinguished from natural landscapes, which are untouched by any cultural influence. But as nowadays nearly the entire habitable surface of the earth is or once was significantly changed by human influence, it should be considered cultural landscape, including post-socialist landscapes that are containing elements of melioration, terraces, and other land processing influences.

There is a growing understanding of the concept of cultural landscape, and particularly relevant to the present paper are the numerous publications that have appeared about socialist architectural heritage. Czepczyński’s Cultural Landscapes of Post-Socialist Cities offers a scientific discussion on the topic, while Kulić et al.’s Modernism In-Between is one of many recently published illustrated books on socialist cultural heritage. That the time is more than right for an intensive discussion about the future role of Albania’s lapidars and socialist monuments as part of the country’s cultural landscapes, is also shown by the recently initiated “International Scientific Committee on Twentieth Century Heritage,” where ICOMOS (UNESCO most important advisory organization on cultural heritage) discusses the possibilities of declaring certain representatives of “socialist heritage” as World Heritage Sites.

Following the theory of collective memory, cultural landscapes are mainly generated by discourses of different actors. This, in turn, requires matched forms of governance. This constructivist perspective is also backed by the so-called “European Landscape Convention” (ELC), an international treaty that aims at the protection, planning, and management of the specifics of the European landscape. Within this treaty, a landscape is defined as “an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natu-

6 Ibid., p. 12.
7 Ibid., pp. 13–4.
10 Ibid., p. 11.
ral and/or human factors.” Thus, landscapes should be perceived as cradle of cultural identity, common heritage, and expression of the European variety.

Following the suggestion of Freytag that “history is objectified into the landscapes in which it took place, and now it is visibly in-situ, the thousand year old in the same presence as of yesterday and today,” we may now turn to historic cultural landscapes. A historic cultural landscape is an excerpt of an existing cultural landscape, dominated by historic cultural landscape elements. These elements are defined as witnesses of the works of past generations, which under present conditions would not appear in the same way (or at all) as they did under former socio-economic and political settings. Therefore, all cultural landscape-shaping elements from the socialist period automatically become elements of historic cultural landscapes in a post-socialist environment. Furthermore, a historic cultural landscape that mainly consists of or is dominated by a high density of socialist cultural landscape elements might then be called a historic socialist (cultural) landscape.

During the last years the Albanian bunkers have become a stereotypical element of the country’s historic socialist landscape. This is connected to the significant number of recent publications in varying quality about those “concrete mushrooms.” Although their sheer

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Fig. 2  Layers of cultural landscapes in Albania
(Modified and translated according to Schenk, "Anmerkungen zum Verhältnis von Politik und Kulturlandschaftsentwicklung in Albanien," p. 71)
number and their unique appearance somehow justify the attention paid to them, the historic socialist landscape in Albania comprises far more than bunkers; the ruins left by socialist economic policy, such as industrial complexes (e.g., combines), agricultural cooperatives, socialist urban design and its functional correlations and architecture, or propaganda elements like slogans on factory chimneys, walls, and mountains, are some of its most visible and significant elements. At least equally striking and omnipresent elements in those landscapes are the widely visible terraces and socialist monuments such as the lapidars. Whereas terraces were a typical element of daily usage, lapidars were intended as static monuments. Thus, lapidars were for socialist Albania also an instrument to define its territory and to border off its ideology from its neighbors. How far this went can be observed in the no-man’s land between the Albanian–Greek border at Kakavijë (ALS–407) or the Albanian–Kosovar (former Yugoslavian) border at Qafë Prushë (ALS–549, ALS–550). What all these elements share is their important role in generating the Albanian identity. For this reason, they were also reproduced in the symbolic landscapes of the Albanian propaganda, such as in the well-known painting “Kudo jemi në ballë” (“Everywhere we are on the forefront”) (fig. 1).

Dealing with lapidars and socialist monuments in Albania: The perception of different layers of history and their ambivalent handling

As elsewhere, Albania’s urban and rural cultural landscapes are shaped by the influences of human interactions throughout time. Therefore, cultural landscapes can be considered as a “photographic plate,” registering human influences.20 However, human development throughout history rarely follows a continuous, linear, and stable change, but is often stratified through abrupt shifting socio-economic and political settings (e.g., through wars, invasions, occupations, and revolutions). As described by Nitz, these “breaks” are mirrored in cultural landscapes.21 For the territory of present-day Albania several cultural landscape layers and their breaking points may be identified (fig. 2).

In Albania the perception of those different layers of history is nowadays strongly influenced by the cultural and communicative memory of communism and its post-socialist reactions. For this reason, the handling of the most recent elements of historic cultural landscapes is significantly different from the ones found in older layers, such as the Illyrian, Roman, and Ottoman periods, of which communicative memory has all but disappeared. Beginning with ancient history, all Illyrian structures in Albania’s landscapes are not only highly accepted (even though resting on a scientifically unstable basis), but moreover serve as a main anchor point for the country’s self-conception.22 That the communist propaganda and historiography played an important role in creating a continuous line from Illyrians to communists in order to underpin their own claim to power, is nevertheless rarely reflected in the Albanian society. Equally, Skënderbeg, the heroic fighter against the “Ottoman oppressors” is most important in this historiography and all physical leftovers from his works are precious to many Albanians. While the Ottomans are still often considered to be occupiers who caused a major setback in the development of the Albanian territory – a view that was also supported by communist historiography23 –, the structures dating from the Ottoman period are strangely enough broadly accepted as an important part of the country’s heritage. Parallel to these observations about the Ottoman period we should mention the ideological negligence of the Italian occupation but the acceptance of what they left as built heritage. For many, at this point the definition of what is “old” and “beautiful” and therefore worthy of protection, ends with this period of Albanian history. As a consequence Gazmend Baku’s recent publication on “Old Tirana” finishes with evidence from 1940.24 Here the factor time shows us how communicative history is consequently fading and with the taking over of the cultural memory the acceptance and neglect of historic cultural landscape elements is changing from an ideologically disclaimed to a more spatially accepted element.

Nearly 25 years after the end of the communist regime the handling of its built heritage seems much more complicated. Its grotesque spatial interventions still dominate the picture that most foreigners have of Albania. Although these cultural landscape-shaping elements are by many Albanians considered to be remind-

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22 See e.g. Jaap Scholten, Concresto (2012); Gyler Mydyti & Elian Stefa, Concrete Mushrooms: Reusing Albania’s 750.000 Abandoned Bunkers (Barcelona: DPR-Barcelona, 2012).
24 Gazmend Baku, Tirana e vjetër: Një histori i ilustruar (Tirana: MediaPrint, 2013).
ers of a repressive dictatorship, many of them also repre-
sent people’s own contribution to shaping the country,
spending countless hours doing the obligatory “volun-
tary work.” For others, lapidars and socialist monuments
are mere landmarks, used mainly as orientation points,
sometimes even after their physical disappearance. For
younger Albanians, raised after the end of communism,
the historic socialist cultural landscapes are at most me-
morials that function as reminder of a recent, albeit not
openly discussed history. If we observe the material col-
clected during the Albanian Lapidar Survey, we can di-
vide their current condition into four main categories:

a. Destroyed, partially destroyed or vandalized;
b. Ignored or (seemingly) neglected;
c. Well-kept and conserved;
d. Transformed or restored.

Although a clear categorization of each lapidar may not
always be possible as there are hybrid forms, this rough
categorization suggests different reasons for their vary-
ing conditions. A proper analysis of the communicative
memory, that is, the range of the public’s opinions
about the perception of socialist cultural landscape el-
ements remains essential to research on post-socialist
cultural landscapes. Without such a proper qualitative
study of this topic, we may not advance from the stage
of hypotheses. Nevertheless, we may already propose
a few conjectures based on the collected material and
above categorization. The condition of a lapidar or so-
cialist monument is – hypothetically – connected to (in
weighted order):

1. Message;
2. Location;
3. Form (artistic appearance and size).

Ad 1. The message of a lapidar or socialist
monument may be most crucial for its handling
in a post-socialist society. Well-kept may be those
that transmit a message that also in post-socialist
Albania is considered important for the current
understanding of history. Even though the partisans’
fight against the fascist occupation is highly charged
with communist propaganda, it remains for many
Albanians an uncritically reflected historic fact and
part of the national identity. For this reason, lapidars
and socialist monuments that are directly com-
memorating partisans, and especially those ones,
presenting important events, such as the monument
of Drashovicë [ALs–438] or the names of single
partisans, are usually well kept. Especially martyrs’
cemeteries fall in this category, as state, society, or
direct relatives of the partisans feel responsible for
maintaining their memory. Assmann concluded
that via the preservation of its cultural memory, a

26 “I pengonte fushëpamjen,vellai i kryetarit të Bashkisë shkull lapi-
darin, reagojnë veteranët,” NOA.al: http://www.noa.al/artikull-i-
pengonte-fushepamjen-vellai-i-kryetarit-te-bashkishe-shkul-lapi-

21. The location of a lapidar and socialist
monument is crucial for its current condition in
different ways; its distance from populated areas,
whether it’s blocking one of the many formal or
informal construction works carried out during the
transition period. On the one hand, the destruction
of a lapidar may go hand in hand with the construc-
tion of a multi-story apartment complex, parking
lot, street, etc. (e.g., ALS–162). On the other hand,
we can observe many examples where construc-
tion works intentionally spared or at least relocated
a lapidar rather than simply destroying it (e.g.,
ALS–200). Media attention was raised when the
brother of Kruja’s DP vice-mayor destroyed a lapidar
“because it blocked his view.” This act may be con-
ected to its spatial aspect. The hypothesis here is
that in the still traditionally more DP-oriented north
of Albania, especially during the early years of the
transition, lapidars were more likely to be destroyed,
their communist icons removed or vandalized with
political statements than in the more SP-oriented
south (e.g., the lapidars in Kalis, ALS–645 and Baj-
ram Curri, ALS–540). Nevertheless, as the lapidars
in the north are more often commemorating the
fight against the Ottomans or “Serbian chauvin-
ism” (e.g., the lapidar in Topojan, ALS–566), first
hypothesis 1) should be considered as a reason why
the overall level of destruction of lapidars might be
equal in north and south.

Ad 3. Finally, not all lapidars and monuments
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houses (ALS–563), or be transformed in order to create a new message. The lapidar along the road from Fushë-Krujë to Krujë (ALS–594) or the one close to Çaush (ALS–423) are best examples for the latter. Also it may happen that lapidars and socialist monuments are well-kept or at least not removed for their original artistic appearance. Especially the bigger monuments with a distinct and more complex appearance might more likely still exist.

Different heritage values for strategy development
As mentioned above, the age factor significantly influences the handling of built structures. Alois Riegler, a pioneer in modern day heritage conservation, expressed this in his age value, which defines how a monument evokes feelings and remembrance because of its mere age. But, it must not be forgotten that there are several, equally set heritage values, defining the importance of a monument. The values of inscribed and potential new heritages are idealistically consisting of esthetic, artistic, scientific, historic, and social aspects. A less broad, but in the scientific community more familiar, value is the historic value. According to this value, a heritage is seen as a historic document or testimony of the past that represents a closed period of human work. Among many others, the relative artistic value must be mentioned here. This value admonishes to judge a monument not by personal means of esthetics, but by a “relative” or more objective opinion. When watching arts, architecture, and fashion through time, it becomes easily recognizable that they are subject to a constant change. Therefore, instead of based on contemporary standards of beauty a heritage should be valorized by the artistic skills that were necessary to create it.

The clear lines and abstract, sometimes seemingly cold or brutal, art and architecture of socialist realism stand in strong contrast with the forms of previous epochs. Yet the artistic skills that were needed to design a lapidar and socialist monument appear valuable upon reflection on the strict guidelines dictated by the communist regime. The high risk that comes with crossing those borders has been painfully observed by for example architect and artist Maks Velo or painter Edison Gjergo, who were both imprisoned for works that were deemed too modernist. Furthermore, if we take a look the on the artistic and complex structures of the monuments at Mushqeta (ALS–304) or Pishkash (ALS–38), not only their relative artistic value can easily be recog-}

policies for Albania’s historic socialist landscape.

Developing a cultural heritage policy for lapidars and socialist monuments

A basis for critical reflection on the socialist cultural landscape elements is a crucial factor for the still absent process of coming to terms with the socialist past. Raising awareness about cultural landscapes in general and acknowledging their importance for education and generating identity as well as sensitizing the population about lapidars and socialist monuments as an element of the historic cultural landscapes would therefore contribute to the reflection on Albania’s recent, inconvenient history. To do so institutional backing is crucial. Therefore the protection of lapidars and socialist monuments needs to be grounded on a legal basis. First and foremost the potential inscription of a monument should not be limited to a certain age. On first sight, a recent draft of amendments to the Law on Cultural Heritage (No. 90.48), proposing to lower the minimum age for the inscription of heritage from 100 to 50 years, looks like a good start. Nevertheless, this would only encompass parts of the socialist period and arbitrarily cut through it. It would make much more sense to define a relative age for potential monuments. This could mean that for its inscription, a monument must be a testimony to a closed period of history, after which a distinct period of time must have passed, as a rule of thumb, the period of one generation or ±30 years. Furthermore, the Law on Cultural Heritage should include the possibilities to protect historic cultural landscapes. This would not just have binding character for landscape planning, but contribute to better protect the senses of identity and home in a rapidly changing environment.

Besides their legal protection the educational aspects of lapidars and socialist monuments as elements of historic cultural landscapes should be valorized. These can easily be prepared, e.g., for school and university curricula in the form of field trips or for public information in form of plates and plaques. This also includes making important sites, such as the martyrs’ cemetery in Tirana, openly accessible, actively promoting them as an accessible site. There are many examples from other parts of the world on how to sensibly deal and present “inconvenient” memorials. Besides widely known sites of fascist terror, like the “Documentation Centre Nazi Party Rally Grounds” in Nuremberg, memorial sites of the socialist past can be visited in some former socialist countries, such as Budapest’s “Memento Park” or Sofia’s “Museum of Socialist Art.”

As basis for further steps in preservation and promotion, an inventory of the historic cultural landscapes and their elements would be needed. Again, there is plenty of experience in other countries. A modern inventory has the advantage that it may not just be only accessible in a single location, but that it can easily be designed as a globally accessible system. An example is the so-called KuLaDig, a GIS (Geographic Information System) on the cultural landscapes of the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia. By publishing its documentation as open access data, the Albanian Lapidar Survey builds a great basis for further engagement in this field.

Besides the legal framework and technical assistance that would help preserving the historic socialist cultural landscapes of Albania, one must not forget that without the support of public opinion and the participation of society at large, the protection of those heritage sites and landscapes will not be sustainable. Especially in post-socialist Albania, with its long-lasting weakness of rule of law and instruments of planning, the direct impact of Albanian society on the appearance of the cultural landscapes, mainly due to the high rate of informal building activity, is much higher than in other countries. Therefore, not in the least an empiric study on the perception of lapidars and socialist monuments as elements of the historic cultural landscape, considering the different categories of destruction, negligence, maintenance, and transformation, is needed.

Gains of an active protection of historic socialist landscapes

When historic cultural landscapes are protected, indicators for their preservation become necessary as their original function has ceased to exist. With the expression “preserving” what became economically functionless, means in a capitalistic society ‘subsidizing,’ Hauptmeyer articulated a major challenge for the preservation of historic cultural landscapes. The educational aspect is what should make this challenge a surmountable one. To preserve historic socialist cultural landscapes, also

means to understand and acknowledge who has worked for them and that they may be an expression of poverty, suppression, or harm. If we do not valorize their educational aspect, cultural landscapes might just become a representative for mere beauty, rather than a place of remembrance.

Lapidars and socialist monuments are works of art, which especially in a rural environment are integrated in prominent settings or even explicitly form the crown of a landscape. Thus they become the rural equivalent to a dominant urban structure that essentially determines the total character of a landscape. If they were to be removed or neglected, feelings of loss and alienation will inevitably appear. Therefore, their preservation also implies supporting feelings of belonging and the Albanian identity. The importance of the protection of those feelings of belonging under the high dynamics of post-socialist development and the resulting rapid change of the cultural landscape is of special importance. New cultural landscapes are intentionally produced in order to generate new identity-building processes in post-socialist societies. The current “Disneyfication” of Skopje in the context of a massive project of a historicist reshaping of the inner city can be seen as a prominent example from neighboring Macedonia. Also Albania, in the framework of the 100th anniversary of national independence in 2012, witnessed the erection of numerous new monuments. At the same time, a massive, re-sanctification of space driven by external donors – i.e., the construction of hundreds of mosques and churches – is taking place. Due to their architectonic dominants (such as minarets and church towers), this process is highly influencing the current cultural landscapes. All this caused a rapid loss of what many define as home. That this is not merely a matter of the beauty of the landscape is shown by industrial heritage sites or the in the work of so-called “mall archeologists”: a group of people, which investigates deserted American shopping malls. From the emotional debate about the degradation of those former temples of consumerism, we can observe that it is the potential to remind us of our childhood that creates those feelings of homeliness. This stands in no case in opposition to the inconvenient history those cultural landscape elements might represent. Examples from Germany show how the preservation of fascist heritage functions as “confirmative” heritage that contributes to a vital definition of a broad anti-fascist (national) identity. Being such an important visible element of Albania’s landscape lapidars and socialist monuments must be seen as both, as an important identity-generating structure for Albanians, as well as an image-generating factor for visitors to the country.

The latter is what gives historic socialist cultural landscapes a high economic potential. The majority of foreign visitors come to Albania in part because (and not in spite of) its recent history. Curiosity for a political system about which only little information existed is part of the great attraction of today’s Albania. Besides a rich, ancient history and an impressive, yet highly threatened coastline, many tourists want to see and learn about the recent socialist past of the country. The historic socialist landscapes have an important part in transmitting this knowledge. Besides losing a chance to come in terms with history, neglecting them thus implies ignoring this economic potential. This does not mean that each bunker, all terraces, and every single lapidar must be preserved and restored against high costs for society. But many appropriate places exist that could be inscribed and actively protected as heritage sites, especially those that have a significant and high density of historic cultural landscape elements. Keeping in mind that ICOMOS has founded a task group for the inscription of testimonies of the former socialist system on the UNESCO's list of World Heritage Sites, Albania has all opportunities to become a global trailblazer here.

Conclusion
Although built during communism and representing socialist historiography, lapidars are not solely perceived as representing communism. Therefore, there is also no broad consensus that lapidars or socialist monuments should be neglected or removed in general. Lapidars and socialist monuments that thematize single elements or the entire lines of communist historiography, from the Illyrians via Skënderbeg to the partisans, continue to express “this is still us.” The more abstract commemorative expression of socialist ideals instead would express “this is not us anymore” and are therefore more likely to be neglected or destroyed. Not least, the well-kept and sometimes even restored lapidars against “Ottoman suppression” or “Serbian chauvinism” express “this will always have been them” or “this is still them,” which especially in the latter case and after the Kosovo war gained a strong momentum. This ultimately shows that the communist historiography is not just still present in post-socialist Albania, but is also generally accepted without much public critical reflection.

Because of this, the handling of the built heritage from the communist period is currently a highly neglected topic in Albania. Hence the mere existence of this publication and its associated digital information system highly enriches the cultural memory about lapidars.

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and socialist monuments. At the same time, it creates a basis for reviving the communicative memory from its current oblivion. Even if communicative memory is limited in its endurance (3–4 generations, see above), every critically reflected discussion on this topic is an important element for the upkeep of Albania’s oral history.

As the recent intensification in international research and public discussion on cultural landscapes and socialist monumentalism shows, it is not too late for Albania to engage in this field. It may even be concluded that now actually is the best time to start working on it. This means gathering empiric data and knowledge, creating a broad scientific, political, and public discussion, creating the right institutional framework and start protecting and promoting the touristic potential of lapidars and socialist monuments as part of Albania’s historic cultural landscapes. And as the loss of valuable witnesses of the recent past is an ongoing process, the necessity to do so is strong and urgent.